

THE SUFFERING SERVANT in Isaiah

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1. HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

Israel's history is in a situation where its glorious age is crushed. It is one in which all that Moses and David had instituted, is destroyed: temple, royal palace, walls of Jerusalem and farm lands. The Davidic ministry deposed and the priesthood discredited.

In August 587 BCE the third and the final massive deportation of the people was underway (Jer 39)

The Israelite remnant were gathered at Rammah, a little village north of Jerusalem (Jer 40:1) where the bulk were chained together to be deported to Babylon.

Dt-Is continually recalls the exodus out of Egypt to be constituted as people not only through a political constitution as the neighbouring countries but as the chosen people of God with whom God had bound himself. Thus, Isaiah of Jerusalem demanded faith that God is control in history. God would make use of a foreign power such as Assyria to bring Judah back to her senses.

God would remain with the people even in the exile through the prophets Ezekiel and Dt-Is. Ezekiel, priest and prophet, pictured the new age of restored Israel along liturgical lines: a new sanctuary city and temple. Dt-Is spoke differently because of the living condition of his fellow exiles.

The Babylonians allowed many of the exiles a fair amount of freedom: they assembled (Ez 8:1;14:1;20:1), owned and cultivated land (Jer 29:4-7). Some of the exiles were attracted to the Babylonian temples and were slowly tempted to apostasize Yahweh, who they felt had abandoned them (Isa 40:27). Thus Dt-Is sets a trial between Yahweh and other gods, challenging the Israelites for a decision (Isa43:9;45:21;48:3-6).

All Israelites were homesick, especially those imprisoned. Without temple, ritual and sacrifice their prayer became simple forming prayers for mourning (Ps 129). Dt-Is sang of a sanctifying power in suffering (52:13-53:12) and once their guilt was expiated (40:2), God would lead his people on a new Exodus. His instrument would not be a priest or a king but the Persian Monarch, Cyrus II the Great. But this was a disappointment for Dt-Is since he encouraged all captive people to return back to their homeland and offer

sacrifices and rebuild their temples. Besides, he attributed his victories to Marduk. Hence, from 49-55, he is not mentioned anymore. Dt-Is was also disappointed because the exiles did not return to any paradise as thought but to a deserted tract of land, hardly enough to support the Jeruslaem temple.¹

2. LITERARY GENRE

There have been **different suggestions** to the literary genres of the passage:

- a form akin to the individual **psalm of thanksgiving or of lament**;
- an analogy to the **psalm of repentance**;
- in spite of psalmic parallels, there is a **liturgical difference** in that the thanksgiving is not made by the suffering petitioner himself but in the third person by another group [Whybry];
- although traditional psalmic conventions lie in the background of the text, it is a **new literary creation**, differing in both form and content from the common oral patterns [Melugin, Beuken];
- **near Eastern mythological setting** for the poem [de Leeuw, North]

3. STYLE

Style, sound and choice of words are so attuned to movement of thought the one hardly notices the masterly touch of the artist, and yet one feels profoundly the strain of intense emotion. Tears are sometimes restrained with heavy, choking, guttural phrases like *nah...hasab...nag...muk*; then suddenly there is a free flow of tears in the low mournful notes of *-anu...-enu* or *...allaw...lannu...kullanu* (53:4-6). This remarkable effect of sustained tension is heightened by echoing phrases, sometimes in the chiasmic form of a-b, b-a (53:3,7,12).

The suffering servant is so central that, somehow or another, abrupt changes of speakers and their sudden appearance without introduction neither disturb nor even distract from the concentrated attention upon the suffering servant. He remains the central figure even though he is explicitly mentioned in the first and last verse. The listener never thinks to ask who the speaker of various lines is, so rapt is his attention on the pitiable sight of the suffering servant.²

¹ CARROLL STUHLMUELLER CP, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, in WILLIAM G. HEIDT et al (Eds.), *Old Testament Reading Guide Vol. 20*, Minnesota, 4-9

² *Ibid.*, 96-7.

4. STRUCTURE

The fourth Servant song is in **two parts**: *what certain people say i.e. the confession of the “we”*³ (53:1-11a) is set within the framework of *what God says* (52:13-15;53:11b-12).

Both parts **speak of** the *Servant in the third person*.

The **framework**, i.e. what God says is an *announcement* whose *subject is the Servant* (52:13-15 and 53:11b-12).

The **central part**, i.e. what certain people say is a *report* whose *subject is the Servant* (53:1-11a).

Link between both parts speak of the *Servant’s humiliation and exaltation*.

The pericope contains an **inclusion** *my Servant* (52:12 and 53:11b).

Such a division has been accepted since the first century AD. However **other scholars** such as Coppens, Snaith, Orlinsky and R.N. Whybry emphasize that 52:13-15 constitutes a separate piece claiming that *Chapter 53 by itself, though not without its own problems, makes good sense as a song of thanksgiving for the deliverance of God’s Servant, Deutero-Isaiah, from mortal danger*.⁴

The framework: 52:13-15;53:11b-12

In 52:13a God proclaims the success of his Servant’s work and thus brings out his exaltation (v13b). This is developed in v14.

The Servant is to suffer greatly and he has to be humiliated to the extent that many are “astonished” at him (v14).

However, afterwards, “nations” and “kings” shall “startle” at his exaltation (v15).

This proclamation is continued in 53:11b-12 in which the success and the exaltation are revealed: the Servant makes many righteous and bears their sins.

Because of this, it is God’s will to give him the return for his work (*portion and spoil*) because he gave up his life and became intercessor for many (v12).

This proclamation (11b-12) attests the truth of the statement made in the “we” report. These are the people who have experienced salvation (v12).

³ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *Isaiah*, in JAMES L. MAYS et al (Gen. Eds.), *The Old Testament Library*, London 2001, 411

⁴ R.N. WHYBRY, *Isaiah 40-66*, in ROLAND E. CLEMENTS (Gen. Ed.), *The New Century Bible Commentary*, London 1990, 169.

The report: 53:1-11a

The first point of contact between the report and the general framework is the fact that 52:14-15 presents the contrast between the Servant's humiliation and his exaltation. This anticipates the response of the "we". v14 parallels 53:2-5 whilst v15 corresponds to 53:10-11a.

The "we" report begins in 53:2 and is divided into 2 parts: 2-9 and 10-11a. Westermann⁵ says that these point to a psalm of thanksgiving where the central portion are normally a report on the suffering and a report on deliverance, as it is also in this case. Nonetheless, this form has been changed in 3 ways:

- the *narrator is not the man himself* who has experienced the deliverance since it is in the third person
- in laments and declarative praise, *the suffering brought to God's notice always has limits set to it whereas here it involves a whole life span*: he grew up... he was buried
- those who tell of the Servant's anguish and deliverance have themselves been given salvation by what happened to and through the Servant as 53:4 suggests: "Surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases". Hence the "we" report is a *confession of those who have experienced salvation*.

The drift of the report of the Servant's suffering is as such perfectly clear:

- he grew up with nothing to commend him (v2)
- he was smitten with pains and disease (v4)
- he suffered submissively (v7)
- he was put to death and buried with the accompaniments of shame (v8)

v10-11a have a frequently mentioned structure: God turns to his Servant who sees salvation.

5. AUTHORSHIP OF THE SERVANT SONGS

The author is the "Great Unknown" of biblical literature.⁶

McKenzie's theory⁷ is that the Servant songs were written by a disciple of Dt-Is i.e. Tritio-Is (Auvray, Steinmann).

- The 4 Songs are from one author.

⁵ CLAUD WESTERMANN, *Isaiah 40-66*, in G. ERNEST WRIGHT et al (Eds), *Old Testament Library*, London 1969, 257

⁶ CARROLL STUHLMEYER CP, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, in WILLIAM G. HEIDT et al (Eds.), *Old Testament Reading Guide Vol. 20*, Minnesota, 3.

⁷ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *Second Isaiah*, in W.F. ALBRIGHT et al (Gen. Ed.), *The Anchor Bible Vol. 20*, 1968, XLI-XLII.

- Their present position is assigned by the editor of Dt-Is, because either he or the author, intended them for Dt-Is.

Stuhlmüller, attributes them to Dt-Is and to deny it would raise more questions than answering the authorship question.⁸ This is so because there is a // between suffering servant songs and other poems in Dt-Is e.g. “my servant, my chosen one” (41:9//42:1). However there are other differences too e.g. in Dt-Is salvation comes through a glorious exodus (43:14-21) whereas in the song it comes through suffering in a desert land (52:13-53:12).

Scholars who attribute it to Dt-Is e.g. North, Rowley, maintain that he composed them toward the end of his career and he or someone else inserted them here.

6. THE CONTENT OF THE 4 SERVANT SONGS

42:1-4 Yahweh is the speaker; He describes the call and mission of one who is to bring forth judgement and righteousness in the whole earth.

49:1-6 the Servant is the speaker; he describes his election, his equipment as a speaker, the difficulty of his labour, his mission to gather Israel and to be a light and mediator of salvation to the earth.

50:4-9 the Servant is the speaker, he describes his mission as a teacher, opposition to his mission, and his assurance of success is the assistance of Yahweh.

52:13-53:12 the speakers are Yahweh and unidentified persons. The Servant suffers and dies, possibly by persecution but certainly with evil reputation. His death is mysterious because of his innocence; the mystery is revealed as the vicarious atoning merit of his death, vindicated by resurrection.

7. EXPOSITION OF THE TEXT

The text of the passage is seriously corrupt especially in 53:10 when speaking about the reversal of fortunes of the Servant.

52:13

- The proclamation continues later in 53:11b-12 showing that what this exaltation consists in is to effect righteousness for many and bears their sins.

⁸ CARROLL STUHLMUELLER CP, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, in WILLIAM G. HEIDT et al (Eds.), *Old Testament Reading Guide Vol. 20*, Minnesota, 13-4.

“See, my Servant...” – *‘ebed* parallels 42:1. These 2 songs go together in that 42:1-4 shows the origin of the Servant’s mission to bring *mispāt* (justice) to the nations whilst this pericope depicts its success already hinted in a negative way in 42:4 “He will not fail or be discouraged”.

- The Servant is the same one in other 3 Servant songs in Isa 42:1-4;49:1-6;50:4-9.
- The term Servant in itself does not indicate what specific office is being described. It can be used of Patriarchs (Gen 24:14), of Levites (Ps113:1), of prophets (1 Kgs 14:18) or Israel (Jer 30:10).

“prosper” - to the sense of prospering there is also included in the Hebrew verb *sql* (prosper) the connotation of insight, wisdom and true knowledge. This verb also denotes an action and its results. However, the way the song develops shows that the verb refers to the result: the exaltation. This leads Carroll Stuhlmueller to conclude that the Servant’s victory is the result of obeying God’s wise plan of salvation.⁹

“exalted and lifted up” - recalls the vision in the call of Isaiah in which God’s throne was “high and lifted up” (6:1). It can also be the background for Jesus’ exaltation: “being therefore exalted at the right hand of God...” (Acts 2:33).

- The exalted of the humiliated from the dust is an important occasion for the praise of God in Israel e.g. Ps 113.
- In v13 Rabbinic interpreters give an exclusive Messianic interpretation to the text saying that it refers to the resurrection and ascension to heaven of the Messiah. But they give no indication as regards to the manner of this exaltation: it is only a sublime glorification but general in description.¹⁰

53:14-15

- These speak of the astonishing effect the Servant’s humiliation and exaltation had on those who had part in them or learned of them.
- v14 shows the way to the Servant’s exaltation: profound humiliation as taken up from the central part of Isa 50:4-9.

“Just” (v14a) // **“so”** (v15) - the astonishment at the humiliation is exactly as great as the astonishment at the exaltation.

“astonished” (v14a) – as in Ps 46:9 it has the use of being stunned into silence.

⁹ CARROLL STUHLMUELLER CP, *Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah*, in RAYMOND E. BROWN et al (ed), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1993, 342.

¹⁰ ROLLA ARMANDO, *Il Messaggio della Salvezza Vol. 2*, Torino 1967, 619.

“at him” (v14a) – MT reads *at you*. Whybry point out that such abrupt changes in Hebrew poetry are not uncommon.¹¹ Stuhlmüller explains that this is as though Yahweh turns for a moment towards the silent Servant, then immediately resumes his words about him.¹²

“so” (v14b) - gives the reason for the astonishment in v14a and thus reading it of as parenthesis. The astonishment that the confusion that the Servant evokes is broken by v14b and then continued in v15. This has caused many commentators, such as Duham and Mowinckel) to reassign v14b between 53:2 and 3 but Childs¹³ insists that there is no textual evidence for this. Besides, the sudden shift to the Servant’s humiliation in v14b would be lost. This is stylistic break common in prophetic literature e.g. Isa 31:4;55:10;Zech 8:14).

“beyond human semblance... beyond that of mortals” – v14b the reason for the astonishment is the disfigured appearance of the Servant. This can be understood against the background of a characteristic feature of the man involved: the grievous sufferings that disfigured him that make him naturally cut off from society. The psalms of lamentation and Job help us to understand what the existential feeling of being cut off: one is no longer regarded as genuine and normal human being.

➤ Rolla Armando sees here, more than physical sufferings, a profound moral humiliation.¹⁴

“yassez” (v15a) – the exact meaning of the verb is not known. Literally it means “to sprinkle” or ritually to cleanse but in the context it is taken to mean “to startle” // “shut their mouths”. Stuhlmüller points out that this liturgical allusion in a non-ritual setting is typical of Dt-Isa (cf 44:28).¹⁵

“many” (v15a) – corresponds to the same “many” in v14. Childs¹⁶ point out that in the Psalter the reference to the “many” usually points out to the advisors or bystanders who observe the suffering petitioner (cf. Ps3,1-2;4,7;31,14).

“nations... kings” (v15a) – these are those who are astonished and it runs // to the Psalms in which nations and kings are called to praise God for his mighty acts. Thus the exaltation of the Servant will be so stupendous that people will hear of it with astonishment in far-distant places (nations) and exalted circles (kings).

➤ John L. McKenzie suggests that if this poem links to the other Servant poems in which nations and kings are told that they will see the great

¹¹ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 170.

¹² CARROLL STUHLMUELLER CP, *op. cit.*, 342.

¹³ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 412.

¹⁴ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 619.

¹⁵ CARROLL STUHLMUELLER CP, *op. cit.*, 342.

¹⁶ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 413.

saving power of Yahweh, then the saving act of Yahweh must be the topic of the poem.¹⁷

“them” (v15b) - Armando argues that this refers to the many in v14 which links smoothly to 53:1 and assigns the “we” to the nations and kings.¹⁸

- On the other hand, Childs¹⁹ believes that a different subject has been introduced in v15b.
- Thus, for Childs, the issue at stake is not anymore the astonishment evoked in the nations but rather in their seeing and understanding as Isa 48:ff indicates: “from this time forth I make you hear new things, hidden things which you have not known”. Israel is challenged to see and to hear the new things God is about to reveal: “before today you have not heard of them” (48,7).
- Now suddenly in 52:15b a new group within Israel, different from the nations, is promised by God both to see and understand. What follows in 53:1ff is the report of that group who is suddenly made to understand the will of God through their experience of the suffering Servant.
- The connection between the two is skilfully made with a chiasitic device. The metaphor of seeing (52:15b and 53:1b) brackets that of hearing (52:15b and 53:1a) and confirms the continuity between the group of Israel in 52:15b and the confessing voice of the “we” report.
- In addition, he points out that, from a form critical perspective, the confessing “we” of the OT is always Israel and not the nations (cf. Hos 6:1ff; Jer3:21ff; Dan3:4ff).

“had not been told... had not heard” (v15b) – the exaltation had no similar precedent to it and thus the greater the astonishment. It is epoch-making in its importance and goes against all traditional ways of thinking. It is something unique.

- For Childs²⁰ the metaphor of seeing (52:15b and 53:1b) brackets off that of hearing (52:15b and 53:1a) and confirms the continuity between the group of Israel in v15b and the reporting voice.

53:1

- The “we” report starts.
- It links perfectly to 52:13-15 that the transition is scarcely noticeable.

¹⁷ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *op. cit.*, 133.

¹⁸ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 619.

¹⁹ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 413.

²⁰ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 413.

“we” - who the “we” are is not stated [see “them” (v15b)].

- Others say that it is the prophet himself using the majestic plural or speaking on behalf of the people or other prophets, as St. Jerome thought.

“heard” – the final words of 52:15b are taken up whilst repeating that what is now to be related has never before been heard of. For the “we” the Servant is a *s^emu’a*, a thing of which they heard and hence they are not eye-witness to it (cf. I Sam 2,24:4,19) and, as such, tidings of which they themselves have to pass on to others. To the “we” the thing was as just astonishing and unbelievable as to those who saw him (v15b).

“to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” – gives a hint to the reason of why the thing was unheard of: the power of the Lord was revealed in this weakness (II Cor 12,9b). The “arm of the Lord” has been referred to in 51:9 and 52:10 as the agent of salvation.

- For Childs this question does not raise out of astonishment but it reflects the new group in Israel which confess that their new knowledge comes from divine revelation and thus echoing 50:10-11 indicating that the response to the Servant would divide the people of Israel into 2 groups.

53:2-9

- The first part of the report speaks of the Servant’s humiliation which is not simply a description of the various things he went through but it is to be seen at the background of the humiliation as stated as a whole namely 52:14.
- Viewed in the light of 53:11a and 52:13ff it is an introduction in the manner of declarative praise in the Psalter.

53:2

“he” - the figure to be portrayed appears in every way to have been a historical one but he is simply identified with this pronoun.

“grew up” - unlike psalms of lament and praise, suffering is not spoken of as a single incident but the entire life is stamped with suffering. He grew and died in suffering to the burial (53:9). Whybry’s philological studies would suggest that this does not refer to the Servant earthly life but it is a metaphor taken up from plant life.²¹

“before him” – the meaning of *l^epanaw* is uncertain and some have emended it to “before us” (*l^epanenu*) on the grounds that “before him” would imply that Yahweh was seen to give the Servant his special protection, which is the

²¹ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 173.

contrary of what the speakers intend to say. But Whybry insists that this emendation is unnecessary.²²

- Westermann²³ suggests that this would stand // to the second half-verse “out of dry ground” // Isa 41:18. It means that the Servant grew up parched without strength and of this Yahweh was aware and yet appeared to do nothing to remedy it.

“young plant... root out of dry land” – examples of a symbolism commonplace in the ancient Near East, including Israel. This is taken to mean by Whybry that just as the man who has divine blessing and consequently prospers is compared to well watered vegetation, so the man from whom the divine blessing has been withheld is like a parched plant destined to wither and die (cf. Ps 1; Jer17:5-8).²⁴

“no form or majesty” – this is the reaction to the Servant. It is not stated that the he was repulsive but that he lacked any impressive appearance which might have commended devotion to him.

- Westermann points out that one must keep in mind that the beauty of the person in OT is a concomitant of blessing (cf. Gen 39,6b on Joseph). Thus the Servant was a man without blessing. Also, beauty in OT is something that comes according to what happens to him. Thus the Servant’s lack of beauty means that no regard will be paid to him.²⁵

53:3

- The verse contains 4 half-verses.

“a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity” – this second half-verse shows that the Servant’s life without blessing and regard is assailed with blows. This is the main statement.

“infirmity” – *mak’oba* is the same word used in psalms of lamentations e.g. Ps 38:17; 69:27; Job 39:19; Lam 3:1.

“despised and rejected by othes” – repeated twice it shows the main effect of his sufferings and links to psalms of lamentations e.g. Ps 22:7; 119:22. The Hebrew term is *h^adal isim* which literally means “shunning men”. This emphasizes that the Servant’s suffering isolated him in the community i.e. he lost all positive significance for the community.

“hide their face” - in psalms of lamentations it is found in accompanying disgust at the sight of wretchedness and despisement e.g. Ps 22:5.

²² R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 173.

²³ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 261.

²⁴ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 173.

²⁵ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 261.

- Since the language used here is similar to that of psalms of lamentations one should not find here a particular description of the Servant's sufferings but it is the general way one brings the suffering to God.
- There is another feature in the description pointing to a description of the prophetic suffering which is described similar to the Psalter. This resembles that of Jeremiah: "I sat alone, because your hand was upon me" (Jer 15,17); "I have become a laughing stock all day; everyone mocks me" (Jer 20,7); "Terror is on every side! Denounce him!" (Jer 20:10)

53:4-6

- This confession of the we is a masterly piece of writing is expressed in a rhythm called forth by the changing pronouns (he.....we).
- The speakers recognize that the prophet's sufferings was an integral part of a ministry which brought Yahweh's healing to them.

"Surely" (v4a) – *aken* marks the beginning of a theme.

"borne our infirmities and carried our diseases" (v4a) – As Whybry suggests, taking this verse by itself, it seems that the speakers recognize that the Servant's suffering, though more intense than theirs, was fundamentally due to the same cause. Thus, they speak of his identification with them in their suffering: there is nothing to suggest that he suffered in their place.²⁶ Armando notes that this would be a rigorous interpretation because of what is said in v5.²⁷

"we accounted him" (v4b) - gives the explanation for the contempt that the Servant suffered: he was counted as being struck by God

"struck down by God and afflicted... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (v4,6) - it was God's will that he suffered all this since *God is perceived as the active agent*. The passive used softens the theological tension. This stands in line with the ancient's way of thinking e.g. Job's friends. This indicates that what occurred was not a tragedy for human history but it was part of the divine plan for the redemption of his people and the world.

- The whole people had deserved to suffer since all had gone astray (v6) but only the Servant had borne the full measure of suffering.

"our transgressions... our iniquities" (v5) – these are explicit terms: transgressions (*pesa'im*) and iniquities (*'awonot*), and they lead Armando to conclude that one is to speak of moral transgressions putting v4 in a new light

²⁶ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 175.

²⁷ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 620.

since the *cause of the blows* is seen in to have been the Servant was burdened with their sins.²⁸

“upon him was the punishment that made us whole” (v5) – he has also been burdened with their punishment.

“by his bruises we are healed” (v5) – this healing is the result for his accepting the burdens of sin and punishment. This healing consists in the removal of sin and punishment.

- Westermann²⁹ explains that such a substitution was not a novelty for Israel and surrounding cultures but what was new in this case was that suffering which gave power to be a substitute and to atone was found residing in a quite ordinary, feeble and inconsiderable person, whose suffering, disfiguring as it was, had brought him into contempt. What led the “we” to make such a discovery? To point to his subsequent exaltation is not the answer since that only originate from the divine utterance. However, one can point to what the “we” say in v6.
- *H.M. Orlinsky*, the chapter only asserts that this person also suffered on account of and along the people at large, the latter because of their own sins and the former because of his unpopular mission. The concept of vicarious suffering conflicts fundamentally with the idea of covenant. This legal contract assured both the guiltless and the wicked their proper due, and was grounded completely in a basic concept of *quid pro quo*.
- *R.N. Whybry* does not agree with vicarious suffering. He agrees with Orlinsky’s argument and he is also of the opinion that vicarious suffering is improbable because of the choice of the word translated *for*:

If the author had intended to imply such a transference of guilt, he would almost certainly have used the participle *b^e* (*bet pretii*), which denotes an exchange. The fact that he chose the participle *min* indicates that he regarded the Servant’s ill treatment as the *result* of the people’s sin and not as a *substitute* for the punishment which they had deserved.³⁰

- *Zimmerli* however points out that *b^e* (*bet pretii*) does occur in the text in the *for* of v5.

“All we... have gone astray... we have all turned to our way” (v6) - that they themselves had been changed. Previous, they counted the Servant as one struck by God but now they confess that they themselves had gone astray turning to their own way. In doing so they dissociate themselves from what all devout ancient people believed.

²⁸ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 620.

²⁹ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 263.

³⁰ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 175.

- Confession always has a reference to something that has been done and something that brought about the change. This must be connected with the exaltation of the Servant. But what exactly brought about this change is not stated in the text. Where the text remains silent, one must not differ.

“like sheep” (v6) – the simile of the straying sheep is found frequently in the OT (Jer 50:6; Ez 34:6) and for Armando this implies that moral transgressions are being spoken about in v4 and not mere punishments.³¹

“iniquity of us all” (v6) - // v5 ‘*awon* i.e. iniquity of all is being spoken about. There might be a reference here to the goat offering in Lev 16:21-22.

53:7-9

- The *report that was interrupted* by vv4-6 now continues in vv7-9.
- Comparing vv4-6 and vv7-9, one finds that the *former is suggestive of an illness* (in spite that v3 *h^oli* refers to suffering), whereas in the latter there is nothing suggestive of an illness but everything points to the *suffering at the expense of others*.
- This difference is extremely important in exegesis. Here we find the same 2 different aspects in the description of suffering as in the psalms of lamentation e.g. in Ps 22 the suffering is physical illness (laments in terms of the body) and persecution and hostility. This shows that Isa 53 depicts the suffering Servant as the typical sufferer in terms of the two basic modes of suffering given by tradition. There is therefore no reason for taking either as a literal description.

“He was oppressed and afflicted and yet he did not open his mouth” (v7a) – *nagas* (oppressed) implies the use of physical violence (North, cf. Ex 3,7; Isa58,3) and that is why it is meaningful that he kept his mouth shut.

- This is similar to *Jeremiah’s situation* which was a hostile situation from the part of men (cf. Jer11:19).
- There is also a similar *sentiment in a psalm of lamentation* (cf Ps 38,13-14).
- The verb ‘*ana* (afflicted) is also used in psalms of lamentations (cf. 116:10; 119:67,71,107).

“like a lamb... like a sheep” (v7b) – these *metaphors* suggest being taken into court of something of the kind.

- The *silence of the Servant* is remarkable and it is noted 3 times in v7 showing the willing submission of the innocent sufferer. However,

³¹ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 620.

commentators are divided over the question whether the phrase was deliberately repeated by the author for poetical effect or whether it is a duplication of the copyist i.e. an error.

- Armando notes that the Vulgate translates “oblatus est quia ipse voluit” implying a voluntary sacrifice which is clearly implied in the Hebrew text.³²

“by a perversion of justice he was taken away” (v8a) – ‘oser speaks of an arrest, imprisonment

- *mispāt* (justice) could be taken to mean also trial
- *luqqah* (taken away) is generally understood as a reference to his violent and sudden death, but the less likely idea of being “released by death” has been occasionally suggested. Whybry suggests that there is no reason supposed that he died. It can be that he was taken away into prison.³³
- North: “he was carried off from prison and judgement” and thus linking it to v7b.
- Armando notes that v8 is *crux interpretum* since every word seems to be exegetically controversial.³⁴ Westermann explains that in whatever way they are taken, the words speak of violent action of the Servant in the context of a court law.³⁵

“Who could have imagined his future” (v8b) – the exact meaning of *doro* (future) is uncertain. It can express the time of a generation, or a circle of one’s contemporaries. North takes it to mean “lot” or “state” which fits in considerably better. But it is clear that its general sense is that no one concerned about him and hence the Servant is all alone in this suffering.

- v8b-9 speak of the Servant’s death and burial. The text does not make it clear whether he died of disgraceful disease, or by violence, or by normal condemnation and execution (Mowinckel).

“cut off from the land of the living” (v8b) – is sometimes taken to be a metaphor and does not necessarily indicate death since in OT both life and death are seen as qualities of existence and that the line separating them is fluid. He the Servant only risks death or was exiled. But the reference to the grave (v9) makes death clear.

“stricken for the transgression of my people” (v8b) – the suffering and the death constitute one single thing i.e. he both suffers and dies for the transgressions of the people. It was the death of the guiltless i.e. a violent

³² ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 621.

³³ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 177.

³⁴ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 621.

³⁵ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 265.

death not due to a guilt incurred by himself, and it was a death which the Servant suffered because of the sins of those who now report it. This seems to be the general sense from the text as a whole since its Hebrew is problematic.

- *'ammi* (my people) shows a change of person from 3rd pers. pl. to 1st pers. sing. leading some to think that the prophet is speaking in his name. Qumran texts adapted it to “his people”.

“they made” (v9) – *yitten* here has an impersonal sense and so Whybry suggests that a better translation would be “assigned”.³⁶

“his grave with the wicked” (v9) – shame was part of the Servant’s suffering attached also to his death according to Westermann. This was a terrible fate of a Jew. He was buried with the wicked since Rabbis thought that the presence of a cadaver of a criminal profaned the tombs. The contrast between the innocence of the Servant and the fact that he was seen as a criminal is seen also here.

- This shows that the report has an individual, one single man, in view. Also, this one had actually died and been buried. Thus, from the narrator’s point of view, the death is something of the past. This shows that up to the last moment - the grave itself – the Servant’s life gave absolutely no indication at all at the positive significance which was later attached to it.
- Whybry, however, points out that in the text, in fact, it is not stated that the Servant died. One of the features of the descriptions of past sufferings in the psalms of lamentations is that the worshipper’s enemies had gleefully supposed him to be at the point of death.³⁷

“with the rich” (v9) – *'asir* (rich man) provides a difficulty in the linking of the wicked with the rich in a burial site. It is highly improbable that the burial places of the rich and criminal would have been identical. This hardly offers any natural parallel in Israel and thus some expand its semantic range to denote “rich through extortion”.

- It has also been suggested that *'asir* is unconnected with the meaning “rich” but connected to an Arabic word meaning “refuse”.

53:10-11a

- This is the report about the deliverance. The difference between this and the declarative psalms of praise (thanksgiving psalms) is that the one who reports the deliverance is not the man himself. This is because the sufferings of the Servant accompanied him his whole life to the grave.

³⁶ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 177.

³⁷ R.N. WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 178.

Thus the deliverance is something that exceeds his lifetime and hence it has to be declared by others.

“yet” (v10a) - *waw* in psalms of lamentations marks a turning point in the lament.

“it was the will of the Lord” (v10a) – this shows that Yahweh was along the Servant’s side (cf. vv4,6) and after the Servant’s death He intervened by reviving him or healing him. But how? This is seen in 10b.

“to crush him with pain” (v10a) – the verb *hlh* conveys the sense of “made sick” or render weak”, and forms with its parallels a continuing lament of the suffering innocent in the Psalter (cf. Ps35:13;41:4;77:16). Yet one should not seek to specify the sickness to precisely as Duhm does as if leprosy was being intended here. Childs is of the opinion that much like the idiom of the Psalter, physical and spiritual suffering are combined without carefully defined boundaries.³⁸

“when” (v10a) – the Heb has “if” (*im*) and not “when” but this conditional clause is difficult to reconcile with the earlier statements that the Servant’s suffering is past.

“offering for sin” (v10a) – *‘asam* (guilt offering). This term turns out to be problematic because of its exegetical use. It occurs most frequently in ritual prescriptions of Lev 5:6-25 (the nature of the misdeed is described and the procedure for atonement by means of a guilt offering is stipulated);6:10;7:1-2,5-7,37;14:12ff;19:21-22 and Num 6:12;18:9, in the so called Priestly source within the Pentateuch. It is also found in Eze 40:39;42:13;44:29;46:20).

- Some hold that the cultic concept of Numbers could be transferred to Isaiah and thus seeing the Servant’s suffering vicarious and priestly but the analogy between the slain animal and the suffering Servant is far from obvious. Besides, the ritual of sprinkling blood on the altar is without parallel. Also, there is no contextual preparation in Isa 53.
- B. Janowski observes that the concept of *‘asam* did not originally stem from the cult (cf. Gen 26:10;1 Sam 6:3-4,8,17) but rather from a secular situation in which compensation for a misdeed was demanded. Hence the suffering Servant did not ritually obliterate the sin of Israel (there is no parallel to the scapegoat) but rather the terminology is that of “bore” (*ns*) and carried (*sbl*). This is the sense of the Servant’s vicarious role in carrying the sins of the nations (our sins)
- However, the text shows that God himself took the imitative in accepting the Servant’s life as the means of Israel’s forgiveness. When seen in the light of the unfolding drama of God’s plan to redeem Israel in Isa 40-55, the vicarious role of the Servant lies at the very heart of the prophetic message

³⁸ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 417.

“through his knowledge” (v11a) – many retain that the knowledge of the Servant has as its object the success of his suffering mission but Armando suggests that it would be better to assume that this knowledge regards the secrets of God in which the Servant participated because he was a docile instrument in the hands of God.

“see his offspring... prolong his days... see light... find satisfaction” (vv10b-11a) – these concepts indicating the Servant’s exaltation are general and taken from tradition: a reversal of fortune. Overall they mean to have a happy and satisfied life. Light indicates well-being and peace (Isa 9,1).

- **“See his offspring”** plays a major role in Isa 56-66.
- Mowinckel says that this is his resurrection from the death.
- But Sawyer³⁹ and Westermann⁴⁰ insists that the text does not specify this. The concept used for the exaltation of the Servant are taken from tradition and none is appropriate to what took place here. Where the text is silent exegesis should not step forward. Thus what the exaltation was it cannot be ascertained.
- In addition, resurrection is judged to be unlikely since such a concept entered Israel’s culture only in the late Hellenistic period.
- Besides, as North points out, one should bear in mind that v10 in Heb is seriously corrupt, and nothing so definite as the resurrection or of a future raising up is definitive.⁴¹

53:11b-12

- This is the conclusion of the divine utterance and thus the continuation of 53:13.
- The introductory part of the song had proclaimed that after the humiliation the Servant would be exalted. 53:11b-12 join directly in this.

“The righteous one my Servant” (v11b) – according the Westermann, the Hebrew rules out such an arrangement of words. This has the meaning of my Servant will stand as righteous before the many because he bore their sins.

“ shall make many righteous” (v11b) - the effect before the “many” is now no longer one of astonishment but of the Servant being seen as righteous. The words then express God’s justification of the Servant previously condemned in

³⁹ JOHN F.A. SAWYER, *Pophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, Oxford 1987, 95.

⁴⁰ CLAUD WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 267.

⁴¹ CHRISTOPHER R. NORTH, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, London 1948, 147.

shame, and his declaring of him as righteous. God rehabilitates the Servant and restores his honour.⁴²

“many” - Armando shows that *rabbim* indicates no limitations i.e. beyond the people of Israel.⁴³

➤ However, Childs would translate this verse as meaning that through the Servant the many will be accounted righteous because he bears their sins.⁴⁴

“I will allot him” (v12a) – the rehabilitation is followed by the reparation made to him which is expressed in general terms taken from tradition meaning that the one who had been deprived from all the good things of life is now to receive them in abundance.

“because he poured out himself to death” (v12b) – the reason for the restoration. God also utters a final endorsement on the Servant’s work. his suffering and death are taken as a single act/process point to a death that is one of shame.

➤ It could also be translated: “because he poured out his blood (*nepes*) to death”. this would suggest a sacrifice of expiation, corresponding to the sacrificial term *‘asam* (guilt offering) in v10. Thus, this points to a sacrificial death. This does not mean human sacrifice that was already opposed by Jeremiah.

➤ In the divine utterance vicarious suffering (suffered for or instead of another) is mentioned 5 times.

➤ *Westermann* says that since the suffering and death of the Servant is absolutely once for all in its character, the same holds true of the expiatory sacrifice which he offered and thus takes place of the recurrent expiatory sacrifice and abolishes it. In the text it is not carried to its logical conclusions as the Epistle to the Hebrews indicate.

“He was numbered with transgressors” (v12b) – this indicates the Servant’s active part in what happened. He offered no resistance to be numbered with transgressors, he actually accepted it.

“yet” (v12c) – this presupposes something which is left unsaid i.e. “in reality he was not a transgressor”.

“bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (v12c) – sum up the meaning of the Servant’s work. The miraculous thing is that the suffering of an ordinary man without priestly status makes it possible for him to take the sins of others on himself and to avert them from its punishment. This is subsumed under the concept of intercession. The Servant did not make

⁴² CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 267.

⁴³ ROLLA ARMANDO, *op. cit.*, 622.

⁴⁴ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 419-20.

prayers of intercession but with his life (suffering and death) he took their place and underwent their punishment.

8. THE SUFFERING SERVANT'S IDENTITY

Childs says that this is the most contested chapter of the OT.⁴⁵

1. Historical individual theories

The strength of the theories lie in the fact that the character and fortunes of the Servant are so vividly drawn that we can only think of a portrait from life. But on this principle one has to say that every convincing character of drama is taken from actual life. The author must have been an excellent poet and artist and thus he made characters convincingly clear.

1.1 Theories which identify the Servant with some individual name

Fifteen names have been suggested:

1. Isaiah
2. Uzziah
3. Hezekiah
4. Josiah
5. Jeremiah
6. Ezekiel
7. Job
8. Moses
9. Jehoiachim
10. Cyrus
11. Sheshbazzar
12. Zerubbabel
13. Meshullam
14. Nehemiah
15. Eleazar

According to John D. W. Watts, Zerubbabel is the most interesting one since through him Israel comes back from the exile and this was the work of the Servant (49:6).⁴⁶

1.2 The Historico-Messianic theory

This was first proposed by Kittel and elaborated by Rudolph and supported by Oesterly. It states that the Servant was an anonymous contemporary of

⁴⁵ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 410.

⁴⁶ JOHN D. W. WATTS, *Isaiah 34-66*, in *World Biblical Commentary Vol. 25*, Texas 1987, 222-233.

Deutero-Isaiah, to whom the prophet looked upon as the promised Messiah. But if so, Volz suggests, the description would have been more concrete and clearer and if he was so great would it have been likely that he would have been remained unknown? Besides, Rudolph's interpretation lays great stress on political elements in the person and work of the Servant which are only secondary in the text.

1.3 The autobiographical theory

Whereas as the identification of the Servant with Dt-Is might be accepted when it comes to the fourth song this idea goes flat since scholars have shown the Dt-Is wrote the first 3 songs but the fourth one was written by his disciples who thought of him to be a very exceptional person. Mowinkel suggested this in 1921 but abandoned it in 1931.

The autobiographical theory raises difficulties since the mission of Dt-Is is not that of the Servant. Dt-Is is the least autobiographical in his writings and his mission is to address Jerusalem. It should be surprising that the he should become so personal in the songs.

2. Mythological interpretation

Because of close verbal parallels between the Songs and mythological texts of **Tammuz**, some consider the Servant to be mythological. But North says that the Servant is a soteriological figure whilst nature gods of Tammuz are not.

Besides, North insists that in OT whenever mythological elements are taken into consideration they are only done to embellish descriptions of Yahweh's redeeming act in history, especially Exodus. Thus the emphasis was upon the concrete and historical.⁴⁷

3. Collective interpretation

- These interpretations have in common that **the Servant is understood to be not an individual person but the personification of a group: Israel**. The strength of the collective interpretation lies in the fact that it insists that no single individual could have produced such consternation among the nations as the Servant is said to have done.
- **Israel is called the Servant of Yahweh several times in Dt-Is (Isa 42:3)**. But if, as some claim, the Servant Songs are detached from Dt-Is this argument loses much of its force.
- These interpretations identify the Servant with Israel, especially to a minority in it: **those exiled to Babylon**. They rest on the **Semitic mentality that presents the community as if it was a single person**. Supporting this interpretation there is Isa 49:3 claiming: "You are my

⁴⁷ CHRISTOPHER R. NORTH, *op. cit.*, 201.

Servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified”. However this raises questions.

1. “Israel” is absent in one of the MSS of the LXX but present in the new Isaiah MS from the Dead sea.
 2. Dt-Is never uses “Israel” except in // to Jacob.
 3. The Servant (*‘ebed*) is never given a name.
 4. In 49:5, the Servant is given a mission to Israel itself. This is difficult to be understood in the light of the 1st pers. sing. used in 49:1-6.
- For these reasons Westermann concludes that **“Israel” was a later interpolation as an early attempt to interpret the Servant to be a collective.**⁴⁸ However in recent times, Lohfink, has shown that there are no textual reasons for its omission.
- Those who accept that it was not a later interpolation suggest that “Israel” is taken to be **an expression of an Ideal Israel**, distinct from the historical one, who, in this context, itself stands in need of salvation.
- Also, **the character of the Servant and the character of Israel are different**, also loses its force. The differences are:
1. **Israel** emerges as a *demoralized and hopeless* (40:27;41:1-13;44:2), **the Servant** is *full of confidence in God* even in difficult moments (49:4;50:5-9).
 2. **Israel** is depicted to be *guilty, sinner and obstinate* (40:2,42:19-20;43:24-28) **the Servant** is *innocent* (42:1-4;50:4-6;53:9).
 3. **Israel** is *slave of his enemies and suffers because of his sins* (42:18-25); **Servant** is *the liberator* (49:6) *and suffers for the sins of others* (53:4-6,11-12).
- Other interpretations would be those of E.J. Kissane assigning **the first 2 poems to Israel, the third to the prophet and the fourth to the Messiah.** H.H. Rowley⁴⁹ assigns the first 3 to Israel and the fourth to the Messiah.
- Blenkinsopp says that **the Servant is not historical Israel but the core of genuine Israelites, who are the prophets and the teachers, and who suffer for the whole Israel.** i.e. the pious devout group which in Third Isaiah is set against the faithless Israel.⁵⁰
- Others have suggested that the Servant is **an idealized Israel who is aware of its mission and dedicated to it.** This would be related to the future and there is no need to relate whatever is said of him to history. The

⁴⁸ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 209.

⁴⁹ H.H. ROWLEY, *The Servant of the Lord and other Essays of the Old Testament*, London 1952, 51-57.

⁵⁰ JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Kentucky 1996, 192.

vision of such an Israel could easily arise from 42:21-29 and 45:14-25 in which Israel is the witness to the sole divinity of Yahweh and the means through which the nations recognize Him. But should this Israel of the future suffer and die, as the fourth Song suggests, when Israel is precisely a witness because it is an object of salvation?

- Because of these considerations some contemporary scholars have moved away from collective interpretations.

4. Messianic interpretation

Some identify the Servant with **the Messiah which in the OT meant the descendant of David who re-establishes the Davidic Kingdom and dynasty** as appears in Isa 9:1-6;11:1-9. The king as a saviour figure is frequent in OT.

But the Servant exhibits no clearly royal trait except for the proclamation of “judgement” and “law” (Isa 42:1-4) and here these mean mediation of revelation.

The **Servant is not the same figure of the Messiah but a parallel to it** which, as it stands, cannot be reconciled to the messianic king.

A higher **synthesis between the two figures of Servant and Messiah (such as in Christ) was not in the vision of OT prophets**. It seems that each figure reflects the period of the Israelite history in which arose: the king was the saviour figure under the monarchy which could not be conceived of the exilic and post-exilic period unless he was another David or an eschatological figure i.e. some Israelites perceived another way of Salvation other than the messianic king.

The **Dead Sea Scrolls** never quote from the fourth song but they presuppose a suffering messianic community before the great day of the Lord.

The fundamental objection to the traditional Messianic interpretations is that **it is wedded to a too mechanical doctrine of inspiration** and what the prophet writes has no relevance to the circumstances of his own time.

5. Corporate Personality Theories⁵¹

There exists in the text an oscillation between colectivity of Israel and an individual future Israelite. Thus, C.R. North calls for a theory that tries to **combine many of the above mentioned features**. Corporate personality is easily identified in OT. Individuals who were heads and representative of groups, in their own characteristics and experiences represent such the group too e.g. patriarchs – Jacob-Israel was in a way Israel.

⁵¹ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *op. cit.*, LII-LV.

The Servant is also Israel because in his person he recapitulates the gifts and the mission of Israel. He is a victor whose victory is achieved in a different way than other kings do. He is the fullness of Israel whilst incorporating the dominant features of Israel's past since like Moses he is the witness of the divinity of Yahweh. He is the spokesman of divine revelation. All this is the conception of Israel in Dt-Is which has no future in the world of politics and war since its place will be reached through other means.

The Servant is clearly not the king-messiah; his mission is to be conceived in this way and the images are not the same. It could be that the prophet meant to replace the king-messiah but this is not explicit, only hinted. The Servant remains an individual figure, but an ideal who reflects the genuine character of all Israel.

The corporate personality does not explain the fourth song in which vicarious suffering is alluded to, together with the idea of resurrection. The revelation of the Servant is that Salvation comes through suffering. Such a revelation, alien to the Jewish tradition, must have been proposed after reflection on the historic experience of Israel.

Israel had been the object of judgement and a remnant had survived the judgement not for its own sake but as a witness of the righteousness of Yahweh (Dt-Is). Had Israel not been preserved through judgement, Yahweh would have no witness and righteousness could not be proclaimed to the nations. Thus, Israel through its suffering had become a medium of salvation through the nations.

This experience does not mean that it has been completed since the process of judgement is not complete. More suffering must be endured before salvation is fully achieved; but an innocent one can sustain the judgement that will save others. The innocent must suffer so that the guilty may repent and escape judgement. The Servant has the mission of proclaiming this and of being the victim of judgement.

If the Servant is conceived as an ideal figure, the victory and resurrection need not be taken as anything else but also ideal.

The Servant belongs to the future, for he is what Israel must become. He belongs to the past for his character is formed by reflection on Israel's history and its leaders. He embodies the ministry of:

- Abraham: mediator of blessings on nations
- Moses: forging a new covenant
- Jeremiah: a suffering prayerful servant

The Servant is not a future individual that will come. The Servant songs are not "predictions" of the future in the simple case. They are, rather, insights into the future, into the ways of God with man: a projection of how judgement and salvation shall be realized. For the community to whom the Songs were addressed, they are a challenge to the commitment.

9. THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Childs warns that *Christian interpreters should be warned not to read in, say, Anselm's highly developed, scholastic theology of the atonement, but rather to closely follow the exact terminology of chapter 53.*⁵²

During most of the history of the Christian church's interpretation of Is 53, it was assumed that the Suffering Servant was a messianic prophecy predicting the future passion of Jesus even so because in the OT by itself it is difficult to understand the expiation of sin and justification of humanity as described through the suffering Servant.

However with the rise of the modern historical-critical approach to the OT the position that gained the widest acceptance was that the description of the suffering Servant was a figure historically tied to the experience of Israel in the Babylonian exile.

In fact the Servant is described in a way that gives him prophetic and kingly features. he was the chosen one of God (42:1,6) like other kings that were called in the OT. He is also destined to be highly honoured by the kings of the nations (52:15). He is the one to diffuse the true religion (42:1). The Songs seem to be inspired from the figures of Moses and Jeremiah.

Indeed, Childs insists that both the Servant's response to his prophetic call (49:1-6) and the confession of a repentant community (53:1-11a) reflect actual events within the life of historical Israel.⁵³

Thus Isa 53 cannot be interpreted either as simply a future prophecy or as a timeless metaphor of the suffering nation Israel.

Because of this, commentators like Whybry have assigned limited theological importance to the text because they think that the Christian Church used this text as a vehicle for developing its Christology by means of an imaginative construal without warrant from the OT witness itself.

Childs reacts by saying that the canonical shape of the book of Isaiah shows a suffering Servant figure who was not simply viewed as a figure of the past, but assigned a central and a continuing theological role in relation to the life of the redeemed community of Israel. Thus, there was a coercion exerted by the biblical text itself, as authoritative scripture, that exerted pressure on the early church in its struggle to understand the suffering and death of Jesus.

The theological category used for its interpretation was not primarily that of prophecy and fulfilment. Rather, an analogy was drawn between the

⁵² BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 415.

⁵³ BREVARD S. CHILDS, *op. cit.*, 422.

redemptive activity of the Isaianic Servant and the passion and death of Jesus Christ i.e. it is the theological reality that is the same. Hence, the suffering Servant is linked dogmatically to Jesus Christ primarily in terms of its theological reality and is not simply a future promise of the OT awaiting its NT fulfilment.

For this reason, it is significant to observe that in Acts 8, when the eunuch asked about the identity of the Isaianic Servant, Philip did not simply identify him with Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, beginning with scriptures, he preached to him the good news of Jesus Christ.

The suffering Servant retains its theological significance within the Christian canon because it is inextricably theologically linked with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is and always has been the ground of God's salvation of Israel and the world.

The relation of Is 53 to the New Testament

Conservative biblical scholars like J. Jeremias, H.W. Wolff, P. Stuhlmacher and M. Hengel say that Jesus himself consciously shaped his ministry according to the Servant figure in Isa 53, with whose mission he identified. When the early church continued to expand this relationship theologically, it did so in the basis of Jesus' own self-understanding as the suffering Servant. This position has sought to demonstrate historically that the concept of the Servant's vicarious suffering was already present in pre-Christian Judaism.

Liberal scholars like R. Buttmann, E. Kasemann, and M. Hooker have pointed out how seldom are there explicit references to Isa 53 found in the Synoptics, and when possible allusions occur they are vague and related to a general OT milieu rather than a specific text. The concept of a suffering Servant was, at best, late Hellenistic Christianity and in no way related to the historical Jesus' self-understanding.

Childs insists that they fail in making the distinction between the kerygmatic witness in the Gospels and a historical-critical reconstruction. Also, theologically speaking it is a false dichotomy that plays "the mind of Jesus" over against scriptural witness.

Childs notes that both sides seek to ground their position on a historical-critical reconstruction. One side sees the historical force moving from Isa 53 in the direction of NT. The other sees the NT's understanding as primary and only secondarily being retrojected back into OT. But this fails to understand the dynamic within the development of canonical literature. The OT played a decisive force in shaping NT but NT radically interpreted OT. The use of Isa 53 in NT tradition appears in some early levels and hence it is not of late Hellenistic elaboration.

In the NT the Servant and the messiah are identified in the person of Jesus. In Lk 22:37, Jesus applies 52:12 to his imminent passion: *For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me, "And he was reckoned with transgressors";*

for what is written about me has its fulfilment". Thus, Karl Hermann Schelkle considers Jesus to be the first one to interpret his passion with reference to Isa 53.⁵⁴

In Acts 8:32-35 Philip catechises the Eunuch taking the opportunity when the latter reads Is 53:7-8.

Other direct references concerning the Suffering Servant Song are:

- Rom 15:21 (52:15)
- Jn 12:38 (53:1)
- Rom 10:16 (53:1)
- Mt 8:17 (53:4) depicts the healings of man.
- Mt 12:18-21 (42:1-4) depicts Christ's humility.

One must note that when it is spoken of Jesus' expiatory sacrifice there are no explicit references to the Suffering Servant Song.

The affirmation that Jesus' assumed the nature of a Servant (Phil 2:7) and as the son of man he is destined to suffer and be despised (Mk 9:12) is inspired from the Suffering Servant.

"Many" in the formula of the Eucharist might be influenced from this pericope (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:23-25).

Jesus gave himself as ransom (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:15; 1 Tim 2:6).

It is written that the Son of Man must suffer (Mk 9:12).

He died for our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Pt 2:21-25).

Expiation (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10).

Jesus lays down his life (Jn 10:11,15,17).

Jesus (Lk 2:31-32) and his followers in the mission of salvation (Acts 13:47) are called light for the nations which goes back to 49:6.

Peter refers to Jesus as *pais theiou* and this is the Greek translation of 'ebed.

J. Jeremais thinks that "servant" has been replaced by "lamb" in Jn 1:29,36.

The conception of the atoning and redeeming death in NT is a development on the idea of the Servant.

In Mark, Jesus is depicted as the suffering Servant.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ KARL HERMANN SCHEKLE, *Theology of the New Testament Vol. 2: Salvation History – Revelation*, Minnesota, 1973, 91.

⁵⁵ GRAHAM N. STANTON, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford 1989, 221-4.

Church Fathers like Clement of Rome (Letter to the Corinthians) and Justin (Dialogue with Trifo) make direct references of Is 53 to Jesus.

Westermann, points out that the correspondence between this pericope and the Church's confession as it is given in the Apostle's creed – born, suffered, died and it was buried. This similarity in structure (the Creed is, too, the confession of man who have been given salvation) is far more important than quotations from this pericope in the NT.⁵⁶

⁵⁷

J.L. McKenzie suggests that the identity of the Servant and Israel is paralleled by the identity of Jesus and the Church. Jesus is the Servant who brings Israel to fullness; He is the true and perfect corporate personality, one with the Church which is his body.

also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

10. SPIRITUAL - PASTORAL INSIGHTS

Sacred Scripture is a great book about suffering.⁵⁸ Hence, a spirituality of suffering could be found in it.

Uniting our sufferings with Christ

In the Letter to the Colossians we read the words which constitute as it were the final stage of the spiritual journey in relation to suffering: "**Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church**". And in another Letter he asks his readers: "**Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?**".

In the Paschal Mystery Christ began **the union with man in the community of the Church as the body of Christ**. In this Body, Christ wishes to be united with every individual, and in a special way he is united with those who suffer. The words quoted above from the Letter to the Colossians bear witness to the exceptional nature of this union. For, *whoever suffers in union with Christ*— just as the Apostle Paul bears his "tribulations" in union with Christ— not only receives from Christ that strength already referred to but also "completes" by his suffering "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions".

This evangelical outlook especially highlights the truth concerning **the creative character of suffering**. The sufferings of Christ created the good of the world's redemption. This good in itself is inexhaustible and infinite. No man can add anything to it. But at the same time, in the mystery of the Church

⁵⁶ CLAUD WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 257.

⁵⁷ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London 1966, 794.

⁵⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Vatican 1984, n. 6.

as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings—in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent *he in his own way completes* the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world.

Does this mean that the Redemption achieved by Christ is not complete?

No. It only means that the **Redemption, accomplished through satisfactory love, remains always open to all love expressed in human suffering.** In this dimension—the dimension of love—the Redemption which has already been completely accomplished is, in a certain sense, constantly being accomplished. Christ achieved the Redemption completely and to the very limits but at the same time he did not bring it to a close. In this redemptive suffering, through which the Redemption of the world was accomplished, Christ opened himself from the beginning to every human suffering and constantly does so. Yes, it seems to be part *of the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering* that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.

The Church, as the Body of Christ, completes that suffering just as the Church completes the redemptive work of Christ. The mystery of the Church—that body which completes in itself also Christ's crucified and risen body—indicates at the same time the space or context in which human sufferings complete the sufferings of Christ. Only within this radius and dimension of the Church as the Body of Christ, which continually develops in space and time, can one think and speak of "what is lacking" in the sufferings of Christ. The Apostle, in fact, makes this clear when he writes of "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church"⁵⁹

⁵⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Salvifici Doloris*, Vatican 1984, n. 24.

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