


The Identity of the Anonymous Servant of Yahweh (*'ebed yhw*) in Deutero-Isaiah

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Abstract

The term 'servant of Yahweh' (*'ebed yhw*) is a fundamental term in Deutero-Isaiah. There are four poems in DI usually referred to as 'Servant-Songs'. Yahweh directly addresses the servant as 'my chosen' (*bəhîrî*), upon whom he has put his spirit. This mysterious servant is tasked with the mission to open the eyes of the blind and to set prisoners free (cf. Isa 42:7). The anonymous servant has a mission "to raise up the tribes of Jacob/Israel" and to be "a light to the nations" and to bring God's salvation to the nations (Isa 49:5-6). He carries out his mission despite the opposition and insults he suffers. He is "despised and rejected", but he is Yahweh's agent of salvation. His death is a vicarious death by which he saves many. One of the challenging issues in the debate about the identity of the servant in Isaiah's servant songs is the question of the identity of the mysterious 'Servant' of the Lord. Does the term 'Servant' refer to Israel or to a royal, or messianic or prophetic figure? These are the questions that this work sets out to address. The study adopts an exegetical method of biblical analysis spiced with theological reflection on the selected passages.

Key Words: Yahweh, Servant, Cyrus, my chosen, anointed one, Deutero-Isaiah.

Introduction

There are four poems in Deutero-Isaiah (DI) usually referred to as "Servant-Songs. These poems are recorded in Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12. In the first song (Isa 42:1-7), the servant is described as Yahweh's chosen one, upon whom he has put his spirit. This implies that this servant has a special relationship with Yahweh. The task of this mysterious servant is specific: to open the blind eyes of the blind and to set prisoners free (Isa 42:7), "to raise up the tribes of Jacob" and "the survivors of Israel" and to be "a light to the nations" (Isa 49:5-6). The servant is portrayed as carrying out his commission despite the opposition. The servant is righteous yet bears the iniquities of many (Isa 53:11); ill-treated in spite of his innocence. But he accepts his fate voluntarily as the means to save "us". He endures suffering and death are the salvation of "many" whose sins he bore (Isa 53:4-5). The suffering and death of the servant are vicarious as Isa 53:4-6 indicates: "he has borne our infirmities...." (Isa 53:4), wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. In Isa 53:6 says explicitly: "The Lord has laid on him "the iniquity of us all" (*'ävön kullānū*, Isa 53:6), a kind of substitutionary representation. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole (Isa 53:5). His death is a vicarious death by which he saves many. Who is this mysterious "servant of Yahweh" (*'ebed yhw*) of the Isaianic "servant songs"? This article, therefore, seeks to unravel the identity of the *'ebed yhw* of the Isaianic servant Songs. An exegetico-theological method of biblical analysis will be employed in this article. This method is an exegetical analysis of selected passages mixed with the spices of theological reflection. The Bible version employed in this work is the New Revised Standard Version.

Concept of *'ebed* in the OT

The noun "*'ebed*" in all its forms occurs 21 times in Hebrew Bible. In 10 of these occurrences, the reference is to the people of Israel (Isa 41:8, 9; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3; cf. also Isa 42:19; 43:8; 44:26). In 6 instances, *'ebed* refers to the prophet, i.e., Deutero-Isaiah himself (Isa 42:1; 49:3; cf. also 5, 6; 50:10; 53:11[Orlinsky, 1967]). In Hebrew parlance, the verb *'abad* means "to venerate" or "to worship a god". A person may also be called *'ebed* Yahweh (servant of God). For instance, in Gen 50:17, Joseph's brothers call themselves "the servants of the God of your father (*'abdē 'ēlohē 'ābikā*). In Ezek 28:25 and 37:25, Yahweh addresses Jacob "my servant" (*'abdī*).

The three Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) are collectively called “his (Yahweh’s) servants” (*ʿabdē yhw*, Exod 32:13; Deut 9:27 [Ringgren, 1999]).

In the Old Testament, the prophets were generally designated as servants of Yahweh (*ʿabdē yhw*). Moses is usually called servant of Yahweh (*ʿebed yhw*) in formulaic references to him as the prophetic prototype (Von Rad, 1998), as lawgiver and mediator of God’s commands (Josh 1:17,13; 8:31, 33; 11:12,15; 22:2,4,5; 2 Kgs 18:12; 21:8; 1 Chron 6:34; Mal 3:33[4:4], and as a liberator (Ps 105:6). David, too, is frequently referred to as servant of Yahweh (*ʿabdī*) in the context of election (Mauchline, 1971) and the perpetual continuation of the dynasty (cf. 1 Kgs 11:13,32; 2 Chron 6:42; 2 Sam 2:7:5,8 [Ringgren, 1999]). In Zech 3:8, *ʿebed* is the epithet for the ideal future Davidic king (“branch,” probably a messianic reference) in the post-monarchic era. The term, *ʿebed*, in the four DI songs, applies to a royal figure, either an individual (Hezekiah, Uzziah, Jehoiachm, Zerubbabel) or an embodiment of an ideal of mythic traits associated with royalty (Blenkinsopp, 1997).

The word *ʿebed* (sg) occurs 19 times in Deutero-Isaiah (DI). Out of these 19 occurrences, the term appears 12 times with the first-person suffix, twice with the third-person suffix, twice with the Hebrew preposition *l*, once without any further qualification; the plural occurs twice (Isa 54:17; 44:26a [Simian-Yofre, 1999; Hermisson, 1982]). Several texts identify *ʿebed* as an apposition with Israel (“Israel, my servant” [*ʿabdī yisrāʿēl*], Isa 41:8; 44:1; 45:4; 49:3) or with Jacob (“my servant, Jacob” [*ʿabdī yaʿāqōb*]; Isa 41:8; 44:1,2,21; 45:4; 48:20). Yahweh directly addresses the servant Israel not only as “my servant” (*ʿabdī*) but also ‘my chosen’ (*bəhīrī*).

DI also makes reference to the inheritance of the servants of the Lord (Isa 54:17). This suggests a linkage between the prophetic figure of the servant of Yahweh in Di (Isa 49-54) and the servants of Yahweh whose vindication is a major theme of Trito-Isaiah (TI [Isa 55-66]). The prophetic figure is spoken of in terms of servanthood, implying a special relationship with the God of Israel (Blenkinsopp, 1997; Zevit, 1969; Lemke, 1966).

The Servant of Yahweh in Deutero-Isaiah

There are four distinctively servant-Songs in Deutero-Isaiah. These songs are 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12. In these songs, the servant is sometimes portrayed as collective - Israel (Zimmerli, 1962), sometimes as a personification of the pious within Israel, or better, a unique person embodying within himself all that is best within Israel.

Isa 42:1-7: First Servant Song

Isa 42:1-7 is usually referred to by scholars as the first servant song. In v.1, Yahweh describes his servant (*ʿabdī*) as his chosen one (*bəhīrī*) whom he upholds, with whom he is pleased, and upon whom he has put his spirit. The servant’s task is explained in Isa 42:6f: he is portrayed as “a covenant to the people (*bərīt ʿām*) and a light to the nations (*lā ʾor gōyīm*)”. Yahweh describes the servant as his chosen (*bəhīrī*), in whom his soul delights, upon whom he has put his spirit. He is commissioned that he will bring forth justice (*mišpāt*) to the nations (Isa 42:1). Watts (1987) writes that the word *mišpāt*, without an article, could mean “justice”. The context here calls for something

more specific. Here *mišpāt* may mean “verdict” or “a decision reached by the divine court”. The servant is chosen as God’s agent to put the divine decision into effect. His methods are to be quiet and gentle; “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”

The servant of Yahweh of Isa 42 may be nameless; he is identified as Jacob/Israel in Isa 41:8. Scholars such as Mettinger (1983), Whybray (1990), and Stern (1994) agree that the servant in question is Israel. Authors such as Lindblad (1993) and Winkle (1985) agree with this identification. The servant is saddled with the task: “to open the eyes that are blind and be “a covenant to the people” (*librīt ʿām*), a “light to the nations” - *lā ʾor gōyīm* (Isa 42:6-7). Furthermore, he is tasked with the duty of bringing out the prisoners from the dungeon, and releasing those who “sit in darkness”.

Isa 49:1-6: Second Servant Song

In the second song, unlike the first and fourth poems, it is the servant who speaks, in the form of a prophetic confession. The servant introduces the announcement to his prenatal call by Yahweh with a summons to the nations: “Listen to me, you islands; hear this you distant nations” (v. 1a). Here, the servant speaks with absolute authority, commanding the world to listen. The worldwide audience is addressed as “islands” and “distant nations.” In v.1b, the servant speaks of his election or prenatal call and commission: “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb, he named me.” (v. 1b). This clearly indicates sovereign choice. His commission resembles that of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5).

In v.2, he describes his preparation for his mission by Yahweh (Isa 49:2). He is equipped by Yahweh as his spokesman: “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword” (simile) and “he made me into a polished arrow” (metaphor). The connotation of preparation is expressed with the word “made”. Yahweh gave him the speaking ability. “Sharpening” and “polishing” imply a process of preparation for his mission. Here, the servant’s “mouth” is probably a metonymy for his “words” which are described under the figure of a sharpened sword. The servant functions an “the mouthpiece of Yahweh”. The sharpened word here refers to the word of a prophet. Thus, “the word of the Lord” is a formidable weapon; it is like a “polished arrow” which has the potential to piercing its target. It portrays the far-ranging effect of the servant’s prophetic word.

In v.3, the servant is identified as Israel: “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel’” (*ʿabdī-ʾattāh yisrāʿēl*). The identification of the servant with Israel is problematic, because, in v.5, the servant has a mission to Israel. In 49:6a, his task is “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel.” This is the same task assigned to Cyrus in Isa 45:4,13: “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name” (Isa 45:4); “I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness...; he shall build my city and set my exiles free” (Isa 45:13). The assignment is expanded in Isa 49:6b. Beyond the task to “raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel”, he is also given “as a light to the nations (*ʾor gōyīm*)”, so that Yahweh’s “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

The expression in Isa 49:6b: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” is axiomatic. The

servant will be a light to guide the Israelite exiles home. His mission is to gather Israel's exiles and lead them to redemption. He is also to cause the heathen nations to acknowledge the omnipotence of Israel's God. He is to perform a missionary task in order that Gentiles might be saved, i.e., that God's salvation may extend to the ends of the earth. His mission is both for the salvation of Israel and the nations. According to Watts (1987), the salvation that he is to bring is defined in political and economic terms. His rule would restore Israel's economy and social order.

There is a transition from the use of "he" ("And he said to me" [*wayyō' mer lî*] in v.3 to an emphatic "I" in verse 4: "I said" [*wa'ānī 'āmarī*], "I" [*'ānī*] have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." Here, the servant voices out to God the disappointments and failures he encountered in the execution of his mission (v.4). Again, this resembles Jeremiah's experience. Jeremiah feared that he had laboured in vain (Jer 20:7-11). But the servant is reassured by God. His dependence on God guarantees the success of his mission (Herbert, 1975).

Isa 50:4-11: Third Servant Song

The third song (Isa 50:4-11) continues with the theme of a prophetic servant. This song is distinguished from the other songs by the use of the first person. The song begins with a declaration made by a prophet (vv 4-9) who is identified as a servant of Yahweh only in the comment appended to it (vv 10-11 [Blenkinsopp, 2002]). Apart from this loose reference to the prophet as servant of Yahweh, the passage says nothing more about the identity of the servant. What is revealed is his willingness to submit to physical and verbal abuse (v. 6) because of their role as spokespersons for the Lord, and his conviction that the Lord will vindicate him (vv. 7-8a).

He claims to have received from Yahweh "the tongue of a teacher" (*lašōn limmūdīm*) that he "may know how to sustain the weary with a word" (50:4). The Hebrew adjective (*limmūdīm*) translated as a teacher is in the plural form of *limmūd*. Herbert would that *limmūdīm* be translated as "like those who are well taught" (Herbert, 1975) as v.4d underlines. In 50:4-9, the servant's function is to speak and to listen (Baltzer, 2001). He is Yahweh's pupil or disciple and equipped with the gift of speech (cf. Moses [Exod 4:10-12]; Jeremiah [1:4-12]). Earlier in Isa 49:2, Yahweh is said to have made the servant's mouth like a sword, and to have been called to a prophetic service. Here the stress is upon his personal spiritual communion with God. He is empowered by Yahweh so that he may sustain the weary.

That the servant's mission is to his fellow Judeans (Rowley, 1954) is evident from the wording of the song. He emphasizes his commitment to his mission amid severest opposition from his fellow countrymen. He is subjected to insult, persecution, opposition, an opposition which reaches the point of physical abuse. He proclaims his message with faithfulness and courage, but he comes under insults and persecution (Isa 50: 4-9). In v.5b-6, the prophet describes his conduct in the face of suffering and violent opposition. Yet he bore the insult: "I was not rebellious; I did not turn backward. I gave my

back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."

These verses seem to be an appeal to those who have almost lost hope during the long days of Babylonian domination, while the servant still clings to something of their ancient faith. This is, perhaps, what the poet means in Isa 50:10: "Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?" But he encounters opposition, he is strengthened by the fact that Yahweh, his Vindicator, is near and will defend his cause and vindicate him.

Isa 52:13-53:12: Fourth Servant Song.

The fourth servant song is the most popular and most quoted of the four Isaianic servant songs, because of the sublimity of its poetry and its theological profundity. In this song, the prophet describes the fate of the servant, crushed under the crimes of mankind, ill-treated despite his innocence. Although ill-treated, he accepts his fate voluntarily as the means to save "us". In the fourth song, the relationship between the servant and the "many" whose sins he bore, is underlined (Isa 53:4-5). The servant is righteous yet bears the iniquities of many (53:11). In his death, "he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa 53:12).

The suffering and death of the servant are vicarious, as 53:4-6 indicates: "Surely, he has borne our infirmities...." (v.4); "he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises, we are healed" (53:5); "The Lord has laid on him "the iniquity of us all" (*'āvōn kullānū*, 53:6). Knierim (1997) stresses that the term *'āvōn* here is comprehensive, and includes sin, punishment, and guilt. The servant is the representative of the many and acts on their behalf. His death is a vicarious death. He takes the place of the others; bearing the consequences of the transgressions of others, who themselves are set free by his substitutionary representation (Simian-Yofre, 1999).

The servant's behaviour in the face of violent persecution in 53:7 is consistent with 42:1-4 and 50:4-9: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:7). The young lamb is killed for her wool. She suffers the harsh hand of the shearer, yet she opens not its mouth in protest. Similarly, though the servant is unjustly treated, he quietly bears the suffering for the sake of others.

Identity of the Anonymous Servant of Yahweh in DI

The identity of the servant of Yahweh in DI has been a subject of debate by both Jewish and Christian scholars down the ages. There are four possible identities of the servant in DI's servant songs: Israel, Cyrus, a prophetic figure, or a future Messiah.

a. Jacob/Israel as the Nameless Servant

Frequently, in Deutero-Isaiah, Israel is named the "servant of Yahweh". In Isa 40-55, the servant is identified as the righteous remnant of Israel (Gelston, 1965; Rignell, 1953; Orlinsky, 1967). In Isa 49:3, God identifies this servant by name: "You are my servant,

Israel” (*‘abdī-‘attā^h yisrā‘ēl*; Isa 49:3) “in whom I will be glorified”. However, this identification of the servant with Israel (Isa 49:3) conflicts with Isa 49:5-7 where the servant has a mission to Israel (Banwell, 1964-65). The servant of the songs differs in character from the Israel-Servant found in the other passages of the book of Isaiah. In Isa 42:18-19, this same servant is decried as deaf and blind, the servant hears (Isa 50:4f). Israel is sinful (Isa 42:18-25; 43:22-28), the servant is just (Isa 53:9-11). Israel has need of restoration (Isa 49:6), and the servant has a task to “bring Jacob back” to Yahweh (Isa 49:5); “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel” (Isa 49:6). How can Israel restore Israel? This makes the identification of the servant with Israel untenable.

Herbert (1975) attempts to resolve this contradiction by proposing that “Israel” of Isa 49:3 is probably a later addition. Herbert argues that the difficulty of Israel (v.3) being sent to Israel (v.5) can be resolved by assuming that a “remnant” is the object of the sending. The function of Israel in the purpose of God is to be the agent of the world’s salvation. Herbert further argues that the “remnant” Israel has still a function “to bring Jacob back to God”. Watts holds a somewhat different view from Herbert. According to Watts, the servants in DI servant Songs “appears to be an organizer, a motivator” or a “leader in Jerusalem responsible for rebuilding the Temple, Zerubbabel” (Watts, 1987).

The theory that the servant is the empirical nation of Israel stems from Isa 52:15 whereby the kings of the earth are astonished over Israel’s influence. This understanding, as Wyman underlines, would portray Israel as a nation that suffers for the iniquities of the world. There are, however, holes in this interpretation. There is no indication in Scripture that Israel was a righteous sufferer for the sins of others. Devoid of a consensus, the servant in this last song remains, by and large, nameless (Wyman, 2017).

b. Cyrus as Servant of the Lord

In Isa 42:1-7, the first servant song, the servant is portrayed as a covenant mediator. Many scholars identify the servant of Isa 42:1-7 as Cyrus, King of Persia, and the hero of Israel’s liberation from Babylonian bondage. In fact, much of Isa 40-48 is directed at Cyrus. In Isa 45:1, Cyrus is addressed directly. Cyrus is referred to in Isa 44:28 as Yahweh’s shepherd, and his anointed (Isa 45:1), whom Yahweh has called by name (Isa 45:3,1). In the first song, the role the servant is to play is twofold: he is “a “covenant (for) people”; “a light to the nations” (Isa 42:6). In Isa 42:1-4, he is addressed with the honorific title, ‘servant of Yahweh’.

Cyrus’ mission is explicit in Isa 45:3-4: to release Israel’s exiles from the Babylonian bondage and restore them to the land of Israel. He is also to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem (Isa 44:28). There is an aspect of royalty about his commission. This fact raises the possibility that the subject of the song is Cyrus, the Persian king. However, it is difficult to reconcile the subject of 41:25 (Cyrus) with the subject of Isa 42:1-4 (the servant). As Wilcox and Paton-Williams (1988) noted, the portrait of Cyrus in Isa 41:2,3, 25, and 45:1-4 as an all-conquering hero, who shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay (Isa 41:25b) differs from the portrait of the gentle servant of

Yahweh described in Isa 42:2, 3, who will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. It is quite difficult to resolve the contradiction between Cyrus’ way of accomplishing his mission through force and violence with the gentle and meek method of the servant. This makes the identification of the servant with Cyrus untenable. Secondly, the picture painted of the ‘servant’ contrasts sharply with the picture of the Royal Messiah found in Isaiah. How, then can we resolve the question of the identity of this enigmatic servant of Yahweh? We must, therefore, reflect deeper to unravel the identity of the servant.

c. A Prophetic Figure

In Isa 49:1-6, the servant’s prophetic characteristics are highlighted. Here, God personifies the servant as he recounts his calling. The language used in v. 1b, “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he named me,” reflects the wording in the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5): “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” There are many parallels between these verses and the prophet Jeremiah. The identification with Jeremiah or any other prophetic figure probably because of two factors: the description of his call and the stiff opposition he suffers at the hands of his audience both of which reflect Jeremiah’s experience. However, his role as Yahweh’s agent of salvation goes deeper than Jeremiah’s role a prophetic voice among the people.

d. The Servant as a Messianic Figure

Often, the servant of the Isaianic servant songs has been identified as Israel, or as the righteous remnant of Israel. However, the ‘servant’ in the songs has an active mission to Israel who is portrayed as deaf and blind (Isa 42:18-19; 43:8; 44:18). Israel’s blindness and deafness imply a refusal of the people to listen and respond to the prophet’s message. The theme of Israel’s blindness and deafness, understood in a metaphorical and spiritual sense, is clearly of central importance to Isa 40-55. The idea of the ending of blindness and deafness will characterize the coming of the great era of salvation (Isa 35:3-6 [Clements, 1985]). Israel has long been blind and deaf to Yahweh’s instructions (Isa 41:18,19), but now Yahweh is determined to redeem his people through his anonymous servant, who is here portrayed as Yahweh’s agent of salvation.

In the fourth servant song, the relationship between the servant and the people is one of substitutionary representation (Isa 52:13-53:12). His suffering is vicarious suffering because he takes up suffering for the sake of others. This distinguishes the anonymous servant as one with an exceptional “task.” Neither Israel nor Cyrus nor any prophet (e.g., DI) nor any other OT figure exhibits all the characteristics of the anonymous servant. The character and theological image of this anonymous servant, as Simian-Yofre (1999) opines, do not completely coincide with any historical figure neither individual nor collective. The context favours an individual rather than a collective interpretation of the servant.

Isa 53 gives the servant’s austere biography. His is a life of total silence in the face of sorrow, mockery, persecution, and death. But he endures the sorrow with the knowledge that it comes from Yahweh,

and that it is carrying out his grand design. The “servant” is seen as an individual in the past (Moses, Jeremiah) or present (Deutero-Isaiah, Zerubbabel), or future (Christ). In the postexilic period, the picture of “the suffering prophet” was clearly molded by the biography of Jeremiah (Baltzer, 2001). The prophet puts before our eyes something puzzling about the servant: it is not by the visible success that he saves humanity, but by his suffering (Isa 52:13-53:12). The servant takes upon himself suffering and death for the salvation of many. This fact, in the views of Zimmerli (1962) and Page (1985), favours an individual interpretation of the song and shows why it is often applied to a messianic figure. His suffering is an expiatory sacrifice by which he gains pardon for the sins of others. This explains why he puts no resistance to insults and spitting to which he was subjected, and why he offered his back to those who beat him (Isa 50: 4ff).

The Targumist viewed the fourth servant song as a description of the Messiah (Page, 1985). And, the Greek translations of Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus interpret Isaiah 53 as a messianic prophecy relating to Jesus (cf. Jeremias, 1962). Authors like Guthrie (1981), Cullmann (1963), Stanley (1954), Jeremias (1962), Whybray (1990), and Page (1985), interpret this prophetic prediction as ultimately recapitulated in Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is not difficult to locate Jesus Christ in Isaiah’s servant songs. Indeed, much of the fourth song prophesies what we know of Jesus’ life, suffering, and death. He had humble beginnings (Isa 53:2); he was rejected by many in his public ministry (Isa 53:3). He was silent before his tormentors (v.7), “crushed for our iniquities” (v.5). His suffering and death are redemptive. Isaiah’s fourth servant song is read, among Catholics, on Good Friday to demonstrate the identification of Jesus and his vicarious death for human salvation with the servant of the fourth song. Like Jesus, the servant of the fourth song is also portrayed as God’s agent of salvation. Christians consider Christ’s suffering and death, like those of the servant, as vicarious.

Vicarious Suffering of the Servant

The fourth servant song, as Herbert wrote, “expresses both the tragic experience and the supreme triumph of the loyal, faithful and obedient servant of Yahweh in a world which ignores God, but a world which God is resolved to save” (Herbert, 1975). The servant is seen as one afflicted by God. But, later in the poem, we learn that the suffering he underwent is the consequence of “our transgressions”: “he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities” (Isa 53:5). He voluntarily took upon himself the suffering which would have befallen “us” that he might reconcile “us” to God. It is vicarious suffering and death for the salvation of the world. The servant of the fourth servant song is the agent of the divine work of reconciliation.

Conclusion

The servant of the Isaianic servant songs is nameless. This shrouds his identity in mystery. The position of scholars as regards the identity of the “servant of the Lord” in Deutero-Isaiah varies. Jewish worldview identifies him as Israel/Jacob, the righteous remnant of Israel. There is, however, a hole in this position. The servant has an

active mission to Israel and is portrayed in Isa 42:7 and 42:18ff as blind. Israel’s blindness and deafness understood in a metaphorical sense (Isa 42:18ff; 43:8; 44:18) refers to the refusal of the people to listen and obey Yahweh’s Torah. Often the servant is identified with Cyrus, king of Persia, whose mission was to set the Jewish exiles free from their Babylonian bondage (Isa 44:28; 45:1,13). However, the portrait of Cyrus in Isa 41:2,3, 25, and 45:1-4 as a conquering hero contradicts the gentle figure described in Isa 42:2, 3, who will not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick.

The puzzle concerning the identity of the servant becomes deeper when we reflect on the servant of the fourth song. He is presented as the representative of the many, the consequences of whose transgressions he bears. It is a kind of substitutionary representation. He is a spiritual agent of redemption. The fourth servant song is the high point of Hebrew messianic hope. The New Testament writers interpret this song in a messianic sense and, therefore, regard the poem as a messianic prediction that has been ultimately recapitulated in Jesus Christ. Christian authors, thus, agree that the servant is a type of the future Messiah. In the passion narrative, the New Testament shaped Jesus around the figure of the servant: his silence before the various tribunals, his scourging, and his death. Lk 22:37 applies to Jesus the words of Isa 53: 12: “He was counted as one of the rebellious....”

It is the researcher’s view that this servant refers to a spokesperson of God to his people. He is a mysterious figure chosen by Yahweh and filled by his spirit (Isa 42:1). He plays a role at once nationalistic and universalistic. On the one hand, he must restore the tribes of Jacob (Isa 49:5f). On the other hand, he must be the light of the nations, a bearer of salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). The salvation he brings is not of the temporal but of the moral order. The servant, therefore, is a spiritual agent of redemption.

The four Isaianic servant songs have both immediate reference and remote consideration. More than one figure in history has fulfilled some aspects of the role assigned to the servant of Yahweh, some politically, some militarily, and some spiritually and messianically. We do not have to be too quick to make an *a priori* identification of the servant of Yahweh, especially the suffering servant, to Christ without considering other personages who played out some aspects of the mission assigned to the Isaianic servant of Yahweh. To quickly rush to such a conclusion would be unfair to both Isaiah’s prophecy and Christ. Singling out one solution to the exclusion of all others flattens the rich dimensions of the Isaianic prophecy to a lone event. Only when we have acknowledged all who in one way or the other fulfilled some aspect of Isaiah’s prophecy (Israel, Cyrus, prophetic figure, etc.) can we proclaim Christ as the complete and ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah’s servant of Yahweh prophecy.

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