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A post 20th century view of Isaiah 53

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A Post 20th Century View Of Isaiah 53¹

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In March of 1998, Pope John Paul II wrote, “It is my fervent hope that the document “We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*,” will indeed help to heal the wounds of past misunderstandings and injustices. May it enable memory to play its necessary part in the process of shaping a future in which the unspeakable iniquity of the *Shoah* will never again be possible. May the Lord of history guide the efforts of Catholics and Jews and all men of good will as they work together for a world of true respect for the life and dignity of every human being, for all have been created in the image and likeness of God”².

That document ends with: “We pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people has suffered in our century will lead to a new relationship with the Jewish people. We wish to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord and have a common father in faith, Abraham”³. As a rabbi, I also pray that two major

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¹ The article was published also in the different and shorter forms as Isaiah’s Suffering Servant: A New View in “Dialogue and Alliance” 20/2, 2006, p. 9-15 and “Jewish Biblical Quarterly” 37/4, 2009, p. 243-249.

² *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Cardinal Edward Cassidy*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html (approach 8.09.2015).

³ *Comission for Religious Relation with the Jews, We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/

events of the 21st century: the the awesome resurrection of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel; and the awful Nazi genocide against Europe's Jews, will enable us to understand in a new way the famous passage in Isaiah (52:13-53:12) about God's servant whose tragic suffering can be redemptive to those who once reviled and belittled him.

Complicated future scenario

Most Jewish scholars have glossed the Isaiah 52:13-53:12 text as referring to the Jewish people during its exile among anti-Semitic European nations. Christian scholars gloss the passage as referring to a suffering and redemptive Messianic figure; Jesus. I think both purports are correct. There can be a dual covenant: one for Israel of the flesh dwelling in synagogues, and one for a spiritual Israel of non-Jews dwelling in churches. Associating the passion and sacrifice of Jesus, with Israel as God's servant and innocent victim of anti-semitism, provides the world today with a new larger view of our opportunity for redemption and salvation.

In Jewish thought the prophet Isaiah himself provides the strongest evidence for the Jewish claim that Isaiah's servant is Israel, the Jewish People. Several verses in chapters prior to Isaiah 53 specifically state that Israel/Jacob is God's servant. "**You Israel are my servant**, Jacob whom I have chosen" (41:8), "Hear me now, **Jacob my servant**; hear me, Israel my chosen" (44:1), "Have no fear, **Jacob my servant**: Jeshurun whom I have chosen" (44:2), "Remember all this, Jacob, remember **Israel, for you are my servant**" (44:21). These verses make it clear that the nation of Israel/Jacob is God's chosen servant. The national community is spoken of in terms of an individual, as is often the case in the Bible (see Jeremiah 30:10).

That a nation could suffer a fate like that of an individual martyr was familiar to many Polish thinkers. Mickiewicz detailed his vision of Poland as a suffering Messiah/Christ of Nations in his "Books of the Polish nation and Polish pilgrimage": "Poland said, 'Whosoever will come to me shall be free and equal for I am FREEDOM.' But the Kings, when they heard it, were frightened in their hearts, and they crucified the Polish nation and laid it in

its grave, crying out ‘We have slain and buried Freedom.’ But they cried out foolishly....” For the Polish Nation did not die. Its body lay in a grave; but its spirit descended into the abyss, that is, into the private lives of people who suffer slavery in their own country...”⁴. Thus, in Mickiewicz’s vision of Poland as a suffering Messiah, the spirit and fate of a nation, can be transferred to the private life of an individual.

So there also were some Jewish scholars who did think the suffering servant in Isaiah also referred to an individual messianic figure. Although Isaiah states, “You are **my servant Israel**, through whom I shall win glory” (49:3) two verses later Isaiah adds, “Now the Lord who **formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him**, that Israel should be gathered to him, now the Lord calls me again: is it too slight a task **for you as my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob**, to bring back the descendants of Israel?” (49:5&6). These verses clearly indicate that in addition to God’s chosen servant Israel/Jacob, there is a prophet like person (perhaps like Jeremiah who suffered a lot in his role as God’s servant) who will be God’s servant to help restore the exiled Jewish people to its land, and to its role in God’s plan for human redemption.

Thus, there are two types of suffering servant. The individual servant’s passion initiates the process of individual redemption for those who are not part of Israel, the servant people. Some time later the son of David comes in glory at the flowering of a worldwide personal redemption that brings about universal peace and prosperity. Thus the upheavals that precede the Messianic Age can be avoided or minimized; and as Franz Kafka wrote in his Blue Octavo Notebooks, “The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival”⁵; i.e. to verify and crown the Messianic Age rather than to personally bring it about.

If the world is not saved through individual repentance and rebirth, then the cataclysmic upheavals of wars and revolutions predicted by the prophets will come to pass. This large scale suffering will, with God’s help, bring about a redemption that will be on a vast national and international scale.

⁴ A. Mickiewicz, *The Books and The Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation*, transl. K. Lach-Szyrma, <http://www.indiana.edu/~hist104/sources/Mickiewicz.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

⁵ F. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks (1917-1919)*, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g-D981HZ190BUJF-3czZNX3DsFWvq3cq-Z4QS4d-9gw/edit?hl=en&pli=1> (approach 8.09.2015).

Many rabbis did identify Isaiah's individual messianic figure as Messiah, son/ descendant of David, from the tribe of Judah. Most Christians identify this individual as Jesus, the Son of God. I think this individual is a messianic figure called by the rabbis: Messiah, son of Joseph, i.e. from one of the northern tribes, who precedes David's son, and is killed in battle by the enemies of Israel. In a first century Alexandrian book. "Joseph and Aseneth" Joseph is referred to as a son of God (6:3,5 13:13) and also as God's first born son (18:11, 21:4, 23:10)⁶. This book is not a rabbinic work. Perhaps some Jews in Alexandria were already thinking or hoping that Jesus of Nazareth was a Joseph's son Messiah. This book is very pro conversion to Judaism, and shows how the concept of a Josephson messiah fits into Jewish thinking.

From the Land of Israel comes an earlier book "The Testament of Benjamin", which is part of a series called "The Testament of the The Twelve Patriarchs"⁷. Although a later Christian copyist has added the italicized words to drive home a Christian gloss to the words Jacob says to Joseph, the non italicized words could represent authentic Jewish thinking about a suffering Joseph's son messiah: "In you shall be fulfilled the prophecy of heaven concerning *the Lamb of God, and Savior of the world, and that* a blameless one delivered up to criminals, and a sinless one who shall die for ungodly men in Israel, in the blood of the covenant, *for the salvation of the Gentiles*, and shall destroy Beliar and his servants." (1:21) Thus, a Josephson messiah who suffers and dies prior to the coming of the Davidson messiah was already current in the first century, in not earlier.

Christians also believe that Jesus will have to come a second time to fulfill all the messianic prophecies of worldwide peace and prosperity that have not yet come to pass. Thus, the first appearance of Jesus could be as a messianic figure like the Josephson messiah. If we keep in mind the Josephson messiah as well as the role of Israel/Jacob as God's chosen servant, we will understand Isaiah's suffering servant prophecy. The belief that there would be two different messiahs, one a moral political leader from the house of David (Davidson) and

⁶ *Joseph and Aseneth*, trans. David Cook, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/aseneth/translat.htm> (approach 8.09.2015).

⁷ *The Testaments of The Twelve Patriarchs, From The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, by R.H. Charles, vol. II, Oxford Press, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/patriarchs-charles.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

the other, a religious reformer from the house of Aaron (Aronson), as well as a special “end of days” prophet such as Elijah or Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14) is found in intertestamental literature. A Dead Sea scroll states that the Qumran community must continue to live according to the original discipline “until there shall come a prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel” (Manuel of Discipline 9:11)⁸.

There is also a rabbinic belief in a messianic figure from the northern tribes; a Josephson messiah who is killed by Israel’s enemies. This idea may be modeled on the example of Saul who reigned before David and was killed in battle by the enemies of Israel. Thus there could be as many as four individual messianic figures as well as the people of Israel who act as God’s agents in bringing about the Messianic Age. Gentile rulers also play a role, first as destructive oppressors of the Jewish people, and second when they later acknowledge their error and are ultimately included in helping bring about the Messianic Age’s worldwide blessings. Cyrus was such a messiah (Isaiah 45:1).

All of this makes for a complicated future scenario that might take generations, or even centuries to develop. When people are persecuted, afflicted and oppressed as a community, and despised and rejected as individuals they need hope for a much quicker and simpler process of redemption. This is why there is an overwhelming focus on the final stage Davidson messiah by most teachers, preachers, commentators and expositors. This is also the reason that those who believe in the imminent coming of the Davidson messiah always think it will occur soon within their lifetime (John 14:19, 21:22).

Much depends on what we do

Also, since humans have free will, the exact time and manner of redemption cannot be determined in advance. Much depends on what we do. Repentance produces changes in the future of both individuals and nations. Repentance enables some individuals and communities to escape the consequences of prior evil. On the other hand, God’s promise is that evil powers will never succeed in destroying Israel or in overcoming justice in the long run. Thus even without full

⁸ F.G. Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, Leiden–New York–Köln 1996, p. 13-14.

repentance, God will act if the Divine promise of a Messianic Age is threatened. As Isaiah states a few verses prior to the suffering servant passage, “The Lord says: you were sold but no price was paid, and **without payment you shall be redeemed.**” (Isaiah 52:3) I.e. all your suffering in exile was not really merited and your redemption from exile will not really be fully earned. Both are part of God’s outline for human destiny and will occur sooner (through repentance) or later (in God’s own time).

Finally, if one believes that God inspired prophets are able to describe scenarios of various developments in the distant future then one has to accept that the understanding of these passages should change and improve as we come closer and closer to the times they describe. As an example, Jeremiah describes a radical future in which woman surround men, “The Lord will create a new thing on earth—a woman will surround a man” (31:22). The great commentator Rashi understands ‘surround’ to mean encircle⁹. The most radical thing Rashi can think of (and in 11th century France it was radical) is that woman will propose marriage (a wedding ring, or encircling the groom at the wedding ceremony) to men. In today’s feminist generation we can see women surrounding men in fields once almost exclusively male such as law, medical and rabbinical schools. Of course, this means that a few generations from now we might have even better understandings of some predictive passages in the prophets so humility should always be with us.

Isaiah proclaims the good news of peace and salvation (52:7) when God returns to Zion (8) and comforts his people (9) so all the Gentiles see his salvation (10). The Jewish people will depart the exile not in flight but under God’s protection (11&12). Israel/Jacob, God’s servant, whose appearance (14) was disfigured, marred and appalling (during the holocaust) will prosper (13) and be lifted up (in subsequent generations). A marvel for many nations, whose rulers will shut their (anti-Semitic) mouths because of this, since they will see what they had not been taught and will understand what they never heard of (15). For centuries the Church taught that the Jews were being punished for rejecting Christ and couldn’t be redeemed without believing Jesus was the Son of God. Now some Gentile rulers see that this teaching is false. The biblical

⁹ *The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary*, http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16028#showrashi=true (approach 8.09.2015).

message of God's commitment to redeem Israel without their believing in Jesus wasn't believed (53:1) but now there is a growing minority who affirm a two covenant theology.

Many Gentile rulers (kings, governments, business and religious leaders) now admit what their anti-Semitism did to the people of Israel. The Jews were like a tender shoot in dry ground, unattractive and undesirable, despised and rejected, sorrowful and familiar (intimate) with suffering (52:2&3). We (the Gentile rulers) scapegoated them and they carried our projected infirmities, but we rationalized that the Jews were stricken and afflicted by God, not by us. Israel was pierced and crushed due to our transgressions (anti-Semitism) for we sought our peace by blaming Jews for all kinds of evils (54:4&5). This anti-Semitism led to: Crusaders slaughtering Jews in France and Germany, blaming Jews for the Bubonic Plague in central Europe, torture by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, many expulsions and pogroms at various times throughout Europe, and the deaths of tens of thousands of Jewish civilians massacred during wars in Poland (1648-9) and the Ukraine (1919-21). All this set the stage for the worst martyrdom of all, the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust (plus five million non-Jews). Each evil regime turned its own kind of iniquity (religious, political, economic and social) on its Jews (54:6).

The redemptive aspect of Jewish suffering

Again and again Jews were passively taken away to exile, or like sheep to the slaughter cut off from the land of the living, though they had done no violence (54:7-9). Yet faithful Jews accepted all this as God's will and refused to abandon their religion or their people. Survivors of the concentration camps, who had lost their entire family, had the courage and faith to marry, and lived to see their offspring (Jewish children and grandchildren) grow up (54:10). Many, whose days were prolonged (54:10) and are now in their 70's and 80's, have lived long enough to see the most amazing outcomes of the Holocaust. The return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the rebuilding of its cities and countryside are the subject of many passages in Isaiah both preceding chapter 53 and following it. The realization of these prophecies did not require a Holocaust. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the mass departure of more than one million Soviet Jews to the land of Israel also are not directly linked

to the Holocaust. **But the redemptive aspect of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust for Gentile rulers and nations is only emphasized in this suffering servant passage.**

The Nuremberg War Crimes Trials that followed World War II set a pattern for later trials of Cambodian, Serb, and Hutu mass murderers by international courts. When the German government decided to pay reparations for property losses to German Jews, it was the first time an oppressor had voluntarily accepted responsibility for acts of oppression upon another people. The Prime Minister of France finally apologized 56 years after the end of World War II for the collaboration of the Vichy French government in deporting French Jews to the death camps¹⁰. A more recent example is the Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt who in May of 2007 apologized for his country's deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II¹¹. "Only by recognizing the responsibility of the authorities at the time can we build a future where this will never happen again", The government had just released "Submissive Belgium", a report that shows how high-ranking Belgian officials and municipalities collaborated with the Nazis in the deportation of Jews.

When the Pope and several Protestant denominations began to atone for previous centuries of anti-Semitism in the 1970's and 1980's a rising awareness of the Holocaust began to influence a wider spiritual consciousness in the West. The American government finally made a token payment to the Japanese interned in American concentration camps during World War II. In 1993 President Clinton signed into law a resolution stating, "Congress apologizes to the native Hawaiians on behalf of the people of the United States for the overthrow of their independent government"¹². The Pope expressed sorrow over the evils done when Europeans conquered North and South America. More recently (2005) the great majority of U.S senators officially expressed sorrow over the many times the Senate refused to pass federal anti-lynching laws (over 4,000

¹⁰ *Allocution de M. Jacques CHIRAC, Président de la République, prononcée lors des cérémonies commémorant la grande rafle des 16 et 17 juillet 1942*, <http://www.jacqueschirac-asso.fr/fr/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Allocution-Vel-dhiv.pdf> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹¹ *Belgium marks Nazi-era activities*, News Brief May 08 2007, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, <http://www.jta.org/2007/05/08/news-opinion/belgium-marks-nazi-era-activities> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹² *UNITED STATES PUBLIC LAW 103-150*. 103d Congress Joint Resolution 19 Nov. 23, 1993, <http://www.hawaii-nation.org/publawall.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

men-70% black- were lynched in the U.S.)¹³. In February of 2006, two centuries after profiting from the venture, the Church of England has apologized for its role in the global slave trade, which included running a Caribbean island sugar plantation and branding the blacks who worked it¹⁴.

On the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown in 1607, the Virginia House of Delegates unanimously approved a resolution expressing “profound regret for the commonwealth’s role in sanctioning the immoral institution of human slavery, in the historic wrongs visited upon native peoples and in all other forms of discrimination and injustice rooted in racial and cultural bias”¹⁵. In May of 2007 the Legislature of the State of Alabama passed a resolution expressing “profound regret” for the state’s enslavement of black people¹⁶. Alabama was the fourth southern state to formally apologize for slavery. Another example of ‘Gentile rulers’ publicly atoning for sins of previous rulers comes from the Australian government. On February 13, 2008 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized in parliament to all Aborigines for laws and policies that “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss” on them¹⁷. He singled out the “Stolen Generations” of thousands of children forcibly removed from their families. The apology, beamed live around the country on TV, was met with cheers. In an example on a more local level, Bob Jones University, a private fundamentalist Protestant College in South Carolina, apologized for its previous racist policies in November of 2008 saying its rules on race were shaped by (Southern) culture instead of the Bible¹⁸.

¹³ *The U.S. Senate Apology on Lynching*, <http://www.elegantbrain.com/academic/department/AandL/AAS/ANNOUNCE/vra/lynch/lynchmain.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹⁴ *Church of England apologises for having been at the heart of slavery*, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/church-of-england-apologises-for-having-been-at-the-heart-of-slavery/2006/02/09/1139465794611.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹⁵ T. Craig, *In Va. House, ‘Profound Regret’ on Slavery*, “The Washington Post” February 3 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/02/AR2007020201203.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹⁶ Complete text of *Alabama’s Slavery Apology*, May 25, 2007, <http://www.learnertoquestion.com/resources/database/archives/003373.html> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹⁷ *Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples*, <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples/sign-language> (approach 8.09.2015).

¹⁸ *Statement about Race at BJU*, <http://www.bju.edu/about/what-we-believe/race-statement.php> (approach 8.09.2015).

Of course, the Turkish government still denies responsibility for the death of over one million Armenians; the Japanese deny slaughtering 300,000 residents of Nanking, and only a few French leaders admit to the complicity of the Vichy government in rounding up Jews for the Nazi death camps. Even the UN has not officially admitted its dereliction of duty in the genocide of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. Yet the few steps of public confession and atonement that have been taken by some political and religious leaders are truly remarkable when you consider that nothing like this has ever happened in previous human history.

If the Holocaust has stimulated a willingness by religious and political leaders to accept responsibility for past examples of persecution and iniquity done by their institutions and governments in the past; and this willingness continues to expand, society will improve greatly. If other governments and institutions admit responsibility for the sins of their predecessors it reduces the likelihood of repetition. Then the false numbering of God's innocent servant-Israel/Jacob with transgressors, will- when the lessons are finally learned- help redeem not just those directly involved but also many others. Israel's pouring out of life (six million deaths) will not have been in vain, and the revived Jewish people will see the light of life and be satisfied (Isaiah 54:11-12).

God's Kingdom will be established

It will take another century of spiritual development to see if this interpretation is correct. Israel's passion in the 20th century should be for the leaders of both Churches and nations, what the passion of Jesus was for many non-Jewish individuals in the 1st century. Without the powerful example of the sacrifice of Jesus that Christianity spread throughout the western world this would not be possible. Both Jesus Josephson and God's servant Israel/Jacob filled the role of the martyred Josephson messiah.

The Davidson messiah will come after all nations, religions and political parties learn to respect and value as a gift from God, each other's right to differ in large as well as small issues. Since this religious refocus requires great leadership from all the major religions, each religion will have to produce its own Aronson spiritual reformer messianic figure. These plural messianic religious reformers are referred to by Jeremiah as 'seven shepherds' (3:14-18) and their

teachings will provide each religion with a reshaped relationship with other reshaped religious communities and a revitalized and renewed covenant (31:31-34). It would not **surprise** me if the work did not begin with Jerusalem and its ancient site previously visited by Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad.

One of the accomplishments of a Davidson Messiah is to rebuild in some form and fashion, the Temple of Solomon, thus fulfilling the prophecy of Zachariah, "He shall build the temple of the Lord, and he shall bear the glory, he shall sit on the throne and rule, there shall be a priest before the throne, and peaceful counsel will exist between both of them" (6:13). Now that a large part of the Jewish people have returned to the Land of Israel and resurrected a Jewish state, one might think that rebuilding a temple on the site where Solomon originally built one almost three thousand years ago, would be relatively simple. And it would, except for the fact that the site is presently occupied by a Muslim shrine called the Dome of the Rock. Often erroneously called the Mosque of Omar, it is not a mosque and was not built by Omar. It was built in 691 by Abd-al-Malik, and it is regarded by Muslims as the third holiest site in the world. Any attempt to replace the Dome of the Rock would provoke a Muslim holy war of cataclysmic proportions.

There is, however, a lot of vacant land on the Temple Mount, and a Jewish house of worship could be built adjacent to the Dome of the Rock provided the Muslims would cooperate. Most observers agree that anyone who could arrange such Jewish-Muslim cooperation would really be a Messianic Ruler of Peace (Isaiah 9:5) Christian support for such a cooperative venture would also be very important, and any leaders who can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together in mutual respect and cooperation would surely fulfill the greatest of all Messianic predictions, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning knives; nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again teach war." (Isaiah 2:4)

Indeed, such Jewish/Christian/Muslim cooperation would not be possible without great spiritual leadership in all three communities. Thus, each community could consider its leadership to be the Messiah and this would fulfill the just cited verse of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, as enlarged upon by the prophet Micah, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning knives. Nation shall not take up sword against nation, they shall never again teach war, but every man shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree

with no one to disturb him, for it is the Lord of Hosts who spoke. Though all peoples walk each in the name of its God, we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.” (Micah: 3-5)

If each people truly follows the best of its own religious teachings; the Messiah will surely have arrived, and God’s Kingdom will be established. The advocacy of pluralism and mutual respect for other theological views by the major religious communities will then have produce the bases for the ultimate messianic predictions of worldwide peace, justice, prosperity, and redemption that the prophets proclaimed so often. The Davidson Messiah activities and inspiration will then have come to crown our own faith in our own religions teachings of God’s deliverance.

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia tradycyjne chrześcijańskie rozumienie Iz 53 odnoszące ostatnią pieśń o słudze Pana do Jezusa z Nazaretu oraz tradycyjną interpretację żydowską, wedle której sługą jest cały Izrael. Następnie ukazana zostaje tradycja cierpiącego mesjasza w religii żydowskiej (mesjasza syna Józefa) i poglądy o odkupieńczym znaczeniu cierpienia narodu. Artykuł pokazuje, że Holokaust miał znaczenie odkupieńcze w sensie praktycznym, ponieważ będąc przestrożą przyczynił się do poprawy współczesnego świata. Autor opowiada się za pluralistyczną interpretacją Iz 53, wzywa do wzajemnego szacunku wyznawców różnych religii oraz przestrzegania najlepszych nauk swoich religii, co ma przyczynić się do nastania czasów mesjańskich.

Słowa kluczowe: mesjasz, cierpiący sługa, żydowska i chrześcijańska interpretacja Biblii, Holokaust, odkupienie

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