
Isaiah Series 2

Lesson 10

“Isaiah 42:1-9”

Objective - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

Materials - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

¹ Behold my servant, I hold him up, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights, I have set my Spirit upon him; he will cause justice to be brought forth for the nations. ² He will not cry out, or lift, or cause his voice to be heard in the street. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a faint wick he will not extinguish; faithfully he will cause judgment to be brought forth. ⁴ He will not grow dim, or be crushed until he establishes judgment in the earth, and the coasts wait for his Torah (teaching). ⁵ Thus says God, Yahweh, who created the heavens and stretching them out, hammered out the earth and its offspring, he gave breath to the people upon it and spirit to the ones walking in it. ⁶ I am Yahweh, I have called you in justice and I have caused your hand to be seized and kept you, I have given you as a covenant people, to light the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes of the blind to bring forth from the dungeon the prisoner from the house of imprisonment, the ones sitting in darkness. ⁸ I am Yahweh, that is my name, and my glory I do not give to another nor my praise to the idols. ⁹ Behold, the first things have been brought forth and new things I will cause to be revealed, before springing up I will cause you to hear them.

As we begin this section, let me first say this is some of the most beautiful and eloquent Hebrew poetry that I have thus far encountered in Isaiah. The care and symmetry with which it is constructed is truly amazing. It truly is of a very different style and texture to that of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. This might indicate a different scribe, perhaps also this could be used as evidence for the different author theories. Without really going into that again I really just wanted to note how beautiful and powerful this poetry truly is.

I have not done this previously, but in this instance I would like to give you the Aramaic Targum of this section. The Aramaic Targum as an early translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic. The Targums were used widely as the Jewish people used more and more Aramaic as their heart language rather than Hebrew. The Targums often add valuable insights into Jewish understandings of the text. It adds a number of interesting aspects to the discussion here. To be sure there are a great many interpretive difficulties with this section. Most are not here with the actual words used here, but with what this particular combination of words means here. Poetry presents particular difficulties, often both in translation of meaning and in

translation of the poetic beauty. The Targum helps us to see some of these difficulties.

^{42:1} Behold my servant, I *will bring* him *near*, my chosen in whom my *Memra is pleased*; I *will put my Holy Spirit* upon him, he will reveal *my* judgment to the *peoples*. ² He will not cry or *call* or *lift up* his voice outside. ³ *The poor who are like a* bruised reed he will not break, and *the needy who are like a dimly burning wick* he will not quench; he will bring forth *judgement* for *his* truth. ⁴ He will not *tire* or *be weary* till he has established *judgement* in the earth; and *islands* wait for his law. ⁵ Thus says the *everlasting* God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, *founded* the earth and its *residents*, gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ “I am the LORD, I have *exalted* you in *truth*, I have taken you by the hand and *will establish* you and give you as a covenant to

people, a light to the *peoples*,⁷ to open the
eyes of *the house of Israel who are as blind to*
the law, to bring out *their exiles, who*
resemble prisoners, from among the Gentiles,
to deliver from the slavery of the kingdoms
those who are jailed as prisoners of darkness.

⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory -
that I am revealed upon you - I will give to no
other people, nor my praise to those who
serve images. ⁹ Behold, the former things
have come to pass, and new things I now
declare; before they *come I will announce to*
*you.*¹

As you can see the Jewish translators of the text have made a number of modifications. These are marked in italics in the text above and they make for interesting interpretations. You might choose to touch on several of these and as I go through this text I may refer to them as I go through.

Let us begin our task, Yahweh's servant was identified as Jacob/Israel at 41:8-10 and was designated as a messenger to Jerusalem in 41:27.

¹ Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum*, in The Aramaic Bible series, Volume 11 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 81-82.

Now, in chapter 42 we have a servant designated as the messenger of the heavenly court to bring notice of decisions reached at that court unto the “nations” and to establish those decisions as a verdict in the land.²

Chapter 42 is the first of three suffering servant oracles found in Isaiah.

These culminate with the pinnacle of this genre in Isaiah 53. The concepts and ideas of Isaiah 53 begin here with the revelation of Yahweh in chapter 42. There appears to be a gradual revealing of the ideas that will be

brought more to light in chapter 53 and will be grasped in the New

Testament as the basis of the Gospel message. The concept of

“vicariousness,” or “vicarious suffering” in the Old Testament is inextricably

linked with Isaiah 53. This concept, or idea, is unique to this context, but it

has roots that run further back into the history of Jewish literature, even

though they are often not clearly defined in those early stages to be easily

seen without the enlightenment that we find in the later revelations.³

According to MacRae, what we have in Isaiah is an example of progressive

revelation. He says that you can hardly find a better example of this type

of revelation than what we find with the “suffering servant.” In chapters

41-55 Isaiah looks forward to the time of their sufferings in exile and gives

them comfort and assurance that Yahweh will take them back to their

² John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Volume 25, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 660.

³ Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., Daniel P. Bailey, trans., *The Suffering Servant Isaiah 53 in Jewish Sources* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), p. 1.

homeland. He then leads on from that situation to give to them the remarkable pictures of the divine plans of salvation that we find so clearly presented in chapters 53-55.⁴

In order to understand the thought processes of the prophets and how he progresses it is important to understand some things about the nature of progressive revelation. The Bible is not like a modern textbook. It does not have a table of contents, an outline, and does not take up, what would appear to us to be logical divisions under which it defines the truths that Yahweh wishes his people to know. Instead the Bible is a record of how God revealed himself to his people down through the centuries. It is written to people of different times, cultures, and social settings; these are very diverse. Often times the context of a given passage deals with an immediate problem that is facing the people at that moment. There is a certain progress that we find in revelation as God reveals his nature, plans and will to his people in a context, an amount, and in a manner that is comprehensible. According to MacRae, progressive revelation is necessary because the human mind cannot immediately grasp all of the truth on any particular subject. He says that certain truths have to be studied for a period of time before a person is ready to receive more truth. He does make clear that progressive revelation does not mean that God reveals


⁴ Allan A. MacRae, "The Servant of the Lord in Isaiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 12, No. 483 (1964), pp. 218-227.

anything false, or wrong in any way, it is just not complete. In some way all revelation is incomplete because humankind can only grasp a small part of the wisdom of God. God chooses what truths he reveals at what time in order that they should be properly understood. In this vein Jesus said to his disciples at John 16, ¹² **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come”** (NRSV). Even Jesus had to delay what he revealed until the proper time and when they had the help they needed in order to have a hope of comprehending God’s message to them.⁵

The prophets of old revealed the things of God, marvelous things, and there seems to be no doubt that they did not understand them all. They marveled at what they were told to reveal, but they did it because they were following the commands of God. What they

⁵ Allan A. MacRae, “The Servant of the Lord in Isaiah,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 12, No. 483 (1964), pp. 218-227.

cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12 ¹⁰ **Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, ¹¹ inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!** NRSV



did know, and what they did trust was that God was their source of salvation. The prophets conveyed the message that in his own time, and in his own way, God would bring about salvation to his servant and through his servant. Yahweh had called Israel to be his servant and had preserved the nation in order to fulfill that purpose. God rebukes Israel for being blind and therefore unfit for the purposes for which he had preserved the nation. He redeems them in order that they might be able to fulfill his purpose, he disciplines them in order that they might be able to fulfill his purpose. Redeeming Israel from exile only becomes a useful exercise for God, and Israel, if they perform the function to which they had been called.⁶

Sin, in this context, is when a person or thing does not perform the function for which he has been created and called by God to perform. Isaiah briefly touches on the point of how Israel can be delivered from its tendency to sin, its tendency to fail to live up to the calling of God. This stands as the background for the comfort that Yahweh brings to his people in chapter 42 through 53 as he challenges them to fulfill their destiny because it is a great destiny

⁶ Allan A. MacRae, "The Servant of the Lord in Isaiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 12, No. 483 (1964), pp. 218-227.

and more and more he reveals to them that in reality he will carry the weight of that calling in the form of his special servant which will be descended, in human terms, from Israel. In 42:1-7 we find only the suggestion that the servant of God being described might be an individual instead of the personification of an entire nation. This seems very mysterious and perhaps even confusing here, but sometimes reality is confusing. Greater clarity on this will be provided later. We are also not told here of the impact that the special servant would have upon sin. In the verses and chapters that follow there will be further illumination of this aspect. In Isaiah 42:1-7 the impression is given that the servant's work applies only to the Gentile nations.⁷ You can see concern with this aspect of Isaiah 42 in the Targum that seeks to address this aspect by inserting in verse 7 "the house of Israel." This phrase is not in the Hebrew text. There appears to be the feeling that the Israel is being left out, or behind, or perhaps just being used as a pawn. We see in the Targum then a changing of the emphasis so that the focus in verse 7 is shown to be toward Israel and not toward the nations. **to open the eyes of**

⁷ Allan A. MacRae, "The Servant of the Lord in Isaiah," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 12, No. 483 (1964), pp. 218-227.

the house of Israel who are as blind to the law, to bring out their exiles, who resemble prisoners, from among the Gentiles, to deliver from the slavery of the kingdoms those who are jailed as prisoners of darkness.⁸

As we come back now to the text in Isaiah 42 let me begin by saying that there are number of differing interpretations of who the servant being described in verse 1 is. In the Hebrew text there is ambiguity and even in the Targum there is the ambiguity. In the Old Greek translation (the Septuagint) all ambiguity is removed with the servant being identified as Jacob, as Israel, very clearly, and distinctly. Even in Jewish sources this interpretation is not universally accepted with a number of different options put forward from Cyrus (Saadya), Israel (Rashi), the king Messiah (Kimchi), and then the prophet himself (Ibn Ezra).⁹ Watts concludes that the agent of Yahweh is Cyrus in the context of Isaiah 42.¹⁰ To be fair, the term “servant” (עֶבֶד) is a somewhat ambiguous term that does not indicate a specific office. It can be used of patriarchs (Genesis 24:14; 26:24), of Levites (Psalm 113:1), of prophets (1 Kings 14:18; Isaiah 20:3), of kings (2 Samuel 3:18; Haggai 2:23), or even of Israel (Jeremiah 30:10; 46:27-28). The form of the oracle here in Isaiah does point to some sort of official commissioning, or installation, as can be seen from the close

⁸ Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum*, pp. 81-82.

⁹ I. W. Slotki, Revised by A. J. Rosenberg, in the Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1987), p. 199.

¹⁰ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, p. 660.

stylistic parallels in 1 Samuel 9:15-17 and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12. The emphasis of Isaiah 42 falls upon the servants' designation, his task, his approach and his success. He is designated as the one in whom the Lord delights and on whom his spirit resides. He will bring forth justice (משפט) to the nations who wait for his teaching (תורה Torah). He will act in a way that is unobtrusive in dealing with those who are damaged and fragile. Finally, he will not be stopped in his task, it will be accomplished by him.¹¹

At this point, perhaps it is the case that the reader is left in considerable confusion or reaches far into the future and applies this to Jesus in order to remove tension. Of course this option will not have been available to the original readers. Confusion will be especially the case if the reader is interested in identifying the servant with a historical person, beyond that of the title given in Isaiah 42. It must be admitted that to enter in such a historical question as this here is to enter into the realm of speculation. It would seem that for the oracle the introduction of the "servant," who is equipped with the traditional attributes that are generally associated with the charismatic leaders that delivered Israel are meant to focus specifically on Israel's complaint (40:27) where the issue of justice (משפט) is brought up as a complaint against Yahweh. The sovereign power of Yahweh has been established in chapter 41 by the

¹¹ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 324.

calling of the conqueror from the north (41:25). That this ruler from the north is the servant of chapter 42 seems to be ruled out by his manner of establishing justice to the nations, not with force, but with gentleness. Some have perhaps seen this as a reference to the gentle manner of Cyrus as he is compared with the previous, Babylonian kings. The term servant within this section of Isaiah occurs in 41:8, along with a variety of attributes that are familiar. Israel/Jacob is designated as servant, the elect one, the offspring of Abraham and even as friend. In 41:9 Israel is once again named the servant who has been cast off and who is promised help from the victorious hand of Yahweh (verse 10).¹²

For those who would take the larger literary context seriously there can be no way of avoiding the implication that *in some way* Israel is the servant who is named in 42:1. No one else is clearly named. Without a doubt there are huge interpretive problems that come from this identification. Each of these interpretive problems though needs to be explored on the basis of the leads that are available to us in the text itself. As was noted previously there are a vast array of opinions about who is being spoken of in this whole section of Scripture. There are however, several things that need to be noted as we proceed with our interpretation. The oracle in 5-9 involves a number of references in the first person, "I am Yahweh," "I have called you in righteousness," "I have

¹² Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, pp. 324-325.

taken you by the hand,” “I have given you...” (verse 6) and then in verse 8 once again there is “I am Yahweh”. All of this first person speech seems to represent some form of commissioning. This commissioning is connected, through language that resonates with Genesis 1 and the Psalter with the creator God. At Exodus 6:2, Moses is commissioned by Yahweh using the self-predication “I am Yahweh.”¹³ In some sense then, what is happening here is that Yahweh is commissioning, calling upon his servant to fulfill his destiny.

To say that the interpretation of the “servant” in chapters 40 -41 has created great debate is perhaps an understatement of the highest order. This subject has greatly occupied scholarship. To be fair there is no true agreement regarding the identity of the servant.¹⁴ Christians seek to bypass any meaning that does not relate directly to Jesus as the Messiah in this passage. To do so is certainly a strong temptation, but I think there is good reason to resist some of this temptation and recognize that the message of Yahweh is more than just a message of hope for a far off event in the future it was a call to become something for that original audience. Certainly in so many ways Jesus so clearly embodies the call of Yahweh for his servant given here in this oracle of Isaiah, but is that not also the calling of the people of Yahweh too? Are they too, not to embody that which

¹³ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, pp. 325-326.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY” Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 42.


Jesus so aptly and courageously displayed in his life? Is this not the call of all who would serve the purposes of the creator? Surely this must be to fulfill our highest calling to fulfill the destiny for which we were first called into being? This beautiful and powerful ancient Hebrew poetry calls with the power of imagery driven back into our created memory for us to recognize the voice of our creator and answer his call to fulfill his destiny for us. Humankind was called into being in order to serve from the beginning.

In Genesis 2:15, the verb form of the word translated in Isaiah 42 is used to describe part of the task given to humanity in the Garden (עבד). This is a word that would in time become powerfully linked with the service of the Priests and Levites in the temple. It would become equated with the idea of worship. It carries with it concepts of fulfilling the role for which humanity was created in the first place. For Christians of course, this role and function is most clearly and powerfully seen in the person of Jesus Christ. Surely in this then is a powerful lesson for us today. Jesus fulfilled the true role for which humanity was created, he worshipped, served and magnified God as a true image-bearer should. Certainly no one has ever fulfilled that destiny as clearly, or powerfully as did Jesus Christ, but the call here in Isaiah is not so much for Jesus but to all of Yahweh's

children. This is a call to Yahweh's image-bearers to fulfill their destiny of bearing his image.

Is it not a remarkable thing for Yahweh to call his people a servant in their exile and in their despair? For some, such a reminder of their being a servant might seem cruel and crushing, but the passion and the beauty of these words lifts the veil of darkness and despair from the people and challenges them to fulfill their role as God people destined to bring light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring our prisoners from the dungeon and darkness of their captivity. These words come to a people who for all practical purposes seemed without hope, without real identity, and these words they are drawn toward their creator in the beauty of understanding that recognizes that the slave of Yahweh is far more blessed than the king of Babylon. A slave in the house of the Lord has hope and can rely upon the one who created everything and everyone and Yahweh will ultimately make all things right. There is work to be done for sure, to put things right, and Yahweh calls his servant to be a part of that great redemptive action.

It is a certainly a difficult question as to how we should interpret the "universal outreach" of this imagery. To be sure the first reading of this text will have most likely been applied primarily to the Jewish people as they sought redemption from the exile and from their shame. Their temple was destroyed, their kingdom lay in ruins as they were subject to



the whims of other powers far beyond the power of Israel. Certainly as the church has read this passage they have seen new things that this first audience will not have been able to see in their despair and in their crushed condition, but despite this, these words have continued to inspire, challenge and call people to the pursuit of the will of Yahweh through the centuries and these words still powerfully call us today. Mark will record these words in his Gospel and attach them to the ministry and the hopes of the message of Jesus. It is perhaps in the imprecision of their great versatility that we find in these words power for all ages and in all circumstances to challenge us to draw nearer to God and to pause and ask God, how would you have me serve?

We are called upon as Yahweh's servant to perform this task with gentleness, faithfulness and persistence because we know that the power from which we serve cannot be crushed, stopped, or extinguished. The one who gave us breath and life empowers us and he will bring justice. He leads us by the hand he has seized to be a light to the nations, displaying the power of his covenant. As we fulfill our true destiny serving Yahweh the light of his truth will be seen by those in darkness and ignorance. In this the name of Yahweh will be praised. Yahweh shares his glory and honor with no other, not images, image-bearers or proxies (idols). Honor belongs to him alone. God reveals all of these things that are to come to

pass in the future in the past in order to cause us to take notice and for us
to be cognizant of the truth.

Synopsis

This beautiful and powerful poetic oracle begins by calling upon the unidentified servant of Yahweh, one who is held up, chosen, a delight to Yahweh's soul, who has the Spirit of Yahweh upon him, to cause justice to be brought forward to the nations. More of the nature of the servant's ministry is revealed in his gentle, persistent confidence, to carry out the task of bringing judgment and teaching (Torah) to the world. There is a quiet, gentle, and confident portrayal of this servant here that speaks of the work of Yahweh; reveals some of Yahweh's nature. We have here a portrayal of the unique nature of Yahweh as the creator and bringer of life. The poet then turns to the theme for which Yahweh is calling his servant, to bring justice. Indeed Yahweh has seized the hand of his servant and caused that servant to be a covenant people that is to bring the light of God's justice to the nations. This servant is to open the eyes of the blind, bring light into the darkness and despair of the imprisonment of sin's cold hard grip.

In all of this poem, a central theme is that all of this is being done by Yahweh, who is unique, special and like no other. There is no one, or nothing with which to compare him. We are also given a glimpse of the jealous nature of Yahweh, which is a part of his righteousness. It is right that only Yahweh deserves the title God; it is right that credit for creation belongs to no other. Any others that make such claims lie, and brings unrighteousness into being. God reveals these things as only he can to stand as a beacon, a marker for those who would see the light of truth. He does it in advance in order to demonstrate his power, his nature and his bringing about of his will.

Questions

1. Why do you think Yahweh refers to his chosen one as a servant?
2. When you think of a servant what are some things that come to your mind?
3. What do you think it means to be the servant of Yahweh?
4. How would you define justice? How from what we have read here, might Yahweh define justice?
5. Why do you think true justice seems so elusive to humanity?
6. How do justice and judgment relate to one another?
7. Why do you think we are reminded of Yahweh's role in creation in this oracle?
8. How do you think breath and spirit are related in verse 5?
9. What is a covenant? How does it differ from an agreement?
10. What do you think it means to be the covenant people of Yahweh?
11. What are some ways that you think the church can be a light to the nations?
12. What are some things you might expect in the future after reading this passage?
13. What does it mean to have the Spirit of Yahweh set upon a person?