

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay will explore the role of the Suffering Servant as depicted in the book of Isaiah and its representation in the New Testament, particularly concerning the Messiah. To achieve this, the analysis will focus on four key passages in Isaiah (42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12) that elaborate on the Suffering Servant's identity and mission. The examination will extend to how these themes and roles are echoed and reinterpreted in other biblical texts, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Suffering Servant's significance in both the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian theology.

## 2. THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

### a. ISAIAH 42

One of the key distinctions found in Isaiah 42 is the direct speech of God, which outlines and describes the servant and the relationship between them.<sup>1</sup> The servant is described as someone in whom God delights and in whom God's divine spirit has been placed (42:1). Westermann suggests that the use of such language and the historic format of the calling of a King point to a servant who not only a servant but also a royal figure<sup>2</sup>. It has been suggested that the servant referenced in Isaiah 42 refers not to an individual but to the nation of Israel. However, Israel is already referred to as servant in Isaiah 41:8-9 and there is no need for great length to be taken in Isaiah 42 to present the extent of the relationship between God and His servant if we were to accept that the servant was merely a continuation of that<sup>3</sup>. The first primary role of the Suffering Servant in this context is therefore an individual who operates in close relationship with God as both His servant but with Kingly purpose.

Not only is the Suffering Servant effectively described as the chosen one, but he is also assigned with a role as an extension of status: to establish justice on earth (42:4). This

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith Stone, 'The Servant that brings light', in *Review and Expositor*, 114. 1 (2017) p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin Duane Lindsey, 'The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9: Part 1 of Isaiah's Songs of the Servant', in *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, 139. 553 (1982) p. 15.

must have been reassuring to the Judahites, who felt a sense of injustice due to the Babylonian exile<sup>4</sup>. However, this is not the liberating declaration that they primarily desire. The Suffering Servant will bring justice not just for them but for the nations (gōyīm) of the earth<sup>5</sup>. The role of this servant therefore is not restricted to the remit of the nation of Israel and the justice he offers is not purely for their benefit<sup>6</sup>. But what kind of justice is offered by this Suffering Servant? To a nation that felt wronged or mistreated then retribution must have been part of the immediate reception; however, this is incompatible with the previous declaration of justice for all nations and the unassuming gentleness described in 42:2-3. Ellis takes this further when he suggests that the justice in question is the teaching and establishment of the truth of Yahweh across the earth<sup>7</sup>.

The conclusion from the first Servant Song in Isaiah 42 is that the Servant operates both as a Servant and as someone divinely chosen and sustained by God, set apart akin to royalty for a purpose. That initial purpose is as the individual who will establish justice on earth in the form of teaching and the conveyance of truth.

## **b. ISAIAH 49**

While Isaiah 42 captures the viewpoint of God instructing the audience regarding the ways and purposes of the servant, Isaiah 49 presents a different perspective where the Servant themselves takes on the mantle that has been bestowed upon them<sup>8</sup>. There is an acceptance from the Servant that they have been called and set apart by God for His purposes (49:1). This is good news for the nation of Israel, as the servant confirms part of those purposes to include their restoration and redemption from the plight of exile and defeat in battle (49:8)<sup>9</sup>. However, much like the declaration of Isaiah 42, which extends justice beyond solely Israel, there is a recognition from the Servant that their

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<sup>4</sup> Julian Morgenstern, 'Isaiah 49-55', in Hebrew Union College Annual, 36. (1965) p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Vesely, 'Between Text and Sermon: Isaiah 42:5-9', in Interpretation, 72. 3 (2018) p. 318.

<sup>6</sup> Angela Hancock, 'Between Text and Sermon: Isaiah 42:1-9', in Interpretation, 73. 2 (2019) p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ellis, 'The Remarkable Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55', in Southwestern Journal of Theology, 34. 1 (1991) p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Tabb, 'Sharing in the Servants Mission: Isaiah 49:6 in Luke-Acts', in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 65. 3 (2022) p. 510.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Bird, 'A light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6): Inter-textuality and mission theology in the early church', in Reformed Theological Review, 65. 3 (2006) p. 125.

role extends to the rest of the world, at the command of God, and this must be the case due to Israel's spiritual blindness<sup>10</sup>.

As such, the Servant is presented not only in the role of the one who brings justice but also as the one who is used by God to offer divine salvation as an extension of that justice<sup>11</sup>. This will be recognised in part by the restoration of Israel (49:5) but also, as Stone puts it, to ensure that 'God's salvation reaches the ends of the earth'<sup>12</sup>.

### **c. ISAIAH 50**

Isaiah 50 introduces the concept of the servant who suffers and endures to achieve the purposes of justice and salvation that are outlined and prioritised by God<sup>13</sup>. There are similar motifs in this chapter like those that have preceded it, such as individualistic language pointing to a singular servant; however, in addition to the introduction of suffering, there are also expansions on previous material. Oswalt highlights how the power of God's word through the servant in 49:2 is extended in 50:4 to incorporate a clear function of such a word: to sustain the weary<sup>14</sup>. The implication is that as the complexity of the Servant's role and function is revealed, so too does the nature of punishment and suffering that was only previously alluded to<sup>15</sup>.

Crucially, Isaiah 50 points to a servant who not only understands the suffering that is required as part of the role but one who is also obedient throughout it<sup>16</sup>. Oswalt highlights the anti-rebellious statement of 50:5 as a declaration of infallible quality that can only be ascribed to someone who is beyond a mere human prophet.<sup>17</sup> He connects this with Jesus' declaration of John 8:29. In essence, we see the role of a servant building from Isaiah 42 as someone who is chosen by God, granted a mission that

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom* (Nottingham: Inter Varsity Press, 2016) p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Kenkeremath, 'Between Text and Sermon: Isaiah 49:8-23', in *Interpretation*, 72. 2 (2018) p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Stone, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> Franklin Duane Lindsey, 'The Commitment of the Servant in Isaiah 50:4-11', in *The Bibliotheca sacra*, 139. 555 (1982) p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Cambridge, Eerdmans, 1998) p. 324.

<sup>15</sup> Lindsey, p. 217.

<sup>16</sup> John Watts, *World Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 34-66* (Michigan, Zondervan, 2005) p. 761.

<sup>17</sup> Oswalt, p. 325.

pertains to justice and salvation, extends beyond, but includes, Israel to a universal scope and now requires endurance in the face of rejection and suffering.

#### **d. ISAIAH 52 – 53**

The role of the servant reaches its culmination in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 through explicit and intentional suffering and affliction directed at the servant, though innocent, by God (53:6, 10) as part of His design and purposes<sup>18</sup>. The conclusion of such suffering is a death (53:8) that is substitutionary in nature, taking on the sins of both Israel and the world<sup>19</sup>. Walton highlights the extent of such treatment and death by linking 53:5 with physical impairment that highlights the extent to which the servant is considered dispensable at the hands of those for whom they will suffer and die<sup>20</sup>. Not only does the servant embrace the unmerited punishment and harsh treatment that is levelled at themselves, but they do so with a gentleness and meekness that corresponds to the descriptions in 42:2-3 through a reluctance to speak out or protest the injustice directed at them<sup>21</sup>. Once again, this serves to highlight the accepting nature of the servant who embraces the role ascribed to them by God.

The unique claim of Isaiah 52, in comparison to the other Servant Songs, is that the suffering and death of the servant will lead to their exaltation at the hands of God<sup>22</sup>. The proclamations of 53:12, that the servant bore the 'sins of many', and 53:11, where the servant will receive satisfaction after their intended suffering is complete, point to the purposes of God including an existence and role for the servant after death.

Westermann notes that the servant's exaltation is directly linked to their suffering, suggesting that the servant's obedience and willingness to bear suffering on behalf of others lead to their ultimate vindication and exaltation<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Blenkinsop, 'The Sacrificial Life and Death of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)', in *Vetus Testamentum*, 66. (2016) p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Oswalt, p. 371.

<sup>20</sup> John Walton, 'The Imagery of the Substitute King Ritual in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song', in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 122. 4 (2003) p. 739.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Barre, 'Textual and Rhetorical-critical Observations on the Last Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)' in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 62. 1 (2000) p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Franklin Duane Lindsey, *The Career of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12*, in *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, 140. 557 (1983) p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Westermann, p. 260.

### **e. SECTION SUMMARY**

The Suffering Servant in Isaiah is depicted as an individual who operates in close relationship with God, chosen and sustained by Him, with a royal purpose to establish justice on earth. While Isaiah 42 introduces the servant as a figure who brings justice and truth to all nations, Isaiah 49 expands this role to include the restoration of Israel and the extension of divine salvation globally. Isaiah 50 further develops the theme of the servant's obedience and endurance in the face of suffering, which culminates in Isaiah 52-53 with the servant's substitutionary suffering and ultimate exaltation by God, highlighting the paradox of victory through suffering.

## **3. THE REPLICATION OF THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT**

### **a. JESUS AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN THE GOSPELS**

The New Testament Gospels present Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of the Suffering Servant depicted in Isaiah. In Matthew 8:17, after describing Jesus' healing of the sick, the author writes that this was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah in 53:4. Though Menken is keen to suggest that the fulfilment quotations throughout the Gospel, including here in 8:17, are redactional in nature<sup>24</sup>, he also points out that a redactional insertion does not presuppose a redactional origin of the text. Morris asserts more concretely that it was plain to Matthew that Jesus' healing in this instance came from God and that warranted a connection of a Scriptural basis for Jesus' healing ministry through what is foretold about the Servant<sup>25</sup>. Thus, Matthew intentionally connects Jesus through these actions and his wider healing ministry, (12:15-21), to Isaiah and the role of the Suffering Servant. Watts disagrees that the purpose of the quotation contained within 8:17 is to connect Jesus and the Servant<sup>26</sup>. Instead, he points to a wider goal the full restoration of Israel in line with Matthew's intended

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<sup>24</sup> Maarten Menken, 'The Source of the Quotation from Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:17', *Novum Testamentum*, 39. 4 (1997) p. 313.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Michigan, Eerdmans, 1992) p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> Rikki Watts, 'Messianic Servant or the End of Israel's Exilic Curses? Isaiah 53.:4 in Matthew 8.17', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 38. 1 (2015) p. 82

audience, yet this in itself is a partial remit of the Suffering Servant which is implied whether it is the primary purpose of the Matthean quotation or not.

In the case of Luke-Acts, O'Toole suggests there can be little room for doubt that Luke viewed the death of Christ through the lens of what was levied at the Suffering Servant.<sup>27</sup> In particular, he points to Luke's consistent usage of *παῖς* in reference to Jesus as a servant (Acts 3:13, 4:27, 4:30). This is further exemplified in the Passion narrative of Luke 23 where Jesus does not speak in front of Herod despite being vehemently accused in correlation to the Servant who does not cry out in the face of suffering and impending Judgement (Isaiah 42:2-3). Luke 24 echoes the duality of the Servants mission to the entirety of nations but with a starting pointing in Jerusalem, however, it is the usage of Isaiah 53:12 in Luke 22:37 at the Passover meal where Jesus is 'numbered with the transgressors' which draws attention. Strauss notes that the citation is given special prominence by Luke through empathic introduction<sup>28</sup> and the fulfilment of this is recognised when Jesus is crucified in 23:33 flanked by criminals on either side<sup>29</sup>. Though Brown attests that Luke diminishes the prominence of suffering through his usage of Isaiah 52-53, this is due to the priority placed on the exaltation and vindication Servant, tying once again to the role of the Messiah<sup>30</sup>. As such, Luke draws on the fourth Servant Song to highlight Jesus as the chosen one through His unwarranted death surrounded by transgressors, but ultimately a death that will lead to exaltation through the resurrection.

## **b. PAULINE USAGE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT**

Paul utilises the Servant Songs at times in a more evangelic manner than the Synoptic writers. Unsurprisingly, the Gospels align the Servant of Isaiah with Jesus through healing and releasing, suffering, death and eventual vindication. However, Paul's usage of Isaiah 53:1 in Romans 10:16 highlights his genuine concern for his fellow Jews who

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<sup>27</sup> Robert O'Toole, 'How does Luke portray Jesus as servant of YHWH', in *Biblica*, 81. 3 (2000) p. 329

<sup>28</sup> Mark Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfilment in Lukan Christology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995) p. 326.

<sup>29</sup> Jeannine Brown, 'Jesus Messiah as Isaiah's Servant of the Lord: New Testament Explorations', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 63. 1 (2020) p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, p. 63.

have not yet accepted Christ as the Servant and the one who will subsequently restore Israel<sup>31</sup>. Ryskova goes as far to suggest that in this, Paul's primary theme is not the Servant themselves but rather he utilises the Servant text of Isaiah 53 to offer a contrast between the faith of the Gentiles and the unbelief of Israel who is finding it difficult to accept Jesus as the Messiah<sup>32</sup>. However, this should be seen in the wider context of Paul's usage of Isaiah 53 (Rom. 4:25, 1 Cor. 15:3, 2 Cor. 5:21) which allude to Christ as the Suffering Servant.

Paul further utilises Isaiah 52:15 regarding those who have not been told being granted the privilege of seeing to reinforce his own missionary call of bringing the '*good news*' in Romans 15:21 to locations where the Gospel has not yet reached<sup>33</sup>. In doing so he identifies Christ with the Suffering Servant who offers salvation to all and further aligns himself with the continuation of the mission to ensure the work of the Servant is realised in all nations. As an extension of this, it could be suggested that in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Paul presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the Suffering Servant and then positions himself as a servant of the Servant through his own understanding outlined in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10. Paul's reception of the Servant in Isaiah is therefore to equate them with the role and purposes of Jesus but additionally to ascertain and present a personal role for Himself in the continued work of the Servant after their death.

### **c. SECTION SUMMARY**

In the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the fulfilment of Isaiah's Suffering Servant, especially in his healing ministry and Passion narrative. Matthew connects Jesus' healings to Isaiah's prophecies, while Luke emphasizes Jesus' role as the Servant through his silent suffering and ultimate exaltation. In Paul's writings, he uses the Suffering Servant motif more evangelically, focusing on the contrast between Jewish

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<sup>31</sup> Marc Brettler, '*Isaiah's Suffering Servant: Before and After Christianity*', in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 73. 2 (2019) p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> Mireia Ryskova, '*The Reception of the Book of Isaiah in Paul's Letter to the Romans*', in *Theologica*, 9. 2 (2019) p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> Ryskova, p. 115.

unbelief and Gentile faith. Paul identifies Christ with the Suffering Servant in his mission to spread the gospel, presenting himself as a continuation of the Servant's work in spreading salvation to all nations.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The exploration of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and its application in the New Testament reveals a profound continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian writings. Isaiah's depiction of the Suffering Servant evolves from an individual chosen by God to bring justice and truth to the nations, to one who endures suffering for the sake of others, ultimately leading to vindication and exaltation.

The New Testament writers, particularly in the Gospels and Paul's letters, interpret these Servant Songs as prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. The Gospels emphasize Jesus' fulfilment of the Suffering Servant role, particularly through his healing ministry and Passion, highlighting his divine mission to bring salvation. Paul's epistles extend this interpretation by presenting Jesus not only as the fulfilment of the Servant's role but also by positioning himself and the early Christian community as continuing the Servant's mission.

Paul's use of the Suffering Servant passages underscores his concern for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles, portraying Christ as the ultimate Servant who brings redemption to all humanity. This alignment between the Old and New Testament texts underscores the theological significance of the Suffering Servant as a central figure in the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, linking the Jewish expectations of the Messiah with the Christian understanding of Jesus as the suffering, yet victorious, Servant. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the figure of the Suffering Servant serves as a critical bridge between the Testaments, illuminating the continuity of God's salvation history and the pivotal role of Jesus Christ within it.

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