

Isaiah's Songs of the Servant
Part 4:

The Career of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12

F. Duane Lindsey

The fourth Servant song (Isa. 52:13-53:12) “may without any exaggeration be called the most important text of the Old Testament.”¹ This is confirmed first by its numerous citations in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 22:37; Acts 8:30-35; 1 Pet. 2:22-25),² and second by the voluminous Jewish and Christian literature which has been based on this prophecy down through the centuries.³

The messianic significance of the song is the basis of the New Testament quotations and accounts in large part for the extensive debate that surrounds this prophecy. While the sufferings of Christ are expanded at length in the song (“there is only one brow which this crown of thorns will fit”⁴), the dominant theme in reality is the exaltation of Christ “victorious and triumphant through his vicarious sufferings.”⁵ Pieper perceives that the theme of the prophecy is “not the suffering of the Servant as such, but rather His triumph over suffering and His exaltation out of this humiliation.”⁶ Kelley similarly points out that the song is not primarily concerned with suffering, for the suffering has already come to an end (it is described in the past tense in 53:3-6, and the verbs in the future tense speak of the Servant’s triumph and glory—52:12; 53:10-11).⁷ Only a premillennial understanding of Christ’s second advent, however, catches the full significance of the Servant’s exaltation.⁸

This twofold theme of “the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pet. 1:11) simply draws together the

prominent thematic threads of the preceding Servant songs. As the first two songs (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-13) emphasized the ultimate success of Yahweh's Servant-Messiah while alluding to His sufferings (42:4; 49:4), so the third song (50:4-11) amplified the sufferings and patient endurance of the Servant while implying His ultimate vindication or exaltation (50:7-9).⁹ The distinctive contribution of this fourth song is to present the details and purpose of the Servant's sufferings and death, particularly as they relate to His exaltation and the ultimate success of His mission.

Unlike scholarly opinions on the other Servant songs, most scholars agree on the extent of this fourth song—52:13-15 constituting an introduction or prologue to 53:1-12. Whybray's dissenting opinion that 52:13-15 is a separate and unrelated poem is based on his unwarranted view that chapter 53 is "a song of thanksgiving for the deliverance of God's servant, Deutero-Isaiah, from mortal danger."¹⁰ But scholars disagree on nearly everything else in the song. Problems abound regarding the text, translation, and interpretation of virtually every verse in the song.

As in the preceding two Servant songs, the fourth song also begins a cycle of thought that culminates in a powerful message of salvation (54:1-17).¹¹

One major problem is the identification of the speakers. It is clear that Yahweh is speaking in 52:13-15, and again in 53:10 or 11-12. The intervening verses (53:1-9 or 10) are a report about the humiliation, sufferings, and sacrificial death of the Servant. Thus the song is a report within a divine utterance, beginning and ending with Yahweh speaking. But who are the speakers of the report? Three groups have generally been suggested: (1) the prophet Isaiah (some say "Deutero-Isaiah") as representative of a group (usually the prophets),¹² (2) the Gentile kings of 52:15,¹³ or (3) the believing Jewish remnant.¹⁴ Evidence for the third view will be presented in this exposition. Since no addressees are indicated in the text, it is probably best to assume that both the divine utterance and the report of the believing remnant are addressed potentially to all mankind, similar to the first Servant song (42:1-4).

The message of 52:13—53:12 thus materializes: Yahweh announces the exaltation of His Servant because of His satisfactory substitutionary death for the sins of both His guilty people and the Gentiles. The passage consists of five strophes, the cen-

tral three of which compose the body of the report. Thus the message has three units: (1) an introductory appraisal in which Yahweh promises to exalt His Servant supremely, who though deeply degraded, will both purify and receive the worship of nations (52:13-15); (2) a confessional report in which believing Israelites contrast their past rejection of the Servant with the true meaning of His death (53:1-9); and (3) a concluding epilogue in which Yahweh promises to exalt His Servant because He did His will in dying as a guilt offering (53:10-12).

**Yahweh Announces the Exaltation of His Servant Who
Has Become Deeply Degraded to Purify Many Nations (52:13-15)**

- ¹³See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
- ¹⁴Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
- ¹⁵so will he sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For those who were not told will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.¹⁵

Yahweh's announcement of His Servant's exaltation (v. 13) is developed along two lines: initially, many were appalled at Him who was humbled below what was human (v. 14; cf. 53:1-9), but ultimately kings and nations who have experienced His provision of purification from sins are amazed that He is exalted above what is human (v. 15; cf. 53:10-12).¹⁶ Von Rad has aptly observed, "The unusual aspect of this great poem is that it begins with what is really the end of the whole story, the Servant's glorification and the recognition of his significance for the world."¹⁷ In a sense, these verses contain the vindication anticipated by the Servant in 50:8-9. Thus in this divine utterance Yahweh (1) announces that His Servant will achieve success (52:13) and (2) compares initial Jewish consternation with ultimate Gentile comprehension (vv. 14-15).

**YAHWEH ANNOUNCES THAT HIS SERVANT WILL ACHIEVE SUCCESS
(52:13)**

The Servant's success will come through wise action (52:13a). Before describing the exaltation of the Servant, Yahweh affirms that it is the Servant's wise and effective action that will achieve success—"See, my servant will act wisely" (v. 13a). MacRae correctly observes that this affirmation is a

“general statement of the effective accomplishment of the great work of the Servant.”¹⁸

Through the use of the demonstrative particle הִנֵּה (“See,” NIV), Yahweh both points to the Servant as if He were present (confirmed by the direct address to the Servant in v. 14), and also calls attention to the person and theme now to be introduced,¹⁹ a theme which is “startlingly new and wonderfully important.”²⁰ Westermann correctly recognizes the deliberate identification between the opening words in this verse (“See, my servant”) and the opening words of the first Servant song (in 42:1 the NIV translates the same Hebrew phrase as found in 52:13 as “Here is my servant”). He indicates that “the two songs go together in that 42:1-4 show the origin of the Servant’s work—his designation to his office by God—and Chs. 52f. its culmination—God proclaims the success of his servant’s way and work.”²¹

Yahweh’s Servant is named again in this prophecy only in 53:11. He speaks nowhere in the song and, except for the “you” (NIV footnote) in 52:14, He is spoken of in the third person throughout. Smith indicates that “we never hear or see Himself. But all the more solemnly is He there: a shadow upon countless faces, a grievous memory on the hearts of the speakers.”²²

The NIV translates the Hebrew word יִשְׁפֹּיֵל as “will act wisely” in the text and “will prosper” in a footnote.²³ Both ideas are contained in the Hebrew word which has the primary meaning of either “possess wisdom” (i.e., “be wise,” e.g., Ps. 2:10) or “use wisdom” (i.e., “act wisely,” e.g., 1 Sam. 18:5), or a secondary sense of “to be prosperous or successful” (e.g., Josh. 1:7-8; 2 Kings 18:7; Prov. 17:8; Jer. 10:21).²⁴ Delitzsch points out that “the word is never applied to such prosperity as a man enjoys without any effort of his own, but only to such as he attains by successful action.”²⁵ A decision as to the correct nuance of the verb in this verse depends in part on one’s understanding of the relationship between the two clauses.

Is the exaltation which is described in verse 13b the result of the verb יִשְׁפֹּיֵל (which would then be translated “will act wisely”), or is the exaltation a parallel description with the verb which would then be translated “will prosper or be successful”? If the former meaning were correct, the word would probably identify the Servant’s effective action in dying as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin, this being the only pathway to ultimate success and exaltation. With this meaning in mind, Culver states, “However tragic the event appeared to be, the most practical, profitable,

and successful event in the history of the world was the death of Christ.”²⁶ Culver’s statement is of course true, and the general idea of this interpretation does fit into the context. However, in view of the ambiguity of the verb **יִשְׁכַּל** in this context, the preference for recognizing synonymous parallelism between the two lines indicates that the translation “will prosper,” that is, by being exalted, is the preferable one.²⁷ Some scholars seek to combine both ideas in the meaning of the verb,²⁸ and the choice of views and translations does not greatly affect the overall thought of the verse.

The Servant’s success is described as exaltation (52:13b). The success which Yahweh has announced for His Servant is described in terms of highest exaltation—“he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (v. 13b). The success of the Servant is unfolded in three verbs which presuppose the inhuman degradation which is viewed in verse 14. This clause does not describe the result or consequences of the verb **יִשְׁכַּל** in the preceding clause²⁹ (although it does describe the results of the implied wise and effective action which led to the success indicated in that verb). Yahweh draws on three verbs of exaltation (the first two of which are reminiscent of Yahweh’s own exaltation in Isa. 6:1; cf. 57:15) to describe the Servant’s “superlative degree of success.”³⁰ Are these verbs synonymous or sequential? Urwick is an example of those scholars who view these terms as an “accumulation of synonyms”³¹ used to exhibit the glorious exaltation of the Servant “to the height of God Himself.”³² Others regard the verbs as describing “the commencement, the continuation, and the result or climax of the exaltation.”³³ Pieper specifies that they “precisely foretold the resurrection..., the ascension into heaven..., and the sitting at the right hand of the Father.”³⁴ In general, the passage certainly predicts the postresurrection exaltation of Christ (cf. Acts 2:33; 5:31; Phil. 2:9) and, retrospectively, appropriately allows for the three stages in that exaltation.

YAHWEH COMPARES INITIAL JEWISH CONSTERNATION AT THE SERVANT WITH ULTIMATE GENTILE COMPREHENSION (52:14-15)

A comparison is introduced in verse 14 with the words “Just as” (the Hebrew: comparative conjunction is **כַּאֲשֶׁר**). A problem of syntax and interpretation arises in identifying the apodosis (“even so” clause) that completes the comparison which is begun in the protasis—“Just as there were many that were appalled at him” (v. 14a). The problem is due in part to the presence of two

clauses beginning with “so” (כִּי) which may complete the comparison (vv. 14b and 15a). At least three solutions have been suggested to this problem.³⁵ Several scholars have suggested that the protasis (v. 14a) is followed by a double apodosis (vv. 14b, 15a).³⁶ Young has claimed that both כִּי clauses are to be understood parenthetically, with the apodosis suggested in the second clause of verse 15 (“and kings will shut their mouths because of him”).³⁷ However, the majority of scholars correctly view verse 14b as an explanatory parenthesis and verse 15a (actually the first two cola of the Hebrew text) as the completion of the comparison.³⁸ More specifically, while the apodosis does begin with the first colon of verse 15 (“so will he sprinkle many nations”), the structural points of the comparison with verse 14a are found in the second colon (“and kings will shut their mouths because of him”). “Just as many were appalled at his inhuman treatment and disfigurement and death, so ‘kings’ will be astonished when they comprehend the meaning of His debasement and the universal application of that death.”³⁹ Thus the comparison is between the “many” individuals (mainly Israelites) who are appalled at the fact of the Servant’s suffering, and the “kings” (representative of “many” nations) who will be awed at the effects (expiatory purification or cleansing) which result from the Servant’s suffering.

Many were appalled at the Servant’s inhuman disfigurement (52:14). As already indicated, this verse begins with the apodosis of a comparison—“Just as there were many who were appalled at him” (v. 14a). The “many” individuals who are “appalled at him” are probably Israelites in contrast to the “many nations, and kings” of verse 15. The term “appalled” is used in Ezekiel 27:35 to describe men’s reaction to the ruined city of Tyre. It could be translated “amazed, shocked, aghast, or horrified,” and indicates that those who gaze on the Servant are petrified by paralyzing astonishment and stupefying surprise at His deep abasement and degradation. The word is frequently used when one is thought to be under divine judgment (Lev. 26:32; Jer. 18:16; 19:8); so it may also here imply that they think He is suffering for His own sins (as in 53:3-4). The object of the verb in the Hebrew is in the second person—“appalled at you” (NIV footnote). The textual reading “him” is supported only by two Hebrew manuscripts, the Targum, and the Syriac translation, but is adopted by many scholars as more fitting to the context. Driver retains “you” but with the implied antecedent “my people”

(i.e., Israel).⁴⁰ It is better with many other scholars to translate “you” with reference to the Servant, for a sudden change in person (cf. the third person in the rest of the verse) is common in Isaiah (cf. 31:6; 42:20).⁴¹ Yahweh has already spoken directly to the Servant in 42:6-7 and 49:8, so it is not unusual here.

The next two lines give a parenthetical reason for the horrified shock at the Servant—“his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (v. 14b, c). Some scholars think these lines belong after 53:2,⁴² but there is no textual support for such a change. The terms “appearance” and “form” clearly refer to the physical appearance of the Servant. Unger understood “appearance” as a “special reference to His face,” and “form” as a reference to His “physical body in general.”⁴³ Since this appearance is described in the context of His sufferings and death (already implied in 49:4, 7; 50:6), it is not a reference to His normal appearance throughout life. While Scripture gives no physical description of Christ, it is extremely unlikely that He was repulsive in appearance as indicated in Christian art before Constantine.⁴⁴ While later Christian art may have idealized His physical attractiveness, the disfigurement described in this verse is the result of His trial-and-death sufferings. “Disfigured”⁴⁵ and “marred” describe the results of the Servant’s physical suffering, particularly leading up to and including the Crucifixion. The extent of His disfigurement is described by the adverbial phrases “beyond that of any man” and “beyond human likeness.” Both phrases are introduced by ׀ן, denoting here “away from,” that is, destroying all likeness to man, so as to suggest that His appearance no longer appeared human: “He looked like a creature not of our race, so much had sorrow smitten him.”⁴⁶

Nations will be purified and kings astonished because of the results of the Servant’s disfigurement (52:15). Just as many individuals were shocked at the Servant’s extreme degradation, even so many nations will be purified through His expiatory sufferings, leading to amazement on the part of kings who comprehend all this.

The first colon of this compound apodosis (“so will he sprinkle many nations,” v. 15a), is one of the most controversial clauses in the fourth Servant song. The contention centers around the meaning of the Hebrew word ׀ן (‘‘he will sprinkle,’’ NIV), traditionally understood to be from the verb ׀ן, ‘‘to sprinkle.’’ This is a technical Mosaic word for the sprinkling of water,

oil, or blood as a cleansing or purifying ceremony. Fausset has recognized that פָּרַק “universally in the Old Testament means either *to sprinkle (with blood); to atone for guilt*—as the high priest makes an *expiation* [Lev. 4:6; 16:14, 19]; or *to sprinkle (with water)*, as synonymous with *purifying* [Num. 19:18,21] or cleansing [cf. Ezek. 36:25 where a different Hebrew word for sprinkle means ‘to cleanse’]. . . . Both *atonement* for guilt and purifying by the Spirit are appropriate to Messiah [John 13:8; Heb. 9: 13-14; 10:22; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2],”⁴⁷

However, during the past century (since Gesenius) probably the majority of scholars⁴⁸ have taken the verb to mean “startle,” either by emending the text or by assuming that the verb comes from an otherwise unattested Hebrew root פָּרַק (II) meaning “to startle,” which is cognate to a supposed Arabic word meaning “to spring up, jump, leap,” as in amazement.⁴⁹ Thus the translation proposed by this viewpoint is “many nations will marvel at him” (NIV footnote). This provides a very fitting apodosis for the comparison begun in verse 14a. However, Young has championed the meaning of “sprinkle,”⁵⁰ along with a number of other contemporary scholars.⁵¹ Young has carefully refuted the translation “to spring up, to startle,” and has satisfactorily answered objections raised against the translation “to sprinkle.”⁵²

Perhaps the major objection to “sprinkle” is that when so translated the fluid sprinkled is in the accusative case, whereas here the “many nations” are in the accusative.⁵³ However, Kay’s refutation of this objection is still valid: This argument “is to forget that in the passage before us the verb refers, not to a literal process of sprinkling, but to an act of purification analogous to that which was effected by ceremonial sprinkling.”⁵⁴ Another objection that a priestly role is out of context for the Servant in this passage has been countered by Young who has called attention to a number of references to the Servant’s priestly work in this fourth Servant song (cf. 53:10-12).⁵⁵

In conclusion, that the Servant will “sprinkle many nations” is a metonymy of cause (sprinkling) for effect (cleansing), here understood spiritually of His atoning work set forth in greater detail in chapter 53. The Servant will cleanse and purify for God’s use those nations for whom His death is an expiatory satisfaction for sins.⁵⁶ Unger related this cleansing more particularly to “millennial nations” which the Servant-Messiah will “sprinkle expiatorily and cleanse for their role (as nations) in the Davidic-Messianic earthly Kingdom (2 Sam. 7:8-15).”⁵⁷

That “kings will shut their mouths because of him” (v. 15b) has been understood in three different senses: (1) they keep their mouths firmly closed to avoid contamination from the Servant,⁵⁸ (2) they are speechless from “their inability to say anything by way of self-justification,”⁵⁹ and (3) they are silent in reverential awe and honor before the Servant.⁶⁰ The vital question, however, is whether or not these kings (and the nations they represent) are expressing trust in the Servant and His priestly purification ministry. Although Pieper claims that “there is nothing whatever in 52:15 to indicate that the gentiles come to the obedience of faith,”⁶¹ a more positive answer is at least implied in the rest of the verse—“For those who were not told will see, and those who have not heard will understand” (v. 15c). This states the reason for Gentile astonishment. The Servant’s atoning death and its significance will be comprehended by “kings” (probably synecdoche of the part for the whole, representing the nations and peoples of the earth) as the basis of their reverential awe. That this comprehension and reverence includes faith in the priestly work of the Servant is evident in that a major point of the verse seems to be that the Servant’s substitutionary death (to be described in chapter 53) is in place of Gentiles (52:15) as well as Israelites (53:1-9). Since 53:1-9 is a confession of faith on the part of a future generation of Israelites, it seems that the comprehension and awe on the part of the Gentiles in 52:15 would include the concept of faith. The Apostle Paul refers to this verse in connection with taking the gospel to those Gentiles who hear it for the first time (Rom. 15:21). But the ultimate fulfillment may relate to the Gentiles of the end time who understand and accept the message of the Servant’s person and redemptive work, resulting in their salvation and entrance into the blessing of the millennial kingdom.⁶²

**Believing Israelites Confess Their Past Misunderstanding
of the Servant’s Death Which They Contrast
with Its True Meaning (53:1-9)**

Two features of general import in this passage are the identification of the speaker or speakers, and the question of its literary genre. A brief review of suggestions regarding literary genre produces a list which includes “a prophetic liturgy...[in] the form of a dirge” which is sung by “a chorus,”⁶³ a prophetic allegory or parable of Israel’s humiliation and triumph,⁶⁴ or an indi-

vidual thanksgiving (i.e., acknowledgment or declarative praise) psalm.⁶⁵ Whybray has defended the entire poem (53:1-12, but not 52:13-15) as being an individual thanksgiving psalm, not in form only, but also in fact, the unusual feature in his view being that the sufferer is Deutero-Isaiah himself who is described in the third person by a group of persons who “confess their own guilt, which was at least partly the cause for his suffering.”⁶⁶ However, Westermann has more correctly recognized that the genre of the individual thanksgiving psalm “does no more than form the background” for Isaiah 53 which “contains a second strand which is closely woven into it a confession on the part of those who experienced salvation.”⁶⁷

The question of the identity of the speaker or speakers has received three general answers: (1) the Gentile kings of 52:15;⁶⁸ (2) the prophet himself as representative either of the prophets of Israel, of “all the heralds of the Messiah” (i.e., in both the Old and New Testaments),⁶⁹ or of the nation Israel;⁷⁰ or (3) the nation Israel (excluding the prophet)—either the exiles in Babylon,⁷¹ or a future believing remnant of Israel.⁷² In refutation of the view that the speakers are Gentiles, Skinner has pointed out that “the ‘nations’ and ‘kings’ [of 52:15] are surprised by the Servant’s exaltation [better, atoning death] because they had not previously heard of it; whereas those who now speak (v. 1) have heard but could not believe.”⁷³ There is substantial positive evidence for the identity of the speakers as repentant Israelites. Paul quotes Isaiah 53:1 in Romans 10:16 as a complaint against the unbelief of Israel. Also in Isaiah 53:8 it is declared that the sins for which the Servant is stricken are those of “my people,” that is, Israel. Delitzsch has argued that “whenever we find a ‘we’ introduced abruptly in the midst of a prophecy, it is always Israel that speaks.”⁷⁴ The NIV has correctly translated the verbs in 53:1-9 in the past tense, suggesting that the speakers are looking backward to the Servant’s sufferings and death. Leupold has painted this interesting picture: “So to speak, here we seem to hear two disciples standing on the street corner in Jerusalem reviewing the things that happened on Good Friday in the light of the better insight that came after Pentecost.”⁷⁵ It should be noted with Unger, however, that the speakers “in the fullest prophetic scope [are] the remnant of Israel, who will turn in faith to the Messiah at His second advent (Zech. 12:10—13:1; Rom. 11:26).”⁷⁶

The confessional report consists of three stanzas: (1) believing Israelites confess that their superficial estimation of the

Servant led to His rejection (53:1-3), (2) they contrast their mistaken moral judgment concerning the Servant with His vicarious suffering (53:4-6), and (3) they contrast the unjust circumstances of the Servant's death with His sinless submission (53:7-9).

BELIEVING ISRAELITES CONFESS THAT THEIR SUPERFICIAL ESTIMATION OF THE SERVANT LED TO HIS REJECTION (53:1-3)

- ¹Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
²He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

In these verses believing Israelites confess that at first they did not properly value the Servant, that is, their superficial estimation of His humble appearance led them to reject Him. In a word, the Servant was “totally misunderstood because of His seeming insignificance.”⁷⁷

They lament that so few have experienced Yahweh's provision through the Servant (53:1). Two rhetorical questions summarize the scarcity of true believers among Israel. The first question emphasizes that few have believed the message of salvation —“Who has believed our message?” (v. 1 a). Such a question expecting a negative answer (“few” or “none”) is used to assert that few of their nation previously responded to the message about the Servant. “Our message” can be understood as “the message we have proclaimed,”⁷⁸ or “the message we have heard.”⁷⁹ The context favors the latter translation, viewing the speakers (or their ancestors) as the recipients who disbelieved the message about the true nature and purpose of the Servant's sufferings.⁸⁰ That the content of the message pertains to the Servant's sufferings and death at least as much as to His subsequent exaltation (including resurrection; cf. 53:10), rather than specifically to His exaltation, is seen in the parallelism with “the arm of the LORD” in verse 1b, a term speaking of Yahweh's power to save.

The second rhetorical question—“to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” (v. 1b)—amplifies the first, and asserts

that few have experienced the power of Yahweh to save. The “arm of Yahweh” is frequently a reference to His power to save (cf. 51:9; 52:10). While some have taken it here as a direct reference to the Servant (i.e., a messianic title or description),⁸¹ it is more likely either a reference to the content of “our message” (i.e., God’s salvation provided through the sacrificial, substitutionary death of the Servant), or to the power of Yahweh in the Holy Spirit effecting faith in those who respond to the message (i.e., efficacious grace).⁸²

The connection between 53:1 and the preceding verse (52:15) has been observed by Hengstenberg: “Those [the Gentile kings] understand what they formerly did not hear; Israel, on the contrary, does not believe that which they have heard.”⁸³

They report that their nation was not impressed by the Servant’s outward appearance (53:2). This verse describes “the humble condition of the Messiah before his sufferings”⁸⁴ as reported by the repentant Israelites of the last days. The Servant’s humble surroundings held no attraction for a nation expecting a messianic King of regal splendor and military power. The Servant is first compared to a stunted plant struggling for life —“He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground” (v. 2a). During the Servant’s “hidden years” (cf. Isa. 49:2),⁸⁵ He was known by Yahweh though unknown by the world. In fact He was under the care and concern of Yahweh, being prepared by Him as a Servant-disciple (Isa. 50:4).⁸⁶ “Tender shoot” (lit., “suckling”) is a horticultural term (not a nursing child) referring to “a tender twig that grows on the trunk or branch of a tree and draws its life and strength therefrom.”⁸⁷ It is true that the trunk from which the “tender shoot” springs is that of “the proud cedar...of the Davidic monarchy [which] had been felled” (Ezek. 17:22),⁸⁸ though that may go beyond the purpose of the figure in this verse. “Root” is probably a synecdoche for a stem or shoot that springs from the root, and may be a messianic allusion to Isaiah 11:1. Some scholars view the “dry ground” as “the house of Jesse or of David.”⁸⁹ Kay refers it to “the barren soil of human nature.”⁹⁰ If this part of the simile is intended to have a specific parallel, it is more likely a reference to the miserable external circumstances of an enslaved nation and a corrupt age.⁹¹

The Servant lacked the regal splendor desirable to the nation —“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (v. 2b). The Servant’s lack of “beauty” (lit., “form” —a term used to describe the physi-

cal attractiveness of Joseph [Gen. 39:6] and David [1 Sam. 16:18]) is neither a statement that He is naturally physically repulsive, nor (in this verse) a reference to His disfiguration through His sufferings, but rather an estimation of His undesirability by the nation who misunderstood and rejected Him.

“There was no kingly form, no regal majesty, no royal appearance. They wanted a king, but they got a carpenter.”⁹²

They report that their nation despised and devalued the Servant (53:3). First, the Servant was rejected as an associate of suffering: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (v. 3a). The twofold occurrence in this verse of the word “despised” sets the mood and expresses the theme of the verse, for the verb “despised” includes the thought of rejection (cf. Esau’s birthright in Gen. 25:34).⁹³ Culver states that “despised” is “the most comprehensive of all the terms here, involving that complete act of the whole man when he utterly and completely refuses something.”⁹⁴ The phrase “rejected by men” may mean “shunning men” (NEB has “he shrank from the sight of men”), but is probably to be translated in a passive sense, “shunned by men.”⁹⁵ It could also mean “lacking men (of rank),” that is, dignitaries avoided Him. The traditional translation, “rejected by men,” probably retains the proper sense. It is highly unlikely that the Servant’s description as “a man of sorrows” and One “familiar with suffering” refers to His illness or a disease such as leprosy.⁹⁶ Rather, it is a reference either to His association with the sick and suffering class in contrast to dignitaries, or to His sufferings on the cross.⁹⁷ The word “sorrows” can refer to “pains and sorrows of all kinds, physical and mental.”⁹⁸ The phrase “familiar with suffering” is literally an “associate of grief, trouble, woe, misfortune, or evil.”⁹⁹ Both “sorrows” and “suffering” are probably figurative for all kinds of pain and suffering, with particular reference to the Servant’s sufferings on the cross. Payne indicates that “it is Difficult...to pinpoint any statement in the Song which unequivocally refers to natural sickness” and that “there is no word in the passage which cannot be used of sufferings inflicted by human beings.”¹⁰⁰

Second, the Servant was despised as an object of displeasure: “Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (v. 3b). The first part of this clause is literally, “as a hiding of faces from him” (or “from us”), and so has been translated “As a man who hid his face from us,”¹⁰¹ or even

“As one from whom God hides his face.”¹⁰² However, the context pictures the reaction of men to the Servant, so the NIV translation seems preferable. The word “despised” is deliberately repeated for emphasis. Culver points out the oddity that the word is used of Antiochus Epiphanes in Daniel 11:21, and so he suggests that in the minds of His persecutors, Jesus Christ “was in the same class with the reprobate who desecrated the holy altar with the carcass of a sow!”¹⁰³ The finality of the Servant’s rejection is reflected in the words “we esteemed him not,” aptly translated as “we held him of no account,”¹⁰⁴ or “we reckoned him as nothing.”¹⁰⁵ Thus the contemporaries of the Servant so totally despised and devalued Him that they ranked Him as “zero.”

Editor’s Note

An exposition of the remaining portion (Isa. 53:4-12) of this Servant song will appear in the January-March 1983 issue.

Notes

- 1 Ivan Engnell, “The ‘Ebed Yahweh Songs and the Suffering Messiah in ‘Deutero-Isaiah,’” *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 31 (January 1948): 73. Delitzsch has called this prophecy “the most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved” (Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973], 2:203).
- 2 If lost from the Old Testament, this passage could almost be reconstructed from its quotations in the New Testament (Page H. Kelley. “Isaiah,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton J. Allen, 12 vols. [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971], 5:340-41). Culver has observed, “Perhaps the most distinguished thing about it [Isa. 52: 13-53: 12] is the fact that this very portion stands in the background of almost every New Testament treatment of the great events connected with our Lord’s passion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and second coming” (Robert D. Culver, *The Sufferings and the Glory of the Lord’s Righteous Servant* [Moline, IL: Christian Service Foundation, 1958], p.20).
- 3 “The extant literature on the monumental fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is so vast that, perhaps, no person could read it in a lifetime” (Robert F. Pfeiffer, p. 3 of preface to Frederick Alfred Aston, *The Challenge of the Ages: New Light on Isaiah 53*, rev. ed. [Scarsdale, NY: Research Press, 1969]).
- 4 F. B. Meyer, *Christ in Isaiah: Expositions of Isaiah XL-XV* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1895), p. 158; for the identification of the Servant of Yahweh with the Davidic Messiah, see F. Duane Lindsey, “Isaiah’s Songs of the Servant, Part 1: The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (January-March 1982): 15.
- 5 Engnell, “The ‘Ebed Yahweh Songs,” p. 74.
- 6 August Pieper, *Isaiah II: An Exposition of Isaiah 40-66*, trans. Erwin E. Kowalke (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 430-31.
- 7 Kelley, “Isaiah,” p. 341.

326 *Bibliotheca Sacra* -October-December 1982

- 8 Cf. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2, *Isaiah-Malachi* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), pp. 1293-1301.
- 9 See the previous articles in this series: F. Duane Lindsey, "The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42: 1-9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (January-March 1982): 12-31, "The Commission of the Servant in Isaiah 49:1-13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (April-June 1982): 129-45; and "The Commitment of the Servant in Isaiah 50: 4-11." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (July-September 1982): 216-29.
- 10 R. N. Whybray. *Isaiah 40—66*. New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), p. 169; cf. R. N. Whybray. *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1978).
- 11 Cf. Robert B. Chisholm, "Toward a Form Critical/Structural Analysis of Isaiah," course paper for 158 Old Testament Theology III, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1980. pp. 62-63.
- 12 E. W. Hengstenberg. *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions*. abridged ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1970), p. 234.
- 13 James Muilenburg, in "The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66," *The Interpreter's Bible*. ed. George R. Buttrick, 12 vols (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 5:614.
- 14 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:310-11.
- 15 All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NN) unless designated otherwise. Abbreviations used for other translations in this article are NASB (New American Standard Bible) and NEB (New English Bible).
- 16 Cf. Claus Westermann. *Isaiah 40—66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 255.
- 17 Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). p. 223.
- 18 Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977). p. 131. Delitzsch has noted, "This very first verse contains, according to Isaiah's custom, a brief, condensed explanation of the theme" (*Isaiah*, 2:304).
- 19 William Orwick, *The Servant of Jehovah: A Commentary. Grammatical and Critical. Upon Isaiah LII. 13-LIII. 12* (Edinburgh: T. & T, Clark. 1977), p.98.
- 20 Culver. *The Sufferings and the Glory*. p. 23.
- 21 Westermann. *Isaiah 40—66*, p. 258.
- 22 George Adam Smith. *The Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols., The Expositor's Bible (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), 2:342.
- 23 Driver's revocalization of the verb to read **יִשְׁכַּח** ("he will be bound." that is. "bound as a form of punishment. such as hanging") is unwarranted (G. R. Driver. "Isaiah 52:13-53:12: The Servant of the Lord," *In Memoriam Paul Kahle*. ed. Mathew Black and Georg Fohrer (Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1968). p. 90.
- 24 Orwick sees this secondary meaning growing out of a metonymy of effect for cause, the resultant success being put for the wisdom itself (The Servant of Jehovah, p. 98).
- 25 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:305.
- 26 Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*. p. 28; cf. Smith, *Isaiah*, 2:347; Joseph Addison Alexander. *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (2 vols. in 1) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1953), 2:226.
- 27 Cf. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 131.
- 28 Whybray. *Isaiah 40—66*, p. 169; Westermann. *Isaiah 40—66*. p. 258.
- 29 Contra Delitzsch, *Isaiah*. 2:305; MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 131; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text with Introductio., Exposition, and Notes*, 3vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965. 1969, 1972),3:335; also see note 26.

- 30 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971):2:224.
- 31 Orwick. *The Servant of Jehovah*. p. 99.
- 32 Gleason L. Archer, "Isaiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962). p. 646.
- 33 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:305.
- 34 Pieper. *Isaiah II*, p. 431.
- 35 Cf. Robert R. Dewbury, "An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1975), p. 25.
- 36 "As thus explained, the sense would be, their abhorrence of him was not without reason ('so marred from man his look...'), and it shall not be without requital ('so shall he sprinkle many nations') (Alexander, *Isaiah*, 2:287); cf. W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 292.
- 37 Young, *Isaiah*, 3:336-37. "Thus the contrast appears between the action of the many with respect to the servant and that of the kings; the many are astounded, the kings close their mouths" (p. 337).
- 38 For example, Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:306; Leupold, *Isaiah*, 2:224; Westermann, *Isaiah 40—66*, p. 258; Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1294-95.
- 39 Kenneth L. Barker, personal correspondence, April 14, 1982. Barker has recognized this structural correspondence in the comparison: עָלָּו (v. 15) answers to עָלָּו (v. 14), יִקְפָּצוּ (v. 15) answers to שָׁמְמוּ (v. 14), קָלְכִים (v. 15) answers to רָגְזִים (v. 14). Cf. Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1295; Dewbury, "Isaiah 52:13-53:12," p. 26. But many commentators view the comparison in a much more general sense. "The point of the comparison is this: As astonishing as would be his humiliation, so astonishing would be his exaltation (as described in v. 15)" (Gleason L. Archer, "Isaiah," p. 646). Statements of the comparison are affected, of course, by the scholar's view of the verb הִנֵּה in verse 15.
- 40 Driver, "Isaiah 52:13-53:12," p. 91; in his translation, on the basis of the Targum and rhythm he even inserts after "you" the words "O my people, for many days"! MacRae also takes "you" as Israel scattered in exile, to which the Servant's appearance is compared in the next line ("the suffering of Israel will be paralleled by the suffering that the Servant must undergo" [MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 132]). Unfortunately, the NASB adopts this rendering.
- 41 For example, Urwick, *The Servant of Jehovah*, p. 100.
- 42 Whybray, *Isaiah 40—66*, p. 169.
- 43 Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1294.
- 44 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:307.
- 45 The Hebrew word translated "disfigured" is מְשַׁחַח which is represented in the Dead Sea Scroll 1QIsa^a as מְשַׁחַחִי. This has been translated, "I have anointed." As Payne points out, this "would offer something approaching a Messianic identification of the Servant" (D. F. Payne, "The Servant of the Lord: Language and Interpretation," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 43 (July-September 1971):133.
- 46 Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 35.
- 47 A. R. Fausset, "Job-Isaiah," *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 2:728.
- 48 A. B. Davidson asserted flatly, "It is simple treason against the Hebrew language to render 'sprinkle.' The interpreter who will do so will 'do anything'" (cited by Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 31). Less bluntly but just as assuredly, Pieper states that "there is today [1919] virtually only one opinion" (Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 432). See also Driver, "Isaiah 52:13-53:12," p. 92.

- 49 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:308.
- 50 Edward J. Young, "The Interpretation of נָחַ" in Isaiah 52:15," *Westminster Theological Journal* (May-October 1941): 125-32; reprinted in Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), pp. 199-206. Cf. Young, *Isaiah*, 3:338, and the extensive refutation of "startle" in Urwick, *The Servant of Jehovah*, pp. 103-4.
- 51 For example, Unger, *Commentary*, 2: 1295 and von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, p. 721; North takes the term in the sense of sprinkling, but for the purpose of neutralizing infection or contagion by the person or thing sprinkled (Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL--LV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 235.
- 52 Young, "The Interpretation of נָחַ," pp. 129-31.
- 53 This has led some scholars to translate the verb as "spurt, scatter," so that the nations are scattered in judgment (Pieper, *Isaiah II*, pp. 432-33; Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, pp. 30-31).
- 54 W. Kay, "Isaiah: Introduction, Commentary and Critical Notes," in *The Bible Commentary*, ed. F. C. Cook, vol. 5 (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 266, n. "A."
- 55 Young, "The Interpretation of נָחַ," pp. 131-32.
- 56 Mark A. Arrington, "The Identification of the Anonymous Servant in Isaiah 40-55" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary. 1971), p. 52.
- 57 Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1295.
- 58 North, *Second Isaiah*, p. 235; this peculiar view scarcely requires refutation.
- 59 Archer, "Isaiah," p. 646.
- 60 Young, *Isaiah*, 3:339.
- 61 Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 434.
- 62 Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1295.
- 63 Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, pp. 222-23.
- 64 J. Lindblom, *The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah: A New Attempt to Solve an Old Problem* (Lund: Lunds Universitets Arsskrift, 1951), pp. 37-51.
- 65 Cf. Whybray's summary of the views of J. Begrich and O. Kaiser (Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, pp. 110-12).
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 127; cf. esp. pp. 109-39.
- 67 Westermann, *Isaiah 40--66*, p. 257.
- 68 Muilenburg, "The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40--66," 5:614.
- 69 Hengstenberg, *Christology*, abridged ed., p. 234.
- 70 Young, *Isaiah*, 3:340.
- 71 Whybray, *Isaiah 40--66*, p. 171.
- 72 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:310-11; Unger, *Commentary*, 2:1295; Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 41; cf. Leupold, *Isaiah*, 2:225; Pieper, *Isaiah II*, pp. 434-35 (Pieper refers only v. 1 to Isaiah speaking for the school of the prophets).
- 73 J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: Chapters XL--LXVI* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. 136.
- 74 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:310.
- 75 Leupold, *Isaiah*, 2:225.
- 76 Unger, *Commentary*, 2: 1295.
- 77 Leupold, *Isaiah*, 2:225.
- 78 Young thus says the message is "what we have caused to be heard" (Isaiah, 3:341).
- 79 For example, E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament and a Commentary on the Messianic Predictions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1956), 2:275-76. Though incorrectly identifying the speakers as the Gentiles of 52:15, MacRae asserts that 53:1 is "not primarily a complaint by a group of prophets lamenting that their proclamation is not being generally received, but rather an exclamation by new converts who are overwhelmed by the wonder of

- salvation that has come to them” (*The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 134).
- 80 Westermann combines both ideas: “a thing of which they have heard...and, as such, tidings which they themselves have to pass on to others” (*Isaiah 40—66*, p.260).
- 81 Kay, “Isaiah,” 5:267.
- 82 Cf. Young, *Isaiah*, 3:341.
- 83 Hengstenberg, *Christology*, 2:276.
- 84 Hengstenberg, *Christology*, abridged ed., p. 234.
- 85 Lindsey, “The Commission of the Servant,” pp. 129-45.
- 86 Lindsey, “The Commitment of the Servant,” pp. 218-20.
- 87 Young, *Isaiah*, 3:341.
- 88 Urwick, *The Servant of Jehovah*, p. 110.
- 89 Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 436.
- 90 Kay, “Isaiah,” 5:267.
- 91 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:312; cf. Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 50.
- 92 Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 52; similarly, Pieper says, “There is nothing here of rank or position, wealth, power, or outward pomp or grandeur, nothing of what appeals to the eye of natural man as brilliant and imposing” (*Isaiah II*, p. 436); cf. Young, *Isaiah*, 3:342. MacRae treats this verse in a similar fashion, indicating that “the character of Jesus was undoubtedly one of rare charm and attractiveness,” but that He did not impress the speakers, whom MacRae views as the Gentile “leaders in distant nations” who would not be attracted to “a Galilean peasant” (*The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 135).
- 93 E. J. Young, *Isaiah Fifty-Three* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 38.
- 94 Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 53.
- 95 Aston, *Challenge of the Ages*, p. 6.
- 96 B. Duhm’s view, as summarized by Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 47-48.
- 97 Cf. Pieper: “Before all others, the Servant was the object of suffering, sought out, so to speak, by suffering as the one object on earth to whom suffering pertained. All the suffering that pertained to this cursed world, He attracted to Himself, v. 6b. This suffering and these sorrows are not physical infirmity; they are the guilt of sin, wrath, curse, and punishment, taken from us and laid upon Him” (*Isaiah II*, pp. 437-38).
- 98 *Ibid.*, p. 437.
- 99 Cf. *ibid.* Contrast D. Winton Thomas who claims that the verb comes from **יָטַח** II, meaning “to be quiet, submissive,” and so translates “brought low by sickness” (“A Consideration of Isaiah LIII in the Light of Recent Textual and Philological Study,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 44 [January-March, 1968]:79, 82-83).
- 100 Payne, “The Servant of the Lord,” pp. 134-35. In possible parallel to the lament motif in both the individual lament and individual thanksgiving or declarative praise psalms, Payne notes that “the psalms of lament often present the reader with a succession of different portrayals of suffering, which make it very difficult to pin down the precise cause of the psalmist’s complaint” (p. 134; cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40—66*, p. 262).
- 101 Thomas, “Isaiah LIII,” pp. 79, 83.
- 102 Urwick, *The Servant of Jehovah*, pp. 115-17.
- 103 Culver, *The Suffering and the Glory*, p. 57.
- 104 Thomas, “Isaiah LIII,” p. 79.
- 105 J. L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p. 129.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary

3909 Swiss Ave.

Dallas, TX 75204

www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu

Thanks to Stephen Taylor for editing this article.