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FROM PATRIARCHS TO PROPHETS: READING AND RECEPTION

Assessment Three (Prophetic Focus)

Examine critically the role of the Suffering Servant within the book of Isaiah and New Testament tradition (with reference to a selection of NT texts).

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Examine critically the role of the Suffering Servant within the book of Isaiah and New Testament tradition (with reference to a *selection* of NT texts)

The New Testament's reception of Isaiah's Suffering Servant exemplifies a highly influential reception of the Hebrew Bible. In post-New Testament Christianity such reception is traditionally read and understood as a messianic text prophetically fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth by his life and vicarious atoning death on a cross. Judaism discloses divergent readings pre and post Christian reception and aspects of New Testament tradition are debated in contemporary biblical scholarship. A critical examination of the role of the Suffering Servant, within the book of Isaiah and New Testament tradition, confirms traditional Christian understanding is a defensible interpretation but does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of this Isaianic servant of Yahweh.

Isaiah's Suffering Servant

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (hereinafter 'Isaiah 53') is regarded as a 'remarkable and notoriously difficult text'.¹ It describes Yahweh's servant who is known by the scholarly construct the 'Suffering Servant'.² In genre a liturgy, hymn of thanksgiving or eulogy and lament it is the last of four servant songs or poems in Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) two or three

¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'The Sacrificial Life and Death of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)', *Vetus Testamentum*, 66 (2016), 1-14 (p.2).

² 'The term was introduced into biblical studies in 1892 by Bernhard L. Duhm (1847-1928)', Marc Brettler and Amy-Jill Levine, 'Isaiah's Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 73:2 (2019), 158-173 (p.159).

others of which relate to the same servant.³ Deutero-Isaiah is dated to the sixth century BCE and, in its original historical location, is directed towards exiled Israelites in Babylon.⁴ In such context Isaiah 53 has been interpreted *inter alia* as part of a theological undertaking to make sense of the Babylonian calamity, a counteroffensive to the 'Zion/David theologoumenon', by presenting the Suffering Servant as 'God's new way';⁵ as a cultic text which is a creative theological response to the traumatic loss of the Jerusalem temple with the Suffering Servant an attempt to address the 'problem of effecting expiation without a sanctuary';⁶ and as 'prophetic of a future [messianic] figure in an eschatological setting' when God will bring redemption to Israel and the nations.⁷

The Servant's Role

The role of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 is located among statements by Yahweh, prophet-narrator comments and servant identifying markers. It comprises how he serves Yahweh by innocently suffering for others. This involves bearing others' infirmities, carrying their diseases, being wounded and stricken for their transgressions,

³ Klaus Koch, 'Latter Prophets: The Major Prophets', in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), pp.353-368 (p.366), John F. A. Sawyer, 'The Book of Isaiah', in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1993), pp.325-329 (pp.328-329), Blenkinsopp, 'The Sacrificial Life', p.2 (footnote 2), R. Reed. Lessing, 'Isaiah's Servants in Chapters 40–55 Clearing up the Confusion', *Concordia Journal*, Spring (2011), 131-134 (pp.133-134) and John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998) [eBook Version], p.325.

⁴ John F. A. Sawyer, 'Isaiah', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.52-63 (pp.54 & 59) and Koch, 'Latter Prophets', p.353.

⁵ Paul D. Hanson, 'The World of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40–55', in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. by William H. Bellinger, Jr and William R. Farmer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), pp.9-22 (pp.13-17).

⁶ Paba Nidhani De Andrado, 'Reconciliation in the Templess Age: The Servant as Sanctuary in Isa 53', *Old Testament Essays*, 34.3 (2021), 915-935 (p.932).

⁷ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009) [eBook Version], pp.586-587.

crushed for their iniquities, bearing 'the sin of many' and being numbered with and making intercession for transgressors (Is. 53:4-5, 8, 12). It is Yahweh's will to lay 'on him the iniquity of us all' and 'to crush him with pain' (Is. 53:6, 10). By bearing punishment and bruising for others he brings wholeness and healing, with 'the righteous one, my servant' making 'many righteous' and bearing their iniquities (Is. 53:5, 11). The servant dies in fulfilling Yahweh's will, the compelling meaning of being 'cut off from the land of the living' in conjunction with pouring 'out himself to death' (Is. 53:7-9, 12). The Servant's role is therefore soteriological based on vicarious suffering.

Isaiah 53: Pre-Christian Jewish Reception

The pre-Christian reception of Isaiah 53 within Judaism assists in understanding to what extent its New Testament reception, the vicarious atoning death of Jesus who is the Messiah, falls within the scope of earlier Jewish reception. A common opinion among New Testament scholarship is the New Testament's reception is novel with limited or no influence from pre-Christian Jewish reception.⁸ This is reflected within contemporary Jewish scholarship.⁹ However, an alternative view is the New Testament's reception

⁸ See footnote 4, quoting H. Haag, in Peter Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. by Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, transl. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp.147-162 (p.148), Morna D. Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53 to Interpret His Mission Begin with Jesus?', in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. by William H. Bellinger, Jr and William R. Farmer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), pp.88-103 (p.99) and H.H. Rowley quote and endnote 3 in Sydney H. T. Page, 'The Suffering Servant Between the Testaments', *New Testament Studies*, 31 (1985), 481-497 (pp.481 & 493).

⁹ In relation to Daniel 12:3 and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Brettler and Levine, 'Isaiah's Suffering Servant', p.165.

has its roots in pre-Christian Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53 albeit such interpretations are not unified.¹⁰

Daniel 12:3 is likely the earliest appropriation of Isaiah 53.¹¹ Vicarious atoning death is possibly hinted at here.¹² The vicarious suffering is collective, arguably also individual.¹³ Subsequent insertions of the *Prayer of Azariah* into Daniel explicitly speak of a 'sacrificial self-offering in death' of martyrs.¹⁴ Two Qumran Hebrew scrolls of Isaiah in 1QIsa, which contain variations from the Masoretic Text, suggest that Deutero-Isaiah was interpreted messianically.¹⁵ Allusions to the servant songs in the Qumran Community Rule (1QS8) attribute 'atoning value...to the suffering of the council of the community' in terms similar to the Suffering Servant.¹⁶ Interpreting the collective Israel as the Suffering Servant, suffering for their own iniquities, Jewish scholar Israel Knohl views the concept of 'a heavenly suffering figure', relevant to Christian reception of Isaiah 53, as having arisen 'during the intertestamental period at Qumran'.¹⁷ In the *Aramaic Apocryphon of Levi* (4Q540-541) vicarious atoning death possibly plays a role. It discloses midrashic interpretation of the servant songs in second century BCE

¹⁰ Martin Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period', in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. by Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, transl. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp.75-146 (p.145).

¹¹ Blenkinsopp, 'The Sacrificial Life', p.11.

¹² Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', pp.75, 90-98 & 146.

¹³ Blenkinsopp, 'The Sacrificial Life', p.12.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁵ Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', pp.75, 101-105 & 146.

¹⁶ Page, 'The Suffering Servant', p.485.

¹⁷ Israel Knohl, 'The Suffering Servant: from Isaiah to the Dead Sea Scrolls', in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination: Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, ed. by Deborah A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.89-104 (pp.91 & 100).

Palestinian Judaism as relating to an individual servant.¹⁸ Allusions in Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the *Parables (Similitudes) of Enoch* may be interpretations of Isaiah 53. Both interpret the servant as an individual as opposed to a collective with *Enoch* providing a messianic interpretation but exclusive of suffering.¹⁹ The Armenian text of the *Testament of Benjamin* 3:8 suggests an individual dying Messiah paralleled in Isaiah 53.²⁰ The LXX Greek translation of Isaiah 53 has been regarded as portraying a messianic individual.²¹

None of the foregoing readings constitute a pre-Christian Jewish reception of Isaiah 53 as an eschatological individual Messiah who vicariously suffers and dies salvifically conforming to traditional Christian understanding. There are few pre-Christian messianically interpreted texts within Judaism and in the majority 'the motif of an end-time victor and judge predominates'.²² To Jewish exiles in Babylon, and Jews in a threatened and subsequently Roman occupied Judah, self-determination and liberation from oppressors were likely at the forefront of any messianic expectations. The New Testament attests to Jesus' suffering and death not being commonly accepted by those who viewed him the Messiah.²³ Jesus' self-understanding of his sufferings was independent of prevailing messianic hopes.²⁴ Nonetheless, whilst the evidence is not

¹⁸ Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', pp.75-76, 117-118 & 146.

¹⁹ Page, 'The Suffering Servant', pp.481-483.

²⁰ Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', pp.75-76, 137-140, & 146.

²¹ John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55 Volume II*, The International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark International, 2006), p.285 and Page, 'The Suffering Servant', p.486.

²² Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', p.89.

²³ Page, 'The Suffering Servant', p.489.

²⁴ Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', p.149.

unequivocal, readings from pre-Christian Jewish reception of Isaiah 53 indicate the presence of ideas also present within the New Testament's reception. Such ideas circulating within elements of Palestinian Judaism during Jesus' life and the early church may have influenced New Testament reception.²⁵ Accordingly, one may reasonably state that the New Testament's reception of Isaiah 53 is consonant with certain ideas within earlier Jewish reception.

Isaiah 53: New Testament Reception and its post-New Testament reading

The New Testament's reception of Isaiah 53 has been a highly influential reception of the Hebrew Bible within the post-New Testament church. Traditionally read messianically and understood Christologically as prophetically fulfilled in the life and vicarious atoning death of Jesus, aspects of New Testament tradition are the subject of contemporary academic debate. The New Testament's reception of Isaiah 53 is found within a few texts which quote from and numerous texts which contain allusions to or are influenced by Isaiah 53.²⁶ Its reception of Isaiah 53, and the subsequent traditional Christian reading and understanding of this, shall be examined by reference to a selection of texts relevant to the role of the Suffering Servant.

Matthew 8:17 (Isaiah 53:4)

Matthew describes Jesus healing the sick as prophetic fulfilment of 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matt. 8:17). Whilst it has been claimed that Isaiah

²⁵ Hengel, 'The Effective History of Isaiah 53', pp.140 & 146 and Page, 'The Suffering Servant', p.493.

²⁶ Otto Betz, 'Jesus and Isaiah 53', in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. by William H. Bellinger, Jr and William R. Farmer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), pp.70-87 (pp.72-74), Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', pp.90-93 and Brettler and Levine, 'Isaiah's Suffering Servant', pp.167-168.

53:4 is speaking of the servant's own disabilities,²⁷ this is not a prevailing opinion within biblical scholarship. Matthew is traditionally understood as a holistic Christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 which embraces Jesus' entire mission not only his sufferings.²⁸ As healing is an outward manifestation of taking 'our infirmities' and bearing 'our diseases' it is a defensible interpretation of the text.²⁹

Mark 10:45; 14:24 (Isaiah 53:11-12)

Jesus defines his servant role as including giving 'his life a ransom for many' (Mk. 10:45) and refers to the eucharistic cup as 'my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk. 14:24). Both verses may reasonably be regarded as allusions to 'many' and bearing 'iniquities' or 'sin' in both Isaiah 53:11 and 12 which follow making the servant's life 'an offering for sin' (Is. 53:10). Traditional Christian understanding of these allusions is they portray Jesus' self-understanding of his vicarious atoning death in terms of the Suffering Servant.³⁰ This is a defensible interpretation. Rudolf Bultmann rejected this believing it a post-Easter creation of the early church.³¹ Morna Hooker on different grounds rejects the Suffering Servant as significant for Jesus' understanding of his mission.³² She considers Mark may not have been aware of the verses' links to Isaiah

²⁷ Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.73-74.

²⁸ See Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', pp.157-158.

²⁹ Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.90.

³⁰ Betz, 'Jesus and Isaiah 53', p.70 and, for intentional references to Isaiah 53, James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002) [eBook Version], pp.342 & 434-435 and William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1974) [eBook Version], pp.308-309 & 405-406.

³¹ Betz, 'Jesus and Isaiah 53', pp.70-71 & 83.

³² Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', pp.88-89 & 93.

53 and that Jesus and the evangelists interpreted his death by reference to the Exodus and 'bringing into existence a new people of God'.³³ Contrariwise Peter Stuhlmacher and Otto Betz affirm traditional Christian understanding. Stuhlmacher views Mark 10:45 as Jesus understanding his mission from the viewpoint of Isaiah 43:3-4 and Isaiah 53:11-12.³⁴ Betz views Mark. 10:45 and 14:24 as authentic Jesus' sayings pivoted on Isaiah 53. The sequential link between Mark 10:45 and baptism in Mark 10:38, a metaphor for Jesus' death, bolsters this with Isaiah 53:10-11 envisaging 'the vicarious death of an innocent agent of God [who] will wash away the sins of many'.³⁵ In Jesus' Markan sayings he is speaking of the soteriological effects of his death.

Luke 22:37 (Isaiah 53:12)

Jesus appropriates Isaiah's servant being 'numbered with the transgressors' (Is. 53:12) as a role he fulfils (Lk. 22:37). Hooker contends the verse is not an explanation of the meaning of Jesus' sufferings but implies Jesus' innocence.³⁶ Contextually in the Lukan narrative fulfilment of the role is something actively occurring during the culmination of Jesus' divine mission concluding with his crucifixion. It is therefore included within the ambit of Jesus' sufferings. In Isaiah it is placed alongside three other roles of the Suffering Servant at the climax of his story and included within his sufferings. That

³³ Morna D. Hooker, 'Isaiah in Mark's Gospel', in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. by Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2005), pp.35-49 (pp.48-49) and Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.100.

³⁴ Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', pp.151-152.

³⁵ Betz, 'Jesus and Isaiah 53', pp.83-97.

³⁶ Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.91.

Jesus here identifies himself with the Suffering Servant in accordance with traditional Christian understanding is a defensible interpretation.³⁷

John 1:29 (Isaiah 53:7, 10)

The Suffering Servant being compared to 'a lamb that is led to the slaughter' (Is. 53:7) is a simile and identifying marker. The Baptist designating Jesus in functional terms as the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn. 1:29) has been viewed as an allusion to Isaiah 53:7. In traditional Christian understanding these verses, together with 'an offering for sin' (Is. 53:10), have been understood as referring to the Levitical sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-10). On such interpretation Jesus as a sacrificial lamb has a theological function in his vicarious atoning death. In contemporary biblical scholarship, against those who view the servant's role in Isaiah 53 as prophetic intercession or in other non-cultic terms, it has been argued that Isaiah 53:10 justifies the sufferings and death of the servant being understood 'as sacrificial by analogy with the ritual of the guilt or reparation offering' in Leviticus.³⁸ However, what is intended by the Baptist's designation is a matter of scholarly debate with numerous interpretations in contention including cultic and composite meanings.³⁹ As an allusion to Isaiah 53:7 seems probable the traditional Christian understanding is a defensible interpretation.⁴⁰

³⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), p.775 and Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', pp.152-153.

³⁸ See Blenkinsopp, 'The Sacrificial Life', and p.1 for quote.

³⁹ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995) [eBook Version], pp.140-143 and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1991) [eBook Version], pp.116-118.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p118 and Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', pp.160.

Romans 4:25 (Isaiah 53: 5, 11-12)

Paul saying Jesus 'was handed over to death for our trespasses' is deemed an allusion to Isaiah 53:12 with its references to death, bearing sin and being numbered with and making intercession for transgressors.⁴¹ In traditional Christian understanding this is Paul using Isaiah 53 to refer to Jesus' atoning death where he vicariously suffers in place of sinners ('*exkludierende Stellvertretung*' in German or 'exclusive place-taking').⁴² It has been asserted Isaiah 53 neither describes vicarious suffering nor the servant's death. The servant's suffering is not instead of but alongside others in consequence of others' sins.⁴³ The negation of death and downplaying the effects of the servant's sufferings is rejected by most contemporary scholarship but whether or not Isaiah 53 describes vicarious substitutionary suffering is theologically debated. In Morna Hooker's view Isaiah 53, in both Hebrew and LXX versions, envisages the servant's sufferings as atoning and resulting in others' restoration and forgiveness. However, Isaiah 53 is describing '*representative suffering rather than vicarious suffering: as inclusive place taking rather than exclusive place taking*'.⁴⁴ She views Paul's language in Romans 4:25 as close to her interpretation and similar in thought to Isaiah 53.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996), p.288.

⁴² Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.96 and Otfried Hofius, 'The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters', in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. by Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, transl. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp. 163-188 (pp.164-172).

⁴³ See Roger Norman Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 4 (Sheffield: Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, 1978) and analysis of Whybray and similar views of Harry Orlinsky by Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', pp.95-98.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.98.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp.101-103.

Whereas Hooker locates representative inclusive suffering within Isaiah 53 Otfried Hofius does not. Hofius views vicarious substitution or exclusive place-taking as the 'dominant and central theme' of Isaiah 53 but considers it theologically unthinkable that freedom from sin and guilt is possible by human substitution.⁴⁶ Behind this is Immanuel Kant's rationalistic view that a debt of sin cannot be erased or transferred to someone else.⁴⁷ For Hofius the New Testament letters' authors, in their Christological reception of the Hebrew Bible, integrated Isaiah 53 into a view of the Christ event seen as "inclusive place-taking" (German: *inkludierende Stellvertretung*). This involves *inter alia* Christ taking the place of but not displacing sinners, unlike the vicarious substitutionary model, and encompassing them as persons thereby affecting their entire existence. Where the New Testament letters' readings of Isaiah 53 refer to one person's taking the place of others, this is conceived of in terms of Christological and soteriological divine inclusive place-taking (for example, 1 Cor. 15:3b-5; Heb. 9:8; 1 Pet. 2:21-24).⁴⁸ In Hofius's interpretation Isaiah 53 and its theology is not simply applied to Jesus, it is transformed into a new text. Hofius thinks Romans 4:25 reflects a pre-Pauline formula from Isaiah 53:12, possibly understood as substitutionary death for alien sin, with Isaiah 53:5 and 11 also relevant. In the context of Paul's theologizing in Romans, including on atonement and new creation, Romans 4:25 is an example of inclusive place-taking.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Hofius, 'The Fourth Servant Song', pp.164-172.

⁴⁷ Daniel P. Bailey, 'Concepts of *Stellvertretung* in the Interpretation of Isaiah 53', in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. by William H. Bellinger, Jr and William R. Farmer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), pp.223-250 (pp.232-234 & 239-241).

⁴⁸ Hofius, 'The Fourth Servant Song', pp.172-175, 177-180 & 184-188.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp.180-182 cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5, *ibid.*, pp.177-180.

Stuhlmacher considers Romans 4:25 a Christological formula interpreting Jesus' passion and exaltation behind which is the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:5 and 11.⁵⁰ Relevant to Romans 4:25 is David Sapp's comparison of the Hebrew versions of Isaiah 53 and the LXX version. He views the language and theology of the Hebrew of Isaiah 53 as supportive of the Christian doctrine of atonement with the LXX translators being theologically biased against the righteous servant experiencing an unjust death.⁵¹ Other examples of vicarious suffering in the Hebrew Bible have been located by Hermann Spieckermann within Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos in the tradition of prophets interceding for the people. However, he regards Isaiah 53 a 'singular text' which says something new.⁵² In light of the foregoing review of contemporary biblical scholarship, the traditional Christian understanding of Isaiah 53 as portraying vicarious atoning death is a defensible interpretation albeit several scholars believe it requires theological refinement and further elucidation.

1 Peter 2:22-24 (Isaiah 53:4-7, 9, 12)

In exhorting slaves, using Jesus' sufferings for them as an example (1 Pet. 2:18-21), a Christological liturgical text or hymn is invoked (1 Pet. 2:22-24).⁵³ Interwoven into it are

⁵⁰ Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts', pp.154-155.

⁵¹ David A. Sapp, 'The LXX, 1QIsa, and MT Versions of Isaiah 53 and the Christian Doctrine of Atonement', in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. by William H. Bellinger, Jr and William R. Farmer (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), pp.170-192 (especially pp.184, 186-189). For an alternative view on the LXX see Cilliers Breytenbach, 'The Septuagint Version of Isaiah 53 and the Early Christian Formula "He Was Delivered for Our Trespasses"', *Novum Testamentum*, 51 (2009), 339-351.

⁵² Hermann Spieckermann, 'The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament', in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. by Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, transl. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp.1-15.

⁵³ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C. Black (Publishers) Limited, 1969), p.120 and Hofius, 'The Fourth Servant Song', p.185.

quotes from Isaiah 53:4-7, 9 and 12 drawn from the LXX except for its substituting sin (*hamaritani*) for lawlessness (*anomial*).⁵⁴ If Isaiah 53 was originally part of the text/hymn it would suggest the early church, prior to 1 Peter, may have viewed Jesus as the Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53:5-6 and 12 applied to Jesus on the cross references his atoning death. Traditional Christian understanding of Isaiah 53 is affirmed as a defensible interpretation in respect of this text.

A critical examination of the role of the servant in Isaiah 53 and in its New Testament reception and subsequent reading confirms traditional Christian understanding is a defensible interpretation of selected New Testament role texts which quote from, allude to or are influenced by Isaiah 53. However, within contemporary biblical scholarship some view aspects of traditional understanding as theologically debatable and open to differing interpretations. In reception history a significant cultural expression of New Testament tradition is Handel's musical composition 'Messiah' with a text by Charles Jennens a biblically knowledgeable Christian.⁵⁵ In his libretto, among other Old Testament texts, Jennens includes Isaiah 9:6, in traditional Christian understanding a messianic verse, Isaiah 50:6 from a servant song and Isaiah 53:3-6 and 8. The juxtaposition of these texts with New Testament texts propagates the idea of Jesus as the Messiah and the Suffering Servant which is reinforced on repeated hearings.

⁵⁴ Kelly, *Commentary*, p.185, Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990) [eBook Version], pp.142-143 and Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.92.

⁵⁵ See Georg Friedrich Händel, "Messiah (1742): A Sacred Oratorio, Words by Charles Jennens", *Public-Domain Opera Libretti and Other Vocal Texts*, October 20, 1999 <<http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/messiah.htm>> [accessed 31/07/23] and John Butt, 'George Friedrich Handel and *The Messiah*', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. by Michael Lieb, Emma Mason and Jonathan Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.294-306.

Isaiah 53: Post-Christian Jewish Responses to New Testament tradition

The New Testament's reception of Isaiah 53 and its traditional Christian understanding has been influential in shaping Jewish interpretations several of which include responses repudiating Christological interpretation. Arising in the medieval and modern periods these anti-Christian polemics were engendered largely by antisemitic persecution and Jewish conversions to Christianity.⁵⁶ Samples of Jewish interpretations disclose diversity in opinions on who the servant is. These include Israel as a national-collective,⁵⁷ only the righteous in Israel,⁵⁸ historical Jewish figures,⁵⁹ Israel and the Messiah,⁶⁰ Israel interpreted allegorically as the Messiah,⁶¹ and an eschatological individual Messiah.⁶² One form of Jewish interpretation focuses on servant identifying markers (Is. 53:2-3, 7, 9) and asserts these cannot apply to Jesus.⁶³ The obvious hermeneutical intent is to undermine justifications for Christological interpretation. Hebrew scholar Jeremy Schipper's contemporary interpretation of Isaiah 53 as depicting 'an ancient Israelite experience of disability' is redolent of this approach.⁶⁴ The

⁵⁶ Joel E. Rembaum, 'The Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition regarding Isaiah 53', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 75:3 (1982), 289-311 (pp.289-294) and Stefan Schreiner, 'Isaiah 53 in the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah* ("Faith Strengthened") of Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki', in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. by Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, transl. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), pp.418-461 (p.423).

⁵⁷ Samuel R. Driver and Adolf Neubauer, translators., *The "Suffering Servant" of Isaiah: According to the Jewish Interpreters* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), pp.43, 114, 221, 244 & 412.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.150.

⁵⁹ John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah Through the Centuries*, Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018) [eBook Version], p.279.

⁶⁰ Driver and Neubauer, *Jewish Interpreters*, pp.78-84 & 129.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp.151-152, 215-216 & 221-223.

⁶² *ibid.*, pp.156-162, 318-319 & 400-402.

⁶³ By way of example, *ibid.*, pp.92-94, 147-149 & 243-244.

⁶⁴ Schipper, *Disability*, p.58.

servant is a person suffering from disability or disease. Schipper postulates, unconvincingly, that instead of death the servant experiences social oppression and near death.⁶⁵ Lamb imagery describes the servant as unfit for ritual sacrifice.⁶⁶ By implication Jesus cannot be identified as the Suffering Servant.

Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53 include an exegetical tradition which rejects Christological interpretation but adapts elements from it and applies them to Israel as the Suffering Servant.⁶⁷ Below are brief summaries of three examples.

Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, France (ca. 1040-ca.1105, hereinafter Rasha)

The servant is the Jewish people exiled from the land of Israel and punished for their transgressions. Consecrating themselves to Yahweh in self-sacrifice provides a ransom meriting future reward. Israel's sufferings atone for humanity's sins and bring all nations peace and prosperity. Israel's intercession dissuades Yahweh from destroying the world. Rasha introduced into Judaism 'a concept of *universal* vicarious expiation'.⁶⁸

Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki, Lithuania (ca. 1525-ca. 1586, hereinafter Troki)

Troki interprets the servant as Israel suffering in exile. The Babylonian captivity prefigures future exiles. Israel suffers not for their own sins but vicariously for the sins of gentile nations. Such sufferings atone for the nations' sins and Israel's intercessions bring nations peace and prosperity. In the messianic age of redemption, restoration and

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp.45-47. On the lack of scholarly support for Norman Whybray's similar interpretation of the servant not dying see Hooker, 'Did the Use of Isaiah 53', p.95.

⁶⁶ Schipper, *Disability*, pp.47-49. See also Jeremy Schipper, 'Interpreting the Lamb Imagery in Isaiah 53', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 132:2 (2013), 315-325.

⁶⁷ Rembaum, 'Jewish Exegetical Tradition', pp.294-310.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, pp.294-299 for a fuller description and analysis of Rasha's interpretation.

exaltation for Israel, Gentiles will confess their guilt for the wrongs they have done to Israel. By living among the Gentiles Israel fulfils its mission to them.⁶⁹

Heinrich Graetz, German Historian (born 31 October 1817, died 7 September 1891)

The collective-nation Israel suffers to reconcile a sinful pagan world to Yahweh. Graetz appropriates symbols of messiahship, the crown of thorns and resurrection from Christological interpretation and applies them to Israel. Jewish sufferings are messianic and sacrificial and serve a missionary and didactic function to the world.⁷⁰

The three foregoing interpretations, by appropriating concepts from Christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 and applying them to Israel, portray Israel as the saviour of the world. Their intent was to give sense to and provide comfort for Israel in exile. Against a background of twentieth-century antisemitism, Isaiah 53 has been interpreted as 'the description of Israel's martyrology through the centuries' with Christian appropriation robbing Israel of the Suffering Servant's dignity 'one of the saddest embezzlements in human history'.⁷¹ Jewish scholarship's refutations of Christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 and interpreting Israel as its centre and fulfilment has not persuaded those who view New Testament tradition as the most defensible interpretation. Accordingly, Isaiah 53 remains a contested text between Judaism and Christianity and in inter-faith dialogue.

⁶⁹ See Schreiner, 'Sefer Hizzuk Emunah', for a fuller description and analysis of Troki's interpretation.

⁷⁰ See Rembaum, 'Jewish Exegetical Tradition', pp.307-310 for a fuller description and analysis of Graetz's interpretation.

⁷¹ Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc, 1973), pp.125-126.

CONCLUSION

New Testament tradition understands Isaiah 53 as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Aspects such as Jesus' self-understanding, cultic sacrifice and vicarious suffering are the subject of academic debate. Post-Christian Jewish interpretations generally understand Isaiah 53 as centred on and fulfilled by Israel. Whilst New Testament tradition is a defensible interpretation of Isaiah 53 it does not exhaust the interpretative possibilities of the Isaianic servant of Yahweh who innocently suffers.

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