

The Messianic Servant of the Lord in Isaiah

In Isaiah chapters 41-53, “My servant” sometimes refers to the nation of Israel (41:8-10; 42:19; 44:1-2). Since it is said that God redeems His servant Israel, we cannot refer such passages to Jesus. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the patriarchs, and Moses, Joshua, Caleb, and David were called God’s servants. We also find the expression, “My servants the prophets.” The messianic Servant-songs in Isaiah speak about Him as the promised Messiah as an Israelite, but He is distinct from Israel in the sense that He has a mission to Israel and redeems Israel through His disgraceful treatment and suffering. He suffers for Israel. Israel ignores and despises Him Yet in the future He will be recognised as God’s servant. He will be righteous, and will fulfil His mission to restore justice.

Unfortunately, the study of Isaiah from chapter 40 on is confused by liberal writers, who refuse to accept that Isaiah chapters 40-66 were written by the same prophet Isaiah as wrote the preceding chapters. Theology is bedevilled by the unbelieving assumption that direct predictions of the future cannot happen. Therefore, it is concluded, references to Cyrus (Isa 44:28; 45:1) and to the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon must have been written after the return from the Babylonian exile, not before it, as the book claims.

“The Servant of the LORD” is Messianic in four prophetic poems in Isaiah, spoken by the Servant of the Lord (42:1-4; 42:5-7; 49:1-6; and 50:4-9), and in two more that speak about the Servant of the Lord in the third person, 50:10-11; and 52:13-53:12).

In addition, Zechariah also referred to the coming Messiah, the Branch, as God’s Servant (Zch 3:8).

The right understanding, that these passages are Messianic, is clearly fixed for Christians by their use in the New Testament. When the Father spoke from heaven at Jesus’ baptism and His transfiguration, His words included a quotation of Isaiah 42:1-2. “Here is My Servant, whom I support, My Chosen One, in whom I delight! I have put My Spirit on Him.” Matthew reported about Jesus’ quiet ministry in the obscure district of Galilee: “Many crowds followed Him, and He healed them all, but He warned them that they should not make Him known” (Mt 12:15-16). Matthew added, “This was to fulfil what had been said through Isaiah the prophet” and quoted Isaiah 42:1-4: “Here is My Servant, whom I have chosen, whom I love, and in whom My soul delights. I shall put My Spirit on Him and He will announce justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or shout, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick, until He brings justice forth to victory; and in His name the nations will hope” (Mt 12:18-21).

Furthermore, in speaking about Jesus, Peter wrote, “He did not commit any sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth” (2:22). That was a quotation from one of the messianic Servant songs (Isa 53:9). Peter continued, “He Himself carried our sins in His body to the cross so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness. By His wounds you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Caretaker of your souls” (1 Pt 2:24-25). This passage contains a number of quotations from the Messianic Servant-song in chapter 53, (vv.4, 5, 6, and 12).

“Servant” as a title for Jesus did not occur in the Gospels, and St Paul nowhere referred expressly to Jesus Christ as God’s Servant. In a Gentile context, such a title could easily have been misinterpreted as subordinationist, and the ambiguity in the meaning of the Greek word “*pais*” between “servant”, “slave”, and “child” perhaps also made it unsuitable as a regular title for Jesus. However, the early church at Jerusalem, steeped in the language of the Old Testament, used the Greek word “*pais*” for Jesus. The Greek translation of the OT, the Septuagint, used “*pais*” for the Hebrew word for “servant” in Isaiah. Peter told the Jews assembled in Solomon’s colonnade at the temple after the healing of the lame man, “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” (Ac 3:13). At the end of the same address, he said, “God has raised up 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). When Peter and John were released, and reported the threats of the chief priests and elders to the Jewish Christians, they prayed to God for boldness. The prayer included this sentence: “For truly both Herod and Pontius Pilate have gathered together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You have anointed (Ac 4:27). Their prayer concluded, “And grant that miraculous signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus!” (Ac 4:30). It was the clear conviction of the first Christians at Jerusalem that the passages about the Servant of the LORD in Isaiah referred to Jesus and foretold that He would be delivered up by the Jews to death, but raised and glorified by God to be the source of blessing for his people.

When Simeon referred to Jesus as “a Light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the Glory of Your people Israel” (Lk 2:32), the reference was to phrases in two of the Messianic songs about the Servant of the Lord. “I have called You in righteousness, that I may grasp Your hand and watch over You, and that I may appoint You as a Covenant for the people, and as a Light for the Gentiles” (Isa 42:6) and, “I shall also make You a Light for the Gentiles so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6).

The Servant-song in Isaiah 50:4-9 is not quoted expressly as Messianic in the NT, but it is impossible to ignore the mockery of Jesus as portrayed in His passion in these words, “I have given My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out My beard. I have not hidden My face from insults and spittle” (Isa 50:6). The Servant-song in Isa 52:13-53:12 is the longest, and speaks about redemption by the Servant of the LORD through His suffering. It is impossible to identify Him with Israel in a collective sense, which had a mission to bring the message of salvation to other nations, or with some historical figure such as Hezekiah, Isaiah himself, Jeremiah, Josiah, or Zerubbabel.

The NT is decisive for the understanding of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 as Messianic. When Paul referred to the spread of the gospel of Christ in this way, "Rather, as Scripture has said: 'Those who have not had it announced to them about Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand'" (Rm 15:21), he was quoting Isaiah 52:15. The apostle John wrote, "Although He had done so many miraculous signs in their presence, they would not believe in Him, in order that the Word that the prophet Isaiah had said might be fulfilled: 'Lord, who has believed our report? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'" (Jn 12:37-38). Paul wrote about the sending of Christian preachers, "For Isaiah asks: 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Both of these writers were quoting Isaiah 53:1.

When the Spirit told the evangelist Philip to approach the Ethiopian's chariot and stay close to it, he heard the Ethiopian reading this passage. "He was led like a sheep to be slaughtered, and, as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so He did not open His mouth. In His humiliation, His justice was taken away. Who will describe His descendants? For His life has been taken from the earth" (Ac 8:32-33). This was Isaiah 53:7-8. Philip began from that passage and told him the good news about Jesus.

We cannot ignore Jesus' own self-understanding. When He was on His way to Gethsemane, He told His disciples, "For I tell you that this passage of Scripture must be fulfilled in Me, 'He was numbered with transgressors.' Yes, what has been written about Me is being fulfilled" (Lk 22:37). He was referring to Himself as the fulfilment of Isaiah 53:12. Jesus' explanation of the meaning of His death, "to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45), alluded to Isaiah 53:10-12. We can also understand the sentence, "He was with a rich man in His death" (Isa 53:9) as fulfilled in Joseph of Arimathea.

John the Baptist's expression "Lamb of God" derived from Isaiah 53:7 as well as from the entire Old Testament sacrificial system.

In addition, the apostle Paul, in a number of passages that expressed the meaning of Jesus death, alluded to words in the Servant songs in Isaiah (Rm. 4:25; 8:34; 1 Cor. 11:23-25; 15:3-5; Plp 2:6-11; 1 Tm. 2:6).