

Isaiah 50-55

“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).”⁵

QUESTIONS

1. The Servant of Yahweh is described in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 53:1-3; 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:¹
 - 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
- 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?

¹ See “Interpreting OT Prophetic Literature in Matthew: Double Fulfillment”, Craig L. Blomberg, *Trinity Journal*, **23** (2002), pp. 17-33, esp. pp. 23-25.

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.)²

4. Some facets of the NT suffering-servant messiah’s atoning death can be seen in earlier and parallel Jewish literature³: In Ecclesiasticus (180-190 BC) and 1 Enoch (1st 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 2nd-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 (1st 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...”⁴

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 11-13). (These are *apparently* 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.)

How *future-prophetic* are these? Is the Messiah the clear fulfillment, or merely consistent with some ambiguous passages? In even just the 4th 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 4th Song.)

² SPOILER: Carson’s answer is “The everlasting covenant has as its eternal sign a transformed universe.”

³ “The Suffering Servant Between the Testaments”, Sydney H. T. Page, *New Testament Studies*, **31**, 1985, pp. 481-497.

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

6. In the following passages, how is concept of a suffering servant/Messiah regarded: Lk 2:25-35 (the Song of Simeon, which quotes Isa 49:6, the second Servant Song); Mt 8:16-17 (quoting Isa 53:4); Lk 22:36-37 (quoting Isa 53:12); Mt 16:21-24; Acts 3:24-26?
7. Read (and marvel at) 1 Peter 1:8-2:23. What motivation is Peter giving for holy living? Note that 1 Pet 2:22 quotes Isa 53:9, 1 Pet 2:24 quotes Isa 53:12b, and 1 Pet 2:25 quotes Isa 53:5-6. Are these uses of Isaiah coherent with the Isaiah's message within its context?
8. The Servant Songs are written from several points of view, including God's, the Servant's, and that of the Servant's contemporaries. In many places they provide insight into the Servant's thoughts and motivation—both in the “autobiographical” passages (Isa 50:4-11; 49:1-6) and elsewhere (53:3; 42:4).

While it is impossible to know for certain, how accurately might these passages reflect Jesus' thoughts and feelings?

9. Paul quotes Isa 52:11-12 in 2 Cor 6:14-18. Of this, Carson writes,

When the Israelites left Egypt they were told to bring with them whatever they could get from the Egyptians—valuable jewelry and clothing. Here, however, the people are warned not to touch anything. but to come out ‘from there’ and be pure. This suggests that the ultimate goal is not geographical Jerusalem, but the new Jerusalem, and what must be left behind is more than Babylon, but all that Babylon represents. That reflection enables us to understand how and why Paul uses this passage in 2 Cor 6:14-18, and how we should use it today.⁵

How do you understand Paul's use of Isaiah? As Carson asks, how should we use it today?

10. In their deliverance from bondage in Egypt we gain insight into what it means to be a *servant* of Yahweh, since both Moses and Israel are referred to as God's servants (Ex 14:31; Lev 25:55). Eugene Peterson points out that “When Moses negotiated the release of the Israelite slaves, he used the word ‘serve’ over and over again. God instructed Moses, ‘Say to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, that they may serve me”’ (Ex 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3).”⁶ In Isaiah, Israel is the servant, as is David (37:35). Peterson continues,

‘Servant’ surprises us because it is so incongruent with the way itself, the way of salvation, a ‘highway for our God’ (Isa 40:3)... Is this the way the all-powerful God who ‘sits above the circle of the earth’ expects to be recognized? We must have expected better: freedom fighters, perhaps, battle-hardened warriors, politically savvy statesmen skilled in negotiating terms... Servant is a position without distinction, the lowest rung on the work ladder...

Jesus regarded service as the hallmark of discipleship (Mt 20:24-28). Again, Peterson:

This is the gospel way to deal with what is wrong with the world, deal with this multifaceted sin-cancer that is mutilating and disabling us. Variations on what is wrong are multiform: unbelief, missing the mark, evil, rebellion, transgression, willfulness, indifference, violence, arrogance, and on and on and on. But whether the wrong is intentional or inadvertent, the servant neither avoids it in revulsion nor attacks it by force

⁵ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. 2. See entries for June 17-23.

⁶ *The Jesus Way* (Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 149-189, esp. 170-174.

of words or arms. Instead, the servant embraces, accepts, suffers in the sense of submitting to the conditions and accepting the consequences. The servant personally takes the wrongdoer and the wrong to the altar of sacrifice and makes an offering of him or her or it. The servant says to his brothers and sisters, ‘Only God can save you. You don’t think you can go to him? I’ll go for you.’ Or at least, ‘Let me go with you.’

Discuss. What aspects of the Servant’s ministry are unique?

11. Many of God’s promises are partially fulfilled now, waiting for the fullness of time to come to completion. To what degree is the beautiful promise of Isa 54:17 true now?



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.