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The Servant: Story and Song

An Exegesis of Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Introduction

This exegesis will seek standard exegetical aims, such as a consideration of the textual selection in relevant contexts and contemporary interpretation. As a part of the latter aim, different contemporary approaches to this text will be contrasted.¹

The passage selection is commonly called the fourth 'Servant Song'. The Song's opening (52:13) is markedly clear, and its prose flows and echoes right through the end (53:12). Therefore, as many commentaries choose not to compartmentalize the Song, this analysis will follow suit.

Authorship, Dating and Historical Context

For the book of Isaiah, issues of historical context, dating and authorship are inseparable. Theories of authorship for the entire book of Isaiah range from a single 'Isaiah' writing the entire piece before the Exilic period, to several 'Isaiahs' composing portions that were collected and edited by later redactors.

Few scholars today attribute chapters 40-66 to the 8th century BC son of Amoz due to a different feel, message and direction in these chapters.² Indeed, the shift in tone strongly suggests a separate author. This has led to this section being called 'Second Isaiah', written by a 'Deutero-Isaiah' sometime near the end

¹ More specifically, a simplistic 'prediction-of-Jesus' reading will not only be sharply dismissed, but will also be shown to miss the richness of Jesus' fulfillment of it.

² Matthews & Moyer confidently put it this way: "*Starting in chapter 40, a second voice of Isaiah begins to speak. This Isaiah... comes from the time of the exile, not from the eighth-seventh centuries BCE...*" (Matthews & Moyer, 1997, p 206)

of the exile in Babylon.^{3 4}

The nearness of the end of exile certainly provides a meaningful setting for Second Isaiah. It is no small understatement that the 'get up and go back home' lines near its opening (40:2, esp. v. 9) seem awkward if directed to people just about to go *into* exile! Indeed, the treatment of the passage below will assume this text as speaking to exiles about to return or returning to Jerusalem.

Brief mention should be made of the Ancient Near East 'substitute king ritual' which was a protection strategy for a threatened king, providing a substitute target king. Scholars have investigated the possibility that such a ritual is the referent of the Fourth Servant Song, but John Walton, in reviewing decades of study, concludes '*not that the Isaiah text represents an actual substitute king ritual but that the motifs of those rituals provide a background for the theological points that the author of the song wishes to make...*'⁵

Literary Context

Two interesting literary features are of note in the fourth Song; 1) its uncommon vocabulary and style, and 2) its specific and important point in the thematic progression of Second Isaiah.

First, the strangeness of the meter (rhythm/pace) of the passage...

"In 53:1-9 the meter is fairly regular with twelve 3-3 verses out of eighteen, whereas in the seven lines of vv 10-12... only one is regular 3-3."⁶

...and of the concentration of rare and/or obscure Hebrew terms.

"The interpretation... is difficult, and any translation must be considered provisional."⁷

"...the imagery is elusive. ...the Hebrew words are unusual and the text is seemingly disordered, so that every translation is to some extent speculative."⁸

³ Or, a label Blenkinsopp uses, an '*Isaian poet*'. (Blenkinsopp, Joseph. 2002, p 351)

⁴ Also, 56-66 is often seen as 'Third Isaiah', written/edited by a 'Trito-Isaiah'.

⁵ See his thorough treatment (Walton, John H., Winter 2003, p. 735)

⁶ Blenkinsopp, Joseph (2002) p. 350

⁷ Ibid, p.350

⁸ Brueggemann, Walter (1998) p. 141

Second, its placement comes at a key transition point in the development of Second Isaiah. Seitz rightly deems this text a '*culmination of all that precedes...*' and a bridge from the previous content on '*the achievement of the servant*' (40:1-52:11) and the later content on '*the work of the servants*' (54:1-66:24).⁹ The previous three 'Servant Songs' (42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9) are seen to build toward this climactic point. In this vein, Michael Barre concludes that the fourth Song casts the Servant '*in the role of a wisdom figure*', which '*contrasts with the other Servant songs... in them, he is portrayed as a royal or prophetic figure*'.¹⁰

Indeed, many pictures, themes and images can be seen to converge in this unique Song. Very helpful here is John Goldingay's treatment, listing four metaphorical patterns woven together:

1. **The imagery of Israel as an afflicted people.** Here the Servant not necessarily *is* afflicted Israel or Zion, but is *like* them.
2. **The relating of the experiences of a prophet.** This highlights the '*price the prophet pays for ministering to the people... that may bring them back to Yhwh.*'
3. **The association with the king of Israel.** The passage '*recalls a king like David*', and portrays the Servant as who, though he may not have the look of a king, will behave like one ought to.
4. **The reference to 'spattering'.** The language of the priestly 'spattering' of blood during sacrificial offerings is used of the Servant.¹¹

Of course, we find here the question of the identity of the Servant thoroughly raised. Does this Song intend to refer to an historical figure, or is the image intended to remain an image? Goldingay warns that seeing the Servant

⁹ Seitz, Christopher (2001) p. 460

¹⁰ Barre, Michael L. (Jan, 2000) p. 27

¹¹ Goldingay, John (2005) pp. 478-9

as Israel or Zion is to *'turn metaphor into literal description.'*¹² Concurring is Walton.

'Instead of having a particular individual in view... the *imagery* of the Servant is more important than the *identity* of the Servant.' (Emphasis his.)¹³

Rhetorical Context

Full appreciation of this Song's message is a large issue, which we can only observe briefly here. There is much agreement that the Song describes the astonished realization that Servant-Israel's embarrassing suffering in Exile was somehow gloriously redemptive.

Blenkinsopp concludes that the Song *'brings out more starkly... the almost incredible contrast between the past humiliation and present or future glorification of the Servant.'*¹⁴ Wright's summary is particularly encompassing:

'If the exile itself was seen as a 'death', and therefore return from exile a 'resurrection', it is not a long step to see the death of Israel as in some sense sacrificial, so that the exile becomes not simply a time when she languishes in Babylon... but actually a time through which the sin she has committed is expiated... The Servant, acting out the tribulation and future restoration of Zion... dies and rises again as a sin-offering'.¹⁵

Seitz concurs while positing that the 'voice' of the Song is that of 'the servant followers of the servant',¹⁶ but he adds that the 'servant followers' are *'the means by which we hear the anticipated voice of the nations.'*¹⁷

In this light, Second Isaiah's broad message of restoration and return reaches here a climactic irony in the fourth Servant Song, which speaks of suffering as glory, proclaims death as life, and re-casts Exile as sacrifice.

¹² Goldingay, John (2005), p. 478

¹³ Walton, John (Winter, 2003) p. 742

¹⁴ Blenkinsopp, Joseph (2002) p. 351

¹⁵ Wright, N.T. (1992) p. 276

¹⁶ Seitz, Christopher (2001) pp. 460 & 461

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 462 (Though his treatment is engaging, I disagree on the specific point of the 'servant followers' speaking for 'the nations'.)

The Song in Subsequent Context

Israel's subsequent understanding of suffering, as expressed in various texts, continued to follow the same theme as expressed in this ironic Song,¹⁸ but the most obvious uses of it are from the New Testament. This usage has sometimes been understood in unhelpful ways. Further, some of these misunderstandings have hugely influenced interpretation of prophetic literature.

The fourth Servant Song is a good example, having often been treated quite simplistically as an Old Testament prediction of Jesus. Indeed, the striking poetic parallels with the crucifixion of Jesus have led many to imagine that the text was always a literal, predictive forecast of the eventual death of Jesus.¹⁹

Strom brings much clarity to the issue. He covers the New Testament linkage of Jesus with this and other Old Testament texts. He describes the richness with which Jesus fulfills not just the meaning of this and other texts, but also various roles and themes: the Servant, the true Israelite, the only true covenant-keeper, the only true son of Abraham, and Israel herself.²⁰

A key question is that of Jesus' own knowledge and use of the text. Bruce responds strongly to suggestions that Jesus did not associate himself with it:

“Although it is unfashionable nowadays to hold that Jesus understood His mission in terms of the Isaianic Servant Songs, I see no more probable explanation of the statements that the Son of Man's sufferings were “written” than that Jesus did just this, and identified the Servant of Yahweh with Daniel's “one like a son of man.”²¹

Getting to the heart of the matter, Wright addresses Jesus' own sense of how his intentions might have related to this well-known text from Isaiah.

‘...if we are looking for a bit of detached teaching... in which Jesus will say “look, I am

¹⁸ Wright convincingly quotes passages from 2 & 4 Maccabees to demonstrate the continuation of the suffering-as-redemption motif. (Wright, N.T. (1992) p. 276)

¹⁹ So devout is this notion in the mind of some, that they a) can't understand ‘why those Jews can't see that it's about Jesus’, and b) can't imagine it being about anything other than Jesus (often suggesting that ‘Isaiah’ probably didn't know what he was writing about!).

²⁰ Strom, Mark (1990) p. 56

²¹ Bruce, F.F. (1968) p. 29

the Servant of Isaiah 53,” we will look in vain... He did not speak of it directly when instructing his puzzled disciples... He spoke of it in his actions... We catch echoes of this, rather than direct statements, as Jesus’ words cluster around his actions.’²²

Conclusion

Indeed, viewing the fourth Servant Song as a strange text having little or nothing to do with anyone, any time or any place before Jesus, the first century and Calvary, not only belittles the Song itself, but also Jesus’ magnificent fulfillment of it. It results in Jesus ‘fulfilling’ only a strange, cryptic prediction, when the New Testament authors saw Jesus fulfilling much more than that.

The events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection were themselves not so much mere clumsy explanations of things which words can encapsulate, but rather they were the new music, lyrics and performance of a fresh, permanent and living rendition of a great and majestic Song – a Song about a God who turns exile into redemption, suffering into glory and death into life.

²² Wright, N.T. ‘The Servant and Jesus’ (in Bellinger, William & Farmer, William (1998))

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