Isaiah 53 has been regarded as a difficult passage within the Hebrew Bible because it describes a person who had to suffer and die vicariously in order to atone for the sins of others. Such a view is in strong contrast to the covenant theology which predominates in the Hebrew Bible and lays the foundation for the principle of retribution: Everyone must bear the consequences of his sins. This study deals with the interpretation of Isaiah 53 in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the reception history of the chapter. In the course of its interpretation history the passage has shown its vitality and importance, first in early Jewish martyr theology, then in a marvelous way in the Christian gospel about the suffering and dying Messiah, and finally in medieval Judaism when Jews must withstand the pressure of the Christian Church. The history of interpretation shows that Isaiah 53, an “erratic block” in the Hebrew Bible, was able to answer questions beyond the stage where the possibilities of the covenant theology and its retribution principle ended. Isaiah 53 opened a new path to understanding that those who sought to be in a covenental relationship to Yhwh may have been forced to suffer because “it was Yhwh’s will to crush the Servant and cause him to suffer.”

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