

# Isaiah 50-55

## Part 1

“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

(Lk 24:25-27)

### BACKGROUND

- In Jn 1:26, 39, John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” possibly quoting Isa 53:7. According to the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, “The phrase ‘the lamb of God’ can be related to several different lambs in OT and later Jewish thought, but most of these (e.g., the Passover lamb, the lamb of the daily offering or the messianic lamb of later apocalyptic) do not directly support the idea of taking away sin, so that it is reasonable to see the Servant figure as making a major contribution to this image.”
- “[The stanza containing Isa 52:15] ends with the ‘sprinkling’ of many nations and the stunned reaction to it. ‘Sprinkling with blood, oil or water is in the OT bound up with cleansing, i.e., with making a person or thing fit to come before God. Normally this has reference to Israel or its institutions, but not here: this is for ‘many nations’ (52:15). The stunned reaction testifies that God’s wisdom overthrows and confounds all human wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-2:5).”<sup>1</sup>

### QUESTIONS

1. The Servant of Yahweh is described in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12—but note that these delimitations are flexible). The Servant is equated with Israel at various points (44:1; 44:2; 49:3; 41:8-10; 45:4). The Servant is also described consistently throughout the Servant Songs:<sup>2</sup>
  - The Servant is God’s chosen (42:1; 49:1)
  - to bring justice (42:1, 1; 53:11)
  - and blessing (49:3-5; 53:10-12)
  - even for the Gentiles (42:1, 4; 49:6; 52:15)
  - despite appearing not to triumph at first because he does not speak out or quarrel (42:2-3; 50:5-7; 53:7)
  - and because he is mocked, despised and rejected (49:7; 50:6; 53:3).
  - Yet in the end he will be vindicated (42:4; 50:8-9; 53:10-12)

At the same time, some of the verses seem to refer to an individual, not the Jews collectively:

- Isa 49:6—how can Israel restore Israel?
- “one who was abhorred and despised by the nation” (49:7)
- 50:4-9—the mocking, beating, etc. most naturally apply to a person, not a nation

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. 2. See entries for June 17-23.

<sup>2</sup> See “Interpreting OT Prophetic Literature in Matthew: Double Fulfillment”, Craig L. Blomberg, *Trinity Journal*, 23 (2002), pp. 17-33, esp. pp. 23-25.

- 53:4—only a person fits the verses that speak of substitutionary sacrifice for the nation (also vv. 5-6, 10-12)
- Also, the “man of sorrows” and the servant’s disfigurement are much more intelligible when taken of a specific individual within Israel (53:3; 53:8-9, 11)

What is the most natural interpretation of the servant within Isaiah’s context?

2. In 50:10, if you fear the Lord, how do you regard his Servant? Who exercises judgment in 50:11?
3. Isa 54 describes the “covenant of peace” (54:10) brought by the Messiah. This in some ways fulfills three other great covenants, described in 54:1-3; vv. 4-8; and vv. 9-17. Which three covenants are referred to in these three passages?

In Isa 55 the theme of covenant continues, and the blessings of “an everlasting covenant” are described (55:3) that, in Carson’s words, “the Lord enacts with his people—and this time the covenant is seen as the fulfillment of promises to David.” Carson adds, “Moreover, this covenant has a confirming sign. The Noahic covenant had the sign of the rainbow; the Abrahamic, circumcision; the Sinai covenant, the sprinkled blood.” What, according to this passage, is the sign of the new covenant? (See Isa 55:12-13; also 2:2-5; 11:1-16.)<sup>3</sup>

4. Some facets of the NT suffering-servant messiah’s atoning death can be seen in earlier and parallel Jewish literature<sup>4</sup>: In Ecclesiasticus (180-190 BC) and 1 Enoch (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD) and the Aramaic Targum translation-commentary of the OT, the Servant is identified as an individual (Elijah and Enoch and the messiah, respectively) rather than all of Israel. 2 Esdras has a prophecy of a dying messiah—but not atoning. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Servant is identified with the Qumran community, and their suffering is seen as atoning for all of Israel, including Gentile converts. In Justin’s 2<sup>nd</sup>-cent. AD *Dialogue with Trypho*, his Jewish opponent argues that the messiah must suffer, but objects to the manner of Jesus’ death (Justin represents this as a common Jewish point of view); in the Babylonian Talmud (c. 200 AD) the Servant is explicitly identified as a suffering messiah (a leper, in fact). In 4 Maccabees (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD) the martyrs of the Maccabean revolution are described as being a “ransom for the sin of [the] nation.” The atonement, when present, isn’t necessarily what is found in the NT. E.g., in 4 Macc, “the primary benefit of the martyr’s atoning death was the removal of God’s wrath and the securing of his favor for the enjoyment of national life in the ancestral homeland...”<sup>5</sup>

How does the NT understanding of Jesus’ suffering differ from all of these? (Hint: See Heb 7:23-28, esp. 24; 1 Pet 1:19-21; also: Rom 3:21-26; Heb 2:14-18; 5:1-10.)

The NT understanding also differs in the effects of the atonement, which are cosmic in scope, bringing a restored personal relationship with God (cf. Eph 1:3-14; 21-22; 2:6; 21-22; 3:10; Col 1:15-20).

5. Of the passages which hint at the suffering of the Messiah, the Servant Songs are the clearest (see also Ps 22; Zech 13:7; Dan 9:26). (These may be the passages to which Jesus refers in Mk 9:12 when he says, “...[it is] written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected”; see also Lk 24:25-27.)

<sup>3</sup> SPOILER: Carson’s answer is “The everlasting covenant has as its eternal sign a transformed universe.”

<sup>4</sup> “The Suffering Servant Between the Testaments”, Sydney H. T. Page, *New Testament Studies*, 31, 1985, pp. 481-497.

<sup>5</sup> Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (section on 4 Macc esp.).

How *future-prophetic* are these? Is the Messiah the clear fulfillment, or merely consistent with some ambiguous passages? In even just the 4<sup>th</sup> Song (52:13-53:12), is the Messiah the only fulfillment, or a second fulfillment? Do these passages have the power to suggest divine authorship, in keeping with Isaiah's theme of God's unique ability to reveal the future? Is it possible that Jesus deliberately chose to fulfill these prophecies? (It may help to list the places where the life of Jesus reflects esp. the 4<sup>th</sup> Song.)



*Fun fact:* *The Jewish Study Bible* initially points out the collective theory for the identity of the Servant. It acknowledges that various passages appear to refer to an individual, and that the Targum identifies the Servant as the Messiah—but says this is unlikely because Deutero Isaiah doesn't refer to the Messiah elsewhere, which it takes as an indication that Deutero Isaiah didn't believe in an individual Messiah. (In other news, Othello isn't black because there aren't many other African characters in Shakespeare, so he clearly didn't believe in them. Oh, and his corpus was written by at least three separate authors.) The JSB additionally acknowledges that Christians see the Servant as prophetic of Jesus, and adds only that “medieval rabbinic commentators devoted considerable attention to refuting this interpretation”—but fails to provide any of their arguments.