

JESUS AS THE SERVANT OF THE LORD IN ISAIAH

There are four “Servant songs” in Isaiah, in which the servant is the Messiah. They are 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12. When Jesus was baptised, the Father’s words, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” were two quotations, one from Psalm 2:5; and the other, “with Him I am well pleased” recalls “in whom I delight”, in the first Servant Song (Isa 42:1). In that verse “I shall put My Spirit on Him” is fulfilled in the descent of the Spirit on Jesus. Jesus’ statement that He needed to be baptised “to fulfil all righteousness” can be understood as a reference to “He will bring justice to the nations” in this verse. “Justice” and “righteousness” are often related, and both are law-court expressions. Matthew quotes part of Isaiah 42:1-4 as a reference to Jesus in 12:18-21.

In Acts 4:27 the believers’ prayer uses the words, “to conspire against Your holy Servant Jesus.” The reference is to the Servant songs in Isaiah. They close the same prayer in this way: “as You stretch out Your hand to heal, and as miraculous signs and wonders are done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus” (Ac 4:30). The Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “Servant” is *pais*, which basically means “child”, or “boy”, and which could also refer to a servant. Perhaps the early Christians found the word useful, because it linked both ideas, Son of God, and Servant of God. Christians refer to themselves as the servants or slaves (*douloi*) of the Lord, and also as sons or children of God, but they never use “*pais*” to refer to themselves.

There are two other references in the New Testament to Jesus as the “servant (*pais*) of the Lord besides Acts 4:27,30, and Matthew 12:18. They are both in the sermon that Peter preached after the healing of the lame man in the temple. In Acts: 3: 13 Peter says, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you handed over and denied before Pilate when he had decided to release Him.” Later in the same sermon he says, “God has raised His Servant, and He has sent Him first to you to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Ac 3:26).

From the beginning the early Christians understood Jesus’ work in terms of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. However, the words of the Father at Jesus’ baptism, “in whom I am well pleased”, repeated when Jesus was transfigured in glory (Mt 3:17; 17:5), indicate that this was not simply an interpretation that the apostles and evangelists imposed on Jesus. The Father Himself identified Him in this way. Besides this, the statement of John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the son of the world”, must be seen as an allusion to the Servant Songs, which compared Him with a sheep that is silent before its shearer, and say, “He will bear the sin of many” (Isa 53:7, 12). Nowhere in late Judaism’s the Messiah referred to as a “lamb.”

Another confirmation of this understanding of Jesus as the Servant of the Lord in the early church appears in the early Christian manual on holy living, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper called the *Didache*. Scholars date it either within the time of the New Testament, or as late as about 180 AD. In five places it has the stereotyped formula, “through Jesus Your Servant (Greek: *pais*).” There are similar references in Clement of Rome’s prayer of the Roman church (1 Clement 59,2-4) (about AD 98), and the prayer of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, as he faced martyrdom. (Martyrdom of Polycarp 14:1-3 and 20.2), roughly AD 156. From the fifth century this language disappears completely as a way of referring to Jesus. Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, did not use “the Servant of the Lord” as a title for Jesus, and Gentile churches tended to avoid it, or used it only in liturgical formulas. We may explain its dropping out of use by the fear that the title “servant” would imply subordination to the Father with respect to His nature. However, the glory of the Gospel is Jesus Christ’s humiliation even to the death of the cross, though He was “in the very form of God”, and had “equality with God” (Plp 2:5-8). For His humiliation applied to His assumed human nature.

Other Messianic sections in Isaiah also say that God would put His Spirit on the Messiah: Isaiah 11: 1-2 “A Shoot will come out from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.” Isaiah 61:1-2: “The Spirit of Lord GOD is upon Me because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bandage up the broken-hearted; to announce freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, to announce the year of the favour of the LORD.”

To sum up what is said about Him in the four Servant Songs, He is the One whom the hand of the Lord has seized; the Lord has called Him in truth, mostly addressing Him directly. He has been fashioned by the Lord from His mother’s womb. He is the Chosen One on whom the Lord’s favour has been focused. The Lord equips Him for service by endowing Him with His Spirit. In obedience and surrender He endures what the Lord has ordained for Him. The Lord touches, and makes ready for His use, His ear and His mouth, which are important

organs to fulfil His task.

His task, according to the Servant songs, is to bring justice to the nations. This goes much further than preaching the Law. He will be a herald, but an unusual one, for He will not cry aloud, break the bruised reed or extinguish smoking flax. The Lord will establish justice through Him by a surprising act of grace. The Servant will suffer meekly, and be cut off from the land of the living as He pours out His life into death. He will be made a guilt offering, justifying many, by bearing their iniquities. From this vantage point we should understand Jesus' repeated assertion that the Scriptures said that the Christ had to suffer. In His humiliation, mockery, and other suffering two things stand out. He is determined to carry out His task, setting His face like a flint; and the Lord helps Him, so that He is not put to shame.

Many liberals refuse to regard these Servant songs as Messianic. Some refer them to an unknown teacher of the Law, and some refer them to Israel as a whole. Certainly, Israel is sometimes called "the Lord's servant", as in 41 :8-9; and in one Servant-song, 49:3 Isaiah calls the Messianic Servant "Israel"; but He is Israel in ideal form. In the language of the East, a trusted ambassador was often called a king's "servant." However, He is not only the representative of Israel, who would be wounded for Israel's transgressions (Isa 53:5), but One who will stand over against Israel as Israel's Redeemer. He is Israel's substitute. He bears the sin of many. That is clear, for example, in 42:7: "to give sight to eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of the prison, and to bring those who live in darkness from the prison house."

Isaiah 49:5-6 indicates that his task will be discouraging, but there will be a mighty expansion of His mission. He will glorify the Lord, and become the light and salvation of the whole world. After He completes His task, He will be vindicated, be greatly honoured, and receive His reward. Because of His work, kings and other great people of the earth will be astonished, and prostrate themselves before Him.