

# ISAIAH

## ISAIAH 52:13-53:12, THE SUFFERING SERVANT, PART 2

One other interpretation that should be discussed concerning the identity of the Suffering Servant concerns the believing Remnant. This idea fails for the same reason the notion that Israel is the Suffering Servant fails. Mere human beings, plural at that, cannot be the unblemished, spotless sacrifice that is required for presentation to God as a sacrificial offering even though they are the believing Jewish Remnant. The believing Remnant is not exalted (Is. 52:13), they will not sprinkle many nations (Is. 52:15), they will not atone for the sins of all Israel (Is. 53:5), and they will not justify the many (Is. 53:11). Only the Suffering Servant, an individual, can do those things, and because Isaiah clearly identifies an individual as the Suffering Servant, the believing Remnant cannot be identified with Him.

As you know, I have been quite adamant in declaring that the Babylonian conquest of Judah and Jerusalem and the subsequent exile in Babylon culminating in the freedom to return to Israel and Jerusalem is a type of the end times Tribulation conquest and restoration of national Israel. This typology culminates with the revelation of the Suffering Servant.

"In keeping with other prophetic voices, Isaiah saw the future glory of Israel and the work of the Messiah in the context of the end of the exile, speaking of a new beginning for Israel, a new creation, a new exodus, and a time when all the world will see the glory of the Lord. The events predicted here are thus far greater than the return of about 45,000 Jews from Babylon in the sixth century BC. Rather, in these passages in Isaiah, the exile also serves as a symbol of the spiritual bondage of the Jewish people, while the return from exile serves as a figure of their redemption. These prophecies of redemption culminate in Isa 52:13-53:12, which leads to the exuberant cries that open up chap. 54, and some have suggested that, with the new exodus, there is a new Moses, namely the Servant of Isa 53" [Michael L. Brown, "Isaiah 52:13-53:12: The Substitution of the Servant of the Lord" in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, gen. ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum, 962].

Through Moses, Yahweh foretold of a future prophet who would be raised up as a prophet just like Moses. It is not inconceivable, in fact, it is preferable, even required, to view the Suffering Servant as the ultimate fulfillment of the "prophet like me" Moses spoke of in Deuteronomy 18. Both the Lord and the apostles confirmed that position during and right after the First Advent when they affirmed that it was the Lord who died on the cross. They related His death to elements of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This also points to the fact that the Suffering Servant was an individual and not the nation Israel.

Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 <sup>15</sup>"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.... <sup>18</sup>I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

“The ultimate Prophet like Moses is Jesus Christ—the One who spoke God’s words and who provides deliverance for His people. Not even Joshua could be compared to Moses, for since Moses ‘no prophet has risen in Israel like’ him ([Dt.] 34:10) with such power before men and intimacy with God. However distinguished a future prophet’s role might be in Israel, none would be like Moses until the Mediator of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ, came” [Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 296-297].

The New Covenant was ratified by means of the shed blood of Christ Jesus on the cross the Suffering Servant died on. He died for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26:28 <sup>28</sup>for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.

John 1:29 <sup>29</sup>The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Acts 3:20–23, 26 <sup>20</sup>and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, <sup>21</sup>whom heaven must receive until *the* period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. <sup>22</sup>“Moses said, ‘THE LORD GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN; TO HIM YOU SHALL GIVE HEED to everything He says to you. <sup>23</sup>’And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ ... <sup>26</sup>“For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

There seems to be numerous misunderstandings—and even outright falsehoods—concerning this Suffering Servant Song that, intended or not, deny the inspiration of the Scriptures as well as the literal truth concerning the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, revealed through the prophet Isaiah.

Some theologians try to apply this Suffering Servant song to the exiles in Babylon which seems very unbiblical, and even silly, given the context of the section. For example, “... the world of the servant in Isaiah 40-55 is that of the confused exiles of Judah who were trying to figure out God’s plans in light of the failed Zion/David theologies of the past. He [Hanson] views the servant as God’s new way of providing relief from their sins and infirmities (53:4) because the servant will remove them, thus giving God’s people a new message to declare to the nations” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 430, n. 298, summarizing P. D. Hanson, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, 9-22]. The policies of the past did not fail; the people failed to live up to their responsibilities under the Mosaic Covenant and therefore fell under the cursing promises of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. God’s plan has not failed; it may be postponed, but it has not failed, and it will be fulfilled at some point in the future. The Israelites did not return to Israel from Babylon with a new message for the nations; they just wanted to survive!

Other Christian theologians believe it is about the nation which will be “exalted after enduring the degrading conditions in exile, but he [Orlinsky] believes that the discussion in chap. 53 relates to ‘the prophet himself Second Isaiah’” [Gary V. Smith, *The New*

*American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 430, summarizing H. M. Orlinsky, "The So-Called 'Suffering Servant' in Isaiah 53," in *Interpreting the Prophetic Tradition*, 227-273]. Several times, it has been mentioned in this class, that the conditions in Babylon were not that degrading and were, in fact, so good that most of the Jews stayed there once they were free to return to Israel. This theologian also presents the incorrect theory that more than one man wrote the book of Isaiah. It should also be obvious as we go through this that the prophet's death could not accomplish anything even remotely similar to that which the Suffering Servant's death accomplished. Neither the nation nor the prophet could die for the iniquities of the Israelites (Is. 53:4-6). Notice also the unbelieving sarcasm uttered by this theologian in the title of his chapter in the book where he refers to the "so-called Suffering Servant."

Orlinsky also said that Christianity reads back into the Suffering Servant song the concept of the substitutionary sacrifice. "H. M. Orlinsky maintains that if it were not for the vicarious element in Christian theology (derived from Hellenism according to him), no one would have ever thought of seeing anything substitutionary in this passage" [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Chapters 40-66*, 377, n. 71 summarizing "The So-called 'Servant of the Lord' and 'Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah,'" in Orlinsky and N. Snaith, *Studies in the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah*, 1-133]. Orlinsky was Jewish; therefore, it is understandable that he did not believe anything in the New Testament, hence the denigration of Christian theology in the above quote, but he was widely regarded as one of the world's foremost experts on the Hebrew Scriptures. I am at a loss to understand how a Jewish Bible scholar cannot fathom the substitutionary or vicarious sacrificial elements of the Suffering Servant song particularly in view of the concept of the scapegoat in connection with the Day of Atonement. This seems to be quite obvious apart from any New Testament revelation concerning the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ Jesus. In the song itself, it is revealed that "our griefs He Himself bore and our sorrows He carried" (Is. 53:4), and "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him" (Is. 53:5). Whether or not you believe Jesus is the Suffering Servant and even if you believe Israel is the one, you cannot plausibly deny the fact of substitutionary sacrifice in the song.

Others "hypothesize a political setting in which the prophet (the servant) was in Babylonian exile supporting the liberation of the exiles by the Persian king Cyrus. Since his political talk was not acceptable to the Babylonian leadership or the exiled Jews who were politically pro-Babylonian, the prophet (the servant) was arrested and imprisoned, then later freed" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 430, summarizing N. Grotzwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, 499-500, and J. W. Miller "Prophetic Conflict in Second Isaiah: The Servant Songs in the Light of Their Context," *Wort, Gebot, Glaube: Beitrage zur Theologie des Alten Testament*, 83-85]. This man is apparently a German higher critic. Of course, the prophet Isaiah was not in Babylon during the exile because it did not happen during his lifetime. These men believe another so-called "Isaiah" wrote the Suffering Servant song much later. The Suffering Servant is killed during His ordeal (Is. 53:8-9); He was never freed as these men assert that He was.

Another theologian "proposed a completely different setting by suggesting that Isaiah 53 should be interpreted in terms of the Adonis-Tammuz cult, which featured a dying and

rising god" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 430-431, summarizing H. Gunkel]. I find it hard to believe that any Christian theologian actually came up with this proposal. The very idea that Isaiah, a prophet of the one true God, should be interpreted according to pagan mythological theology is absurd. If nothing else, there was no sacrificial substitutionary death in that pagan myth which does not fit the biblical context of a sacrifice.

"... the servant (a second Moses figure) appears at a heavenly judicial court scene where his life is judged.... [He] compares this to the heavenly dispute over the body of Moses in the *Assumption of Moses* or the trials of Joshua in Zech 4 or Job 1-2" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 431, n. 303 summarizing K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 398].

I went through all this to show you the viewpoints various theologians have of this Suffering Servant song, but I also went through it to show you how dangerous some of these theologians can be. I believe that every one of the men quoted above have doctoral degrees in various subject areas including theology and/or Hebrew, yet they come up with some of the most unbelieving interpretations of Scripture imaginable. This is a warning; do not be deceived by impressive credentials. If the work you are studying is written by a theologian who does not begin his studies with the presupposition that the Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God, then their commentary on the text is quite suspect and should not be believed apart from some serious study on the Bible student's part that either verifies the truth of their theology or the nature of the falsehoods it is conveying. Furthermore, if they deny the supernatural power of God to know the future, they cannot properly recognize, much less exegete, prophetic texts, because they must deny that they are, in fact, dealing with the future. If they are replacement theologians, they cannot possibly understand God's plan for history and Israel's part in it. Most of the comments we reviewed above are very suspect. Being very knowledgeable in the languages does not, in and of itself, guarantee that the text is being properly exegeted and interpreted. When theological priority over the text is evident, then the theologically influenced commentary must be discarded as erroneous, even false. That is the troubling situation revealed here in these various commentaries on the Suffering Servant song.

Clearly, the Suffering Servant song is the culmination of the previous Servant songs that were about an individual rather than the nation. Some were also about Israel, God's servant nation, but context determines whether the nation or an individual is the subject. In Isaiah 49:1-13, the Servant is revealed to be the One who will not only restore Israel, but He will also provide salvation to the end of the earth. In Isaiah 50:4-11, He is revealed to be God's disciple who will suffer, but who will also be unashamed because God is with Him. He will establish justice throughout the earth and despite obstacles, He will not become disheartened (Is. 42:4). Many theologians believe the Servant Songs are an indication of a royal messianic person. Isaiah 49 particularly seems to be suited to that understanding.

When the preceding Isaiah text is properly exegeted and understood, and when progressive revelation following Isaiah is considered, which we are privileged to possess and which has been available since the first century when the canon was completed, then this Servant song is not that difficult to understand.

“Most of these interpretations are not very convincing if one takes the view that all of these Servant poems are prophetic of a future figure in an eschatological setting when God will bring salvation to his people and the nations. As with most other future proclamations of salvation, the setting of the author and his audience is largely hidden and unknown. The undated future setting of the suffering Servant is primarily in focus.... The exposition of the text ... will suggest that when these questions [concerning the details of the Suffering Servant song] are dealt with in the context of the earlier poems about the Servant and the surrounding literary material, many of these mysteries and ambiguities begin to find answers” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 431].

The Suffering Servant song is widely considered to be the pinnacle of God's prophetic Word. “‘These five matchless stanzas of the fourth Servant poem are the Mt. Everest of messianic prophecy.’ So wrote Old Testament scholar Dr. Kyle M. Yates over fifty years ago, and his words still stand. This passage is at the heart of chapters 49-57, and its message is at the heart of the Gospel. Like Mt. Everest, Isaiah 53 stands out in beauty and grandeur, but only because it reveals Jesus Christ and takes us to Mt. Calvary” [Warren W. Wiersbe, “Isaiah” in *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Prophets*, 58].

In terms of format, these verses have an interesting arrangement. There are 15 verses total which are arranged in 5 groups of three verses each. Group 1 and group 5 are commendations of the Servant. The middle 3 groups reveal the Servant's commitment to accomplishing the mission God has set before Him. The central group, Is. 53:4-6, reveals the nature of His death which was in place of the death the people of Israel should have suffered for their sins and for which the penalty is death (Gen. 2:16-17). This Suffering Servant song reveals a substitutionary sacrifice; the innocent One pays the price for the guilty one resulting in the declaration of innocence for the formerly guilty party. The picture of the scapegoat as portrayed in the Day of Atonement ritual portrays the concept of the innocent paying the price due from the guilty party and thereby freeing the guilty party from paying the price (Lv. 16: 20-22).

Leviticus 16:21–22 <sup>21</sup>“Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send *it* away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who *stands* in readiness. <sup>22</sup>“The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.

Buksbazen represents the common theological thinking on this structural arrangement: (1) Is. 52:13-15 “Jehovah introduces His faithful servant and announces that he will accomplish the divine purpose and shall in the future be highly exalted.” (2) Is. 53:1-3 “The confession of penitent Israel.” (3) Is. 53:4-6 “The servant of Jehovah suffered for the sins of his people.” (4) Is. 53:7-9 “Although without sin, the servant submitted himself to humiliation, suffering and death without opening his mouth.” (5) Is. 53:10-12 “The servant's offering was God-ordained in order to bring forgiveness and redemption to many. Yet the servant shall rise from the dead, have a lasting following and rejoice in the results of his completed work.” [Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 408].

Oswalt described the same arrangement this way: "The central thought of the poem is focused on two great contrasts: the contrast between the Servant's exaltation and his humiliation and suffering, and the contrast between what people thought about the Servant and what was really the case" [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, 376].

This five-part arrangement is accurate, but it is also a fairly simplified view of the song's structure. For a more detailed explanation of the song's structure, see Ronald Bergey, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 2 (June 1997): 170-188. "These stanzas would then consist of two divine proclamations declaring the final triumph of the suffering servant (52:13-15; 53:11c-12 framing the report of confession of those who are the object of his humiliation (53:1-11b))" [p. 178]. [[https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/40/40-2/40-2-pp177-188\\_JETS.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/40/40-2/40-2-pp177-188_JETS.pdf)]. He goes on to further refine the structural arrangement into 4 parts depending on who is doing the speaking. If you are interested in this kind of detail, this theologian's understanding of the structure is very good.

Smith divides the song into three paragraphs with the middle one itself divided into three sections. (1) Is. 52:13-15 "Exaltation of the Servant predicted." (2) Is. 53:1-9 "Report on the Servant's suffering." (2a) 1-3 "The surprising, despised Servant." (2b) 4-6 "Vicarious suffering for our sins." (2c) 7-9 "Willing submission to death." (3) Is. 53:10-12 "Sacrifice leads to the exaltation of the Servant." [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 433].

In Isaiah 49:1 to 52:12, the fact of salvation for Israel was revealed, and in the midst of that revelation, salvation for the world's people was also revealed (Is. 49:6, 51:4-6). All of this relates back to the preparation of the believing remnant for salvation when Zion will be cleansed.

Isaiah 4:2-5 <sup>2</sup>In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth *will be* the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel. <sup>3</sup>It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup>When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, <sup>5</sup>then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.

This relates to Isaiah 52:1-10 which is a prophecy of Zion restored and holy. All of this is leading into just how this is going to be accomplished through the work of the Suffering Servant. Some theologians see this Scripture as an explanation of Isaiah 49:7 which immediately follows the prophecy of salvation for Israel and for the world.

Isaiah 49:6-7 <sup>6</sup>He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." <sup>7</sup>Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel *and* its Holy One, To the despised One, To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of rulers, "Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You."

“These interlinking connections suggest that this Servant poem in 52:13-53:12 is the climatic message that fills out the unanswered questions raised in these earlier oracles. It explains the personal action of God through the Servant that makes salvation possible to many, and it plays a fundamental role in convincing the nations to understand and accept the salvation that God offers” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 434].

One of the outstanding characteristics of the Scriptures leading up to this Suffering Servant section is God's promise to unleash His mighty power on the world in order to show Israel and the people of the world just how mighty He is and how unstoppable is His plan for history. He speaks to the mighty displays of His power in terms of controlling His creation and causing it to do His will (Is. 50:2, 51:3), the power He used to create Israel (Is. 51:1-2), and of the display of His power when He redeemed the nation out of slavery in Egypt (Is. 51:9-10).

Isaiah 52:10 <sup>10</sup>The LORD has bared His holy arm In the sight of all the nations, That all the ends of the earth may see The salvation of our God.

In the end, the Suffering Servant song reveals that the ultimate display of God's wisdom and power will not come by means of what we think of as an overt display of power, but by means of what appears to the world to be a lack of power and an over-abundance of weakness, death, and defeat. This was probably shocking to the Jewish people, then and now, which is revealed in their confused concept of two Messiahs in the persons of a Suffering Servant and a Conquering King.

1 Corinthians 1:22–23 <sup>22</sup>For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

“In this passage, Isaiah filled out the previously sketchy picture of the Servant with more detail concerning His work, character, and nature. God's greatest power is evident in His ability to return love and forgiveness for hatred and injustice, not in His ability to crush all opposition” [Thomas L. Constable, “Isaiah” in *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible, Volume IV: Isaiah-Daniel*, 150].

We believe that the Suffering Servant text is a revelation of a man, an individual person who is the Messiah, and not the nation Israel that is the focus. The text continually refers to this person with masculine singular personal pronouns. Furthermore, the commendation of this man is inconsistent with identifying the Suffering Servant with the nation because the nation was continually criticized and condemned by Yahweh as sinful, rebellious, and unrighteous. A cursory search of the prophet Isaiah's book reveals that the nation was described as deaf and blind (Is. 42:14-25, 43:8, 59:10), rebellious (Is. 3:8, 30:1, 9, 48:8, 57:4), lawbreakers (Is. 42:24), idolaters (Is. 42:17, 44:9-20), deceived (Is. 44:20), unrighteous (Is. 48:1), untruthful (Is. 48:1, 59:13), stubborn (Is. 48:4), and sinful (Is. 1:4, 31:7, 59:12). These ungodly attributes are not ascribed to the Suffering Servant, rather He is praised and commended by God for His work and His faithfulness.

In reality, the nation is the object of the Suffering Servant's work. The nation cannot save itself; it has to be God who restores the nation. In fact, that is exactly what God has

revealed to the nation—He will redeem them at the end of history as we know it just as He redeemed them out of slavery in Egypt.

Isaiah 43:1 <sup>1</sup>But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!

Isaiah 44:22 <sup>22</sup>“I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud And your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

“[T]he national servant, Israel, is loved by God but guilty, blind, and deaf, suffering for its own sins. The individual Servant is righteous, suffering vicariously for the sins of others. This agrees with the Sinai theology of blessings for national obedience and curses for national disobedience (Lv 26; Dt 28). In light of this, righteous, national Israel would be established in the land, triumphing over her enemies; unrighteous Israel would be exiled to the nations, vanquished by her enemies.... Under no circumstances, then, would the Lord exile Israel if they were righteous as a people. Thus Isa 53 cannot apply to the nation of Israel, regardless of longstanding Jewish tradition” [Michael L. Brown, “Isaiah 52:13-53:12: The Substitution of the Servant of the Lord” in *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy: Studies and Expositions of the Messiah in the Old Testament*, gen. ed. Michael Rydelnik and Edwin Blum, 965-966].

The overall message of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 seems to be very clear, but embedded within this Scripture are a lot of interpretive issues. “The interpretation of these verses are complicated by textual problems, the difficulty of interpreting some metaphors, problems with connecting the interrelated clauses, and the vagueness of terms like ‘the many,’ but these issues do not make it impossible to understand the main thrust of the message. The goal in interpreting these verses will be to try to understand what the original author was communicating to his audience at that time” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 435].