

THE IDENTITY AND MISSION OF THE SERVANT IN ISAIAH: OUR CALLING IN THE LIGHT OF HIS

Alex Hall

In our dialogue with Muslims, Jews and even many open-minded agnostics there is no issue so central as the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Muslims deny that Jesus even died. "What need was there for it?" they ask. Jews on the other hand accept that he did die but see this as evidence that he cannot be the Messiah. The following quote, drawn from an internet site aimed at equipping Jewish people to resist Christian evangelism sums up their common objection:

What is the Messiah supposed to accomplish? The Bible says that he will build the third Temple, gather all Jews back to the land of Israel, usher in an era of world peace, end all hatred, oppression, suffering and disease. He will spread universal knowledge of the God of Israel, which will unite humanity as one. As it says: "God will be King over all the world- on that day, God will be One and His Name will be One" (Zechariah 14:9).

If an individual fails to fulfill even one of these conditions, then he cannot be "The Messiah." Because no one has ever fulfilled the Bible's description of this future King, Jews still await the coming of the Messiah. All past Messianic claimants, including Jesus of Nazareth, Bar Cochba and Shabbtai Tzvi have been rejected.

Christians counter that Jesus will fulfill these in the Second Coming, but Jewish sources show that the Messiah will fulfill the prophecies outright; in the Bible no concept of a second coming exists.

To respond to this all we need to do is show, from the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus' rejection, death and resurrection were indeed prophesied as part of the Messianic program. Hence the centrality of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah, or more precisely Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. For the sake of brevity I will refer to this text from this point on as '53'. Even when read alone, 53 vividly foretells a Messianic figure who will suffer rejection and die with a measure of clarity which cannot but beg the question 'who could it be, but Jesus?' In addition to this, in answer to the Muslim objection, it gives the reason why Messiah's death and resurrection were such an indispensable part of God's plan for humanity. It tells of a Messiah commissioned not only to reign over the kingdom of God, but also to provide atonement for the sins of his people by bearing their guilt and becoming a sin offering.

The New Testament reflects the extent to which 53 was regarded by both the Apostles and Jesus as a pivotal prophetic witness not only to the fact that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, but also to the kind of Messiah he was ordained to be. Jesus explicitly referred to himself as the servant in Luke 22:27 "*I am among you as the one that serves.*" Note the definite article (omitted in some translations). He quoted Isaiah 53:10 in Luke 22:37 "*and he was reckoned among the transgressors*" to explain why he would allow himself to be treated like a common criminal. His statement in Matthew 26:28 "*for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (NASB) is pregnant with meaning derived from several key passages in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 24 & Jeremiah 31). The expressions 'poured out' and 'for many' echo Isaiah 53:12 (*because he hath poured out his soul unto death... and he bare the sin of*

many). It is also worth noting at this point that in Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8 the Messiah is promised to be a covenant for the nations. The mission of Isaiah's servant is reflected in Jesus' statement in Mark 10:45: "*For even the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*" Lastly, when asked if he was really 'he that should come', Jesus' reply distinctly alludes to Isaiah 42:7 as being fulfilled in his ministry.

The Apostles saw in Jesus' life and death the fulfillment of 53 and referred to it often. They use the title servant of Jesus in Acts 3:13, 26, 4:27, 30 (This too is obscured in some translations, the word 'servant' being rendered 'child'). Matthew 8:17 is a direct quotation of 53:4: "*That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.*" Other examples are Mark 15:28; John 12:38; Acts 8:32, 33; Romans 10:16; 15:21; and 1 Peter 2:22, 24, 25. Lastly, Matthew also gives a lengthy quote from another key servant text and applies it to Jesus in Matthew 12:15-21.

Such is the importance of this text that over time Judaism has developed a response to it:

Christianity claims that Isaiah chapter 53 refers to Jesus, as the "suffering servant." In actuality, Isaiah 53 directly follows the theme of chapter 52, describing the exile and redemption of the Jewish people. The prophecies are written in the singular form because the Jews ("Israel") are regarded as one unit. Throughout Jewish scripture, Israel is repeatedly called, in the singular, the "Servant of God" (see Isaiah 43:8). In fact, Isaiah states no less than 11 times in the chapters prior to 53 that the Servant of God is Israel. When read correctly, Isaiah 53 clearly refers to the Jewish people being "bruised, crushed and as sheep brought to slaughter" at the hands of the nations of the world. These descriptions are used throughout Jewish scripture to graphically describe the suffering of the Jewish people. Isaiah 53 concludes that when the Jewish people are redeemed, the nations will recognize and accept responsibility for the inordinate suffering and death of the Jews.

At first sight, this application of 53 to Israel as a nation appears to carry considerable weight. In addition, it raises the very important issue that 53 is part of a wider context and is the climax to a theme that is developed across several preceding passages. We will investigate this next. Having done so, we will then move on to explore historical rabbinical scholarship's interpretation of 53 before finally approaching the passage itself. In conclusion we will explore some of the implications of our findings for our lives as believers today.

THE SERVANT SONGS

The body of Isaianic literature can be divided into three distinct parts, the book of the king, the servant songs and the book of the anointed conqueror. The chapters relevant to today's study are 38-55 and constitute the second section. They describe the person and work of a mysterious figure called '*eved adonai*' or 'the servant of Yahweh/Jehovah' from which they derive their title. There are four 'songs': 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11 and lastly, the debated 52:13-53:12.

With respect to the servant's role in the first two 'songs', the predominant emphasis is on his calling to be the One God's witness to the nations.

THE FIRST SONG (42:1-9)

In the first four verses the Lord speaks of the servant describing his task. His mission is here summarized as bringing forth judgment (*mishpat*) to the nations. This is linked in 3c with truth (*emet*) and in 4 with teaching/law (*torah*).

*“The word mishpat is versatile, but its sense is plain in context. In the light of the of foregoing court scene it must retain its meaning of ‘judgment at law’, the result of a trial between the Lord and the idols. **The servant thus carries to the world the message that there is only one God.** Another shade of meaning follows automatically: ‘justice’ summarises those things which the Lord has authoritatively settled. It is a summary word for his revealed truth. **In this wide sense, the servant brings the truth of God to the world.**” [1]*

This call to witness is given further emphasis in the texts which stand between the first and second songs. The servant is referred to as a messenger in the parallelism of 44:26 *“That confirmeth the word of his **servant**, and performeth the counsel of his **messengers**”*. Also in 43:10-11 the choosing of the servant is linked to a mission of proclaiming the saving truth that there is only true God: *“**Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour.**”*

Unfortunately, that is not the whole story. Returning to the glorious description of the mission and attributes of the servant set out in the first song we read on and see that it is followed almost immediately by a slap in the face. The Lord asks *“Who is blind, but my **servant**? or deaf, as my **messenger that I sent?**”* (verse 19). Ringing commendation has turned to stinging rebuke. The title ‘servant’ is the same, but the message from God could not be more different. Blindness is metaphor of spiritual need, deafness goes further and denotes culpability and constitutes one of God’s primary charges against his people, their refusal/failure to heed his word. [2]

There is a savage irony in the prophet’s call in verse 18 to the deaf and blind Gentile nations (compare 7 & 16). The servant’s mission was to bring divine revelation and truth to them. Instead they are now subpoenaed as witnesses to the his own incapacity! The metaphor of blindness and deafness has been transferred to the servant himself. So lost is God’s messenger that the nations are able to see in his condition something which he himself is incapable of noticing. We have been given a picture of uselessness. A messenger who is unable to hear the word, much less pass it on.

In summary, there is a striking contrast between the vision of the servant, described in the first song and the reality. The privilege, confidence and divine empowerment the servant is called to are juxtaposed with a complete failure to live up to it. How have the mighty fallen! Something has gone horribly wrong. The servant has utterly failed in his evangelistic mandate and is now under God’s condemnation.

This tension between high calling and present failure is addressed and resolved in the next song...

THE SECOND SONG

In 49:1-3 a figure introduces himself as Israel. He then goes on (5 & 6) to make an extraordinary statement: “*And now, saith the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, **to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.***”

The individual is called Israel, yet at the same time is set apart from the nation. Indeed, he actually has a mission *to* Israel. How can this be?

Motyer comments that “*Israel was the name of an individual before it became a national name. At Bethel Jacob received the name and with it the blessing and responsibility of the Abrahamic promises. At that moment the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Isaiah brings us full circle back to such a moment as he penetrates the secrets of the Lord’s age-long workings; the giving of the name to the servant here surely reflects the prophet’s discovery that Israel in exile is not really capable at that moment of living up to what it means to be Israel. [As we know, exile constitutes a forfeiture of the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant.] In consequence either the Lord must acquiesce in the failure of his plans and promises or else he must find a true and worthy Israel. The servant is this wondrous new beginning.*” [3]

The only possible alternative corporate interpretation of the servant in verse 6 would be to apply it to a believing remnant within Israel that will restore the nation at large. However, this too is ruled out by the further mention of ‘the preserved of Israel’ as being included among subjects of the servant’s ministry. He is “*thus distinguished from both nation and remnant*” [4].

By this point a sensitive reading of the text should already have brought us to the conclusion that the Israel/Messiah enigma posed by the servant songs is much more than a question of an either/or relationship. Far from being mutually exclusive there is a considerable degree of overlap between the two. A correct understanding of these texts is not merely a matter of establishing a clear line of demarcation between the two. Quite the opposite, Isaiah’s revelation deliberately gives the same title to both servants and in addition to this, groups the oracles together. It is only by arriving at an appreciation of the full sense in which the Messiah *is* Israel that we can take on the full import of the prophet’s message.

You could go as far as to say that the servant will actually do a better job of being Israel than the entire nation did. He will be Israel in a sense that goes far beyond merely reflecting the social and cultural conditioning of his people. He will fully embody everything God wanted Israel to be and in the immediate context of the first two servant songs, more than anything else that means being a witness to the saving truth about the only God before the nations.

It is against the backdrop of the Messiah’s mission to fulfill Israel’s calling and also to meet their desperate need for reconciliation before God that the prophet goes on in the last two songs to show us a second sense in which the Messiah is Israel. Verse 7’s mention of being despised and abhorred drops a hint at what will become the theme of these successive songs. He will stand in for them not only in achieving success on their behalf by taking up and completing their

unfinished work. He will also secure their reconciliation before God by taking upon himself the penalty for the guilt of the entire nation and becoming a sin offering for them.

In order for them to be able to stand with him in his glory, he must stand with them in their failure, bearing in himself its full consequences.

THE THIRD SONG (50:4-11)

In verses 1 to 3 God is, yet again, denouncing Israel for their failure to respond to him. “Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? when I called, was there none to answer?”, he protests. In verse 4 the text moves into the first person. The attached comment (10 & 11) reveals that it is the servant speaking. He declares his readiness to answer to God’s call, even at immense personal cost: “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.” In spite of this he proclaims his confidence that God will ultimately vindicate him “therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.” Once more we have this juxtaposition between the individual who will succeed through suffering and the nation who failed through disobedience.

The scene is now set for us to move on into the last song. But first...

A WORD FROM THE RABBIS

Modern Jewish treatment of 53 often gives the impression that the Messianic interpretation was invented by us Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth. Until the 1800's the consensus of Jewish scholarship was that the servant described in Isaiah 53 was indeed the Messiah. There are literally hundreds of examples of which the following are typical:

Sanhedrin 98b states that the Messiah was “*the leprous one that bore our sicknesses*”. Also Midrash Rabbah on Ruth 5:6 dated from the middle of the 3rd century C.E. states that “*The fifth interpretation [of Ruth 2:14] makes it refer to the Messiah. ‘Come hither: approach to royal state. And eat of the BREAD’ refers to the bread of royalty: ‘AND DIP THY MORSEL IN THE VINEGAR refers to his sufferings, as it is said, But he was wounded because of our transgressions. (Isa. 53:5).’*” [5]

This understanding of 53 is well documented throughout Judaism’s history and dates back to the Targum of Jonathan, written in the intertestamental period prior to Jesus’ birth. In it, the commentary paraphrasing Isaiah 52:13 quotes it as “*Behold, My Servant the Messiah shall prosper.*” [6]

In contrast to this, the earliest record of 53 being applied to Israel is not found until Origen (185-254 C.E.). In his ‘Against Celsus’ (Lib. I, cap. LV) he refutes the eponymous Jew’s argument in favour of that position. It’s safe enough to say that both views coexisted for some time, though the next documented appearance of the ‘Israel’ interpretation is not until nearly 1000 years later, in the 11th century with Rabbi Solomon Yitzchaki (1040-1105) AKA Rashi. Even then, it was only several centuries later that it became the majority Jewish view. It may have been a minority opinion as late as 1437-1508 at which time a certain Don Yitzchak Abrabanel, criticising what he called “Nazarenes” for their belief that 53 referred to Jesus added the telling comment that the Messianic interpretation was “*the opinion of our learned men in the majority of their Midrashim.*”

To summarise, there is a marked contrast in Jewish scholarship regarding this issue over time. Nevertheless, it is the original view that the suffering servant of 53 was the Messiah. In contrast the later 'Israel' position has only usurped the dominance of the older view relatively recently. Even by the 1800's after Rashi's interpretation had finally won out, dissenting voices from within Judaism continued to be heard. In my opinion the second interpretation was only developed as a reaction against Christian use of 53 and constitutes a tacit acknowledgment of its clear testimony to Jesus. It is an example of the extent to which belief is an exercise of the will.

We now turn our attention to factors within the text of 53 which led Jesus, the Apostles, those Rabbis and modern scholars alike to the conclusion that the passage in question could only refer to the Messiah.

Most striking is the use of pronouns in this text. 'He, him and his' are used throughout 53 of the servant. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the plain meaning of all these references should be enough to support a conclusion that the subject is an individual. In addition to this, those pronouns used in reference to the servant are deliberately contrasted with 'we, us and ours', speaking of the prophet and his people. Even a cursory reading of 53 reveals this to be a thematic device deliberately used by the author and integral to the message of the chapter. The innocent one suffers for the guilt of the many. A striking example of this is verse 8: "*he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due. NASB*" Any blurring of the distinction between the servant and the people here would make a nonsense of the verse and destroy the message Isaiah is conveying. Indeed, the addition of Yahweh in verse 6, who loads iniquity upon the servant, sets him apart from both his God and the rest of humanity. He is as utterly alone as he is unique.

How could this passage apply to Israel? In spite of being innocent, the servant suffers on behalf of others in order to bring about their justification and healing. When did Israel ever suffer on behalf of another nation, much less to such effect?

In verse 7 we learn that the servant bears this suffering in silence. The Jewish people have always been most articulate in voicing their indignation at the injustices they have suffered throughout their remarkable history.

IN CONCLUSION

The contextual evidence, rabbinic scholarship and the text of 53 itself all bear witness to the fact that it points to one individual servant of God, the Messiah. What is more, no individual in history has matched Isaiah's portrayal of undeserved, dignified suffering more perfectly than Jesus of Nazareth.

In a recent interview Mel Gibson, director of the 'The Passion of the Christ' was called to answer the charge of anti-semitism for his portrayal of the role the Jewish people played in the death of Jesus. He replied by saying that on the day they filmed the crucifixion his hands were the ones drove the first nail into Jesus. It was an eloquent gesture, expressing his personal view on the ultimate reason why Jesus went through what he did. It was for the sins of his people. We cannot claim his forgiveness without acknowledging our sin as the cause for which he died. In view of

what he has done for us, is it too much to ask that we continue the servant's witness to the only God and the saving gospel of his coming kingdom?

OUR MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF HIS

For all the diversity, imagery and richness of poetry, there is a remarkable consistency to the purpose of God across the servant songs. Being called is virtually synonymous with being a witness.

As Chris Wright observes: "*the continuity of mission and witness to the nations thus runs through Israel, the servant, Jesus, the church... That is why he called Abraham, sent Jesus and commissioned the apostles*" [7].

Any illusion that evangelism is an optional extra for the zealots among God's people has evaporated under the intense rays of Isaiah's revelation. Witnessing has been shown to be integral to God's plan throughout the age and an indispensable part of what it means to serve him. The reader cannot avoid seeing that the servant's baton has been passed in turn to him or her. But more than that, Isaiah's depiction of the servant offers insights into the kind of witnesses he wants us to be.

The calling was first given to Israel. Thus the church is not some new Gentile thing born yesterday. It was first and foremost a Jewish tree with a Gentile component grafted on later. The Messiah is the last Adam, patriarch of this new humanity, made up both of Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, the roots are firmly planted in the soil of God's chosen people, Israel. Any witness to God's truth must be consistent with the revelation given to us through the Hebrew Bible. Any move to try and alienate Jesus or his message from source will rip the guts out of our understanding of his identity, his mission and his God.

The mission in this age is to be carried out in a context of servanthood. There are those who advocate a calling to prosper and succeed. In so doing, they argue, the people of God will rise to positions of influence and in this way be able to 'Christianise' society. While that sounds like a lot of fun, it bears little resemblance to the example set for us by the servant. He did not court rulers or jockey for position. Quite the opposite. His reach seems always to have gravitated downwards to meet the point of greatest need. He promised us glory and power as our reward in the coming kingdom, not as our purpose in this present age. The means through which we are to inherit the earth is not success in achieving dominion ASAP, but by emulation of the servant Messiah in a life of humble service.

[1] J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP 1993), 319.

[2] *Ibid.* 327.

[3] *Ibid.* 386.

[4] *Ibid.* 388.

[5] *Midrash Rabbah* (Soncino) vol. VIII, 64.

[6] S.H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation*, 63.

[7] Chris Wright, *Knowing Jesus* (Marshall Pickering 1992), 175.