

Healing in the Atonement

Dealing with a misunderstanding of the text, that has placed many sick Christians in to guilt and shame, when they remained un-healed after prayer.

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Isaiah 53:4-5, Matthew 8:16-17, 1 Peter 2:24, Psalm 147:3, Luke 4:18

KEY SCRIPTURES

Those that teach Healing in the Atonement, make a grave error in interpreting certain Scriptures in isolation from other texts, particularly Isaiah and the Jewish background. The Scriptures usually appealed to are:

“Surely He has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was on Him; and with His stripes we ourselves are healed.” (Isaiah 53:4-5)

“And evening coming on, they brought to Him many who had been possessed with demons. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick so that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “He took on Himself our weaknesses and bore our sicknesses.”” (Matthew 8:16-17)

Before we can deal with the Matthew text, we will exam what Isaiah wrote and how it is interpreted in different translations.

We will also examine the underlying languages – Hebrew and Greek.

Isaiah is understood by Christians to refer to the coming Messiah Jesus; The Jewish people regard it as referring to Israel. The argument around this is hotly debated by both parties. That discussion is for another time, as we are focusing on what the text speaks to, regarding the healing it describes.

There are eight references to the sinful condition. A careful reading of the text shows clear statements – ‘But He was wounded [?????? châlal] for our transgressions [??????? pasha]?’ – ‘He was bruised for our iniquities [????? ?âvôn]’. The Hebrew words show that the ‘wounds’ are borne for ‘transgressions’. This should be enough to show that the claim of physical healing in the atonement is false. However, we can go deeper.

The LXX (The Jewish translation of the original Hebrew into Greek) Isaiah 53:4-5:

A close rendering of the Greek to English:

“This one bears our sins, and suffers pain on our behalf; and we accounted him to be in trouble, and in a plague [from God], and in affliction. But he was wounded because of our lawless deeds, and has been made sick/weakened because of our sins. The discipline of our peace was upon him; by his bruise we were healed.”

In examining the text we find the following:

- ? v.4 — “sins” instead of “sicknesses/griefs.” The MT, (Greek – English Translation), has חֲטָאוֹתֵינוּ (choláyenu, “our sicknesses/infirmities”) and מַכְאוֹבוֹתֵינוּ (makh’ovenu, “our pains/sorrows”). The LXX translator renders the first as ἡμῶν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν, “our sins” — a striking theological shift from physical suffering to moral guilt. Matthew 8:17, quoting the verse of Jesus healing the sick, uses ἀσθενεία astheneia. The English can be translated in various ways and the term ‘weakness’ is commonly used elsewhere (Rom 6:19; 1Cor 2:3; Heb 5:2; Heb 7:28 Rom 8:26). The idea of intellectual and moral weakness can be suggested. The choice is down to the translator but other Scriptural use of the Greek is the best guide. This reflects the Hebrew more reasonably.
- ? v.4 — “we accounted him to be in trouble” (חָלָה לָנוּ) rather than the more specific “stricken” (חָלָה לָנוּ, associated with leprosy/plague). The Greek is more generic.
- ? v.5 — “wounded because of our lawless deeds” (חָלָה לָנוּ בְּעוֹנוֹתֵינוּ) — close to “wounded for our transgressions.”
- ? v.5 — “made sick/weakened” (חָלָה לָנוּ בְּעוֹנוֹתֵינוּ) “because of our sins,” rather than “bruised for our iniquities.” The Hebrew חָלָה לָנוּ (medukka) means “crushed,” a much more violent image than the Greek’s “made infirm/enfeebled.”
- ? v.5 — “by his bruise” (חָלָה לָנוּ בְּעוֹנוֹתֵינוּ, singular) we were healed — not the plural “stripes.” Hebrew חָלָה לָנוּ is also singular (“his wound/welt”), so most English translations that render it “stripes” (plural) are already interpretive; the LXX matches the Hebrew’s singular here.

Therefore, the overall pattern: the LXX consistently sharpens the passage toward sin language (חָטָאוֹתֵינוּ/חַטֹּאתֵינוּ) where

the Hebrew is more ambiguous or physical (illness, crushing), while softening some of the violent imagery (crushed ? weakened). This has made LXX Isaiah 53 a frequently cited text in both patristic Christology and modern Jewish-Christian polemics over the Suffering Servant, since the Greek already reads the servant's suffering explicitly in terms of vicarious atonement for sin rather than mere affliction. Theological bias can often influence the translator's choices.

It is worth noting that the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1QIsa?), roughly a thousand years older than the medieval Masoretic manuscripts we have, agrees with the Masoretic consonantal text (how text sounds) at these verses. This confirms that the LXX's rendering of "sins" in verse 4 reflects the Greek translator's theological interpretation of the Hebrew, rather than evidence of a different underlying Hebrew source text.

It is also interesting that on Isaiah 53:5, the Targum Johnathan reads:

"He shall build the house of the sanctuary, which has been profaned on account of our sins; it was delivered over on account of our iniquities, and through His doctrine peace shall be multiplied upon us, and through the teaching of His words our sins shall be forgiven us."

This again points to the understanding of the Hebrew language, which again speaks of sin being forgiven as the result of the Servant's suffering.

Rashi, one of the great Rabbis of the Jews comments:

“..the chastisement of our welfare was upon him The chastisement due to the welfare that we enjoyed, came upon him, for he was chastised so that there be peace for the entire world.”

This messianic and illness-bearing reading of the verse is not without earlier precedent within Judaism itself, predating Rashi’s national interpretation by centuries. In the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98b), the Rabbis discuss the names given to the Messiah, and one view calls him “the leper of the house of the Rabbi” on the basis of Isaiah 53:4 — “surely our illnesses he did bear and our pains he endured; yet we did esteem him stricken.” The Talmud there applies the verse to the Messiah individually, reading it in terms of affliction and sickness borne. This confirms that a messianic reading of the verse’s “illness” language is ancient, even though later medieval commentators such as Ibn Ezra and Radak instead followed Rashi in applying the whole chapter nationally, to Israel. Here we are again concerned with understanding the healing not the debate on to whom the passage refers.

When we consider the Jewish Peter, we find he writes.

“Christ carried our sins in his body on the cross. He did this so that we would stop living for sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24 ERV)

The use of ‘wounds’ here instead of ‘stripes’, fits the Greek better. Thayer, in his Greek dictionary, defines it as ‘a bruise, wale, wound that trickles with blood’. Peter is clearly making

the case from Isaiah 53:5 that it was our sins that were dealt with by the wounds of the Christ.

The Psalmist speaks thus:

“He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds.” (Psalm 147:3)

This fits with Jesus Himself, when He read from the scroll of Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me; because of this He has anointed Me to proclaim the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim deliverance to the captives, and new sight to the blind, to set at liberty those having been crushed..” (Luke 4:18)

He added, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears.”* His sacrifice was to heal the broken in spirit and those in sin. In this regard there is an interesting pericope in Matthew nine. Jesus meets a paralytic man. When he meets Jesus, Jesus forgives him his sin. Only when the sceptics mumble against Him, He gives physical healing. Jesus’ priority was the salvation of souls. Jesus made that clear (John 12:47) and Paul writes:

“Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ

Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” (1 Timothy 1:15)

This is from the pen of an Apostle who himself was ill. (Galatians 4:13-15). Even in his closing days his eyesight was failing. There is also his ‘thorn in the flesh’ which remains a mystery (2 Corinthians 12:7). Then there was Trophimus. Paul wrote “...but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.” (2 Timothy 4:20) And Timothy with his stomach complaints? Paul wrote, “ Drink water no longer, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake, and for your frequent infirmities.” (1 Timothy 5:23)

"Ah but, it is because they do not have faith they are not healed." I will hear from the proponents of healing in the atonement. Indeed, faith is a necessary component of healing and so is God's will alongside His timing and His purpose for each person. (Look at the man in the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. There every day and Jesus would have passed Him. His healing had to wait for Peter and John and God's purposes) Would anyone accuse Paul of not having faith?

Paul, this faithful man of God, would have no truck with the healing in the atonement proponents.

This understanding of the Servant's wounds as bearing away sin rather than sickness is also found in the earliest Christian reading of the passage, predating any modern ‘healing in the atonement’ teaching by many centuries. Justin Martyr, writing around AD 155-160 in his Dialogue with Trypho, repeatedly appeals to Isaiah 53 to argue that the Messiah's wounds were borne for the forgiveness of sins. Origen makes the same case against the pagan critic Celsus in Contra

Celsus (Book I), and Eusebius of Caesarea gives an extended reading of the chapter along the same lines in his *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Book X), working directly from the Greek text discussed above. This demonstrates that even from the earliest days of the Christian Church – those closest to the original sources – understood fully the wounds which were inflicted on our Saviour, were indeed to heal our sins and redeem us from the effect they have on our lives. It is better to enter eternity with physical problems than allow sin to continue. (Matthew 18:8-9)

It can only be concluded. That the sufferings and wounding of the Suffering Servant, was indeed for the healing of transgressions and that other healings in the Gospel had the purpose of demonstrating that Jesus was the Messiah, as promised in the Tanach. Let us give Paul the final word:

“I am happy in my sufferings for you. There is much that Christ must still suffer. And I gladly accept my part of those sufferings in my body for the good of his body, the church.”
Colossians 1:24

