
Isaiah Series 2

Lesson 14

“Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12”

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.**

¹³ Behold, my servant will act wisely; he will be exalted and lifted up and be very high. ¹⁴ Just as many were appalled by him - so disfigured was his appearance from a man, his form from that of man (Adam). ¹⁵ So he will startle many nations; kings will shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told to them they will see, and that which they have not heard they will understand. ^{53:1} Who has trusted what was reported to us? To whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed? ² For he went up before him like a tender plant, and like a root from dry ground; he had no form to him and no majesty that we should look at him and nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ The one being despised and rejected by men, a man of pain, and one knowing sickness, one from whom they hide their faces, one being despised and we held him to be of no account. ⁴ Surely our sickness he has carried, and our diseases he has borne; and we accounted him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. ⁵ He was pierced from our transgressions, being crushed from our iniquities upon him was the discipline that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have strayed, to our own path we have turned,

and Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and he was afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; like a lamb brought to the slaughter and like a sheep before his shearers is silent, he did not open his mouth. ⁸ From oppression of justice he was taken, and his future, who could speak because he was divided from the land of the living, from the transgression of my people he was marked. ⁹ They intended to give him a grave with the wicked, with the rich his tomb, no violence had he done and no deceit was in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yahweh was pleased to crush him by sickness. When you make his soul *an offering* for sin, he will see his seed; he will prolong his days, and the pleasure of Yahweh in his hand will prosper. ¹¹ From the labor of his soul he will see; he will satisfy in his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will cause the multitude to be righteous and their iniquities he will bear. ¹² Therefore, I will apportion to him a place with the great and with the strong he will divide the spoil because he emptied himself to the death of his soul and with the transgressors he was numbered and he carried the sins of many, and for the ones transgressing he will make entreaty.


I know I have said this previously, but in this section I would really recommend that you take note of the translation that I have given. The level of interpretation involved in the English translations of this section is much higher than I have seen in any of the previous chapters that we have studied. To be fair, the English translators are dealing with an extremely dense and difficult text, but I believe that they oversimplify it at the expense of the density and depth of the meaning in the text. It is my opinion that we should struggle with complex texts and not simplify them in translation as sometimes the clarification empties meaning from the text. One point in particular where this happens, is in this section with the usage of the word “soul” (נֶפֶשׁ) which is either translated as “life,” or some other manner, and this deep concept is hidden from view for the English reader.

We have already seen the “servant” of Yahweh mentioned in 42:1-9; 49:1-7, and 50:4-9. These poetic units are often regarded by interpreters as a distinctive set of texts, which are commonly referred to as “the Servant Songs.” There is however, great interpretive uncertainty in this regard on two counts. One, it is disputed as to

whether, or not, these poems were intended to be a distinctive body of texts, or whether they simply need to be taken in their present literary context. Two, the poems are concerning a particular figure (historical or metaphorical), but the actual identity of the figure remains enigmatic in the poem. It is one of the great truths, and also an oddity in Old Testament studies that at the same time as a text that is taken to be *abundantly rich and theologically suggestive* it is undeniably *inaccessible and without clear meaning*. All of this is compounded by the complexity of the Hebrew with a text that seems to us, at least to be disordered and enigmatic. Every translation of this text is to some degree speculative.¹

Some consider this chapter to be the most contested chapter in the Old Testament. This chapter has been shown enormous attention from the Christian church. It has been seen as closely related to the New Testament proclamation of the gospel (Acts 8:26-39). Perhaps it needs to be said very strongly here, more strongly perhaps than at other places, that great care must be taken not to bring a historical, or literary perspective to this text from

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Companion Bible (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 141.



outside. To do so colors all that follows. It is crucial that we begin by doing our best to understand the text within its current canonical context.² Certainly it is for us important how we see this passage used in the New Testament, but that should not be our starting place for understanding what this passage not only means today, but the message that it will have brought to those who originally heard it, those who preserved it, and those who continue to be challenged and encouraged by its message through the centuries.

From a Jewish perspective this passage is often seen as presenting the Jewish people as “the Suffering Servant.” Their claim is that the prophet is not speaking about future events, but about what was contemporary to his time. The implication of this Jewish argument is that the Jews suffer because of the misconduct of the world, and that their suffering has a redeeming value that affects the rest of the world. This kind of polemic, in the past, often resulted in violence with many Jews suffering violence, or even paying with their life. Nevertheless, with regard to this passage of Scripture passions still run very high. Within a Jewish context this passage has not

² Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 2013), p. 410.

always been understood to be about the Jewish people in general, but about one person in particular. From the 10th century A.D. Saadia Gaon identified the description of Isaiah 53 with the prophet Jeremiah. He interpreted the whole chapter as being a reference to the prophet. Saadia's theory was rejected during his own lifetime, with particular strength by the Karaites, a Jewish sect that still exists today. They were strict literalists when it came to Biblical interpretation; they rejected rabbinical interpretations and innovations. This view has also been rejected by some modern scholars as well.³


Others are not so sure, even citing the words of Jeremiah about himself when he says **"But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!'"** For Schreiber the rejection of Jeremiah as "the Suffering Servant" has been too hastily accepted. It is his belief that the reference here in Isaiah 53 was

³ Mordecai Schreiber, "The Real "Suffering Servant": Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.

indeed a reference to Jeremiah that was picked up by the second Isaiah while in Babylonian captivity: When he heard about this great prophet whose story was not widely known by the Babylonian exiles. Schreiber credits Jeremiah with transforming Judaism from a religion focused on the Temple sacrifices to a faith based upon the Torah, prayer, and ethical behavior. He believes that Isaiah 53 gives a biographical overview of the life of Jeremiah as seen by this second Isaiah when he heard of this prophet while in exile in Babylon.⁴

Jeremiah then becomes the image of the prophet *par excellence*, the true servant of God. As this pivotal prophet of God then, Jeremiah comes to embody the entire Jewish people and so the Servant of Yahweh becomes interchangeably Jeremiah, and the Jewish people. Schreiber sees Isaiah 53:2 as a direct biographical reference to Jeremiah as we are told in Jeremiah 1 that God chose Jeremiah from birth. The two words “arid land” (מֵאֶרֶץ צִיָּה) are borrowed from the next episode in the Book of Jeremiah (2:6 בְּאֶרֶץ צִיָּה) where the prophet reminds his readers of the wandering through the desert. Jeremiah was born a priest, but he gave up his

⁴ Mordecai Schreiber, “The Real “Suffering Servant”: Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.



priestly rank and he was not an official prophet of the royal court until the very end, when King Zedekiah finally began to consult him without actually engaging him as a court priest. He was not well respected and even despised by his contemporaries. He was the most afflicted Hebrew Prophet in the Bible. He was despised for what he foresaw and proclaimed to his contemporaries as someone who disturbed the serenity and smugness of his contemporaries.⁵

There is no prophet in Israel's history that suffers the pain of the Jewish people more vividly than does Jeremiah (53:3). After he prophesies at the Temple the priests try to put him to death, he is banned from the public and goes into hiding. At one point King Jehoiakim throws Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies into the fire and once more Jeremiah is forced into hiding in order to save his life. Jeremiah suffers like no other prophet in the Bible, and even authors the Book of Lamentations as Judaism's official lament for the destruction of the Temple (53:4). Even at 53:5, a case can be made for Jeremiah bearing the burdens of sin for his generation. The life and teachings of Jeremiah served as an object lesson for those of his

⁵ Mordecai Schreiber, "The Real "Suffering Servant": Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.

generation and even those that followed. He is credited with preserving the Jewish people as a distinct people leaving a legacy by helping to preserve for Judaism the Torah and the prophetic teachings with the help of his scribe Baruch ben-Neriah.⁶

Schreiber sees in 53:5-6 that Jeremiah was flogged and even lowered into the mud pit emerging with bruises; all of this is done for the sake of the Jewish people. He lived among a divided people during the siege of Jerusalem and had to bear the consequences of living among a divided people. He was attacked (53:7) and the priests in the Temple try to pass a death sentence upon Jeremiah, he humbly accepts his fate and is only saved through the last-minute intercession of a highly placed friend (Jeremiah 11:19⁷). The question then becomes why would the prophet fail to identify Isaiah by name in his oracle? Those that hold that this is Second Isaiah, use as evidence, that the prophet does not even identify himself, but remains anonymous himself. Schreiber proposes that part of the reason for leaving “the Suffering Servant” unnamed is due to the

⁶ Mordecai Schreiber, “The Real “Suffering Servant”: Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.

⁷ **But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. And I did not know it was against me that they devised schemes, saying, “Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, so that his name will no longer be remembered!”** NRSV

politics of the people returning to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah and their efforts to rebuild the Temple, while at the same time only 70 years have passed and there are people that can almost remember this man. Having a timeless “Suffering Servant” perhaps presents a more powerful image than one that is almost contemporary.⁸ Arguments from silence, as this one is, are seldom strong arguments, really they are very weak without a considerable amount of additional substantiation. Without that substantiation this type of argument represents little more than pure speculation.

So often as we look at the Bible the things we have heard and the things we have been taught fill the screen of our consciousness so full that they crowd out all that is not on that familiar screen. For us as Christians our immediate response to the proposal of Schreiber regarding “the Suffering Servant” being Jeremiah seems farfetched and strange. It seems radical and new, but surely that is the way so much of the Christian message seemed to the Jews of the First Century and perhaps even today as many may hear the stories of Jesus for the very first time. We need to be aware of the fact that

⁸ Mordecai Schreiber, “The Real “Suffering Servant”: Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.

often we find in the Old Testament types a new, fresh fulfillment in the New Testament. An example of this can be seen in Isaiah 7:14 which is then quoted again in Matthew 1:23, this time mostly from the Septuagint.

Schreiber believes that Jesus knew that “the Suffering Servant” was indeed Jeremiah and that he, Jesus, modeled his life on the life of Jeremiah. Schreiber even believes that Jesus manipulated circumstances so that he would be martyred and that he planned this based upon modeling his life under the influence of Jeremiah.⁹ Childs would agree that there are parts of Isaiah 53 that seem to fit the biographical sketch that we have of the Prophet Jeremiah, especially with regard to the trials of Jeremiah, but there are parts that seem to go further than Jeremiah. It is interesting to observe that in Acts 8, when the Eunuch asked about the identity of “the Suffering Servant,” Philip did not simply say that this was Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, beginning with the Scriptures, “he preached the good news of Jesus.” Certainly it is the case that “the Suffering Servant” is of such theological significance because the imagery is linked with the Gospel

⁹ Mordecai Schreiber, “The Real “Suffering Servant”: Decoding a Controversial Passage in the Bible,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 37 (2009), pp. 35-44.

of Jesus Christ, who is, and always has been, the foundation of God's salvific work for both Israel and the world.¹⁰


If indeed, the 3 "Suffering Servant" oracles are connected, then it would seem the same character would be behind that imagery in each of "the Suffering Servant" oracles. It was at Isaiah 41:8 that it seems that the "servant" of Yahweh is identified as Israel, as Jacob. As we moved through to chapter 42 there was no hint that anyone has identified this person with the prophet Jeremiah. There is no indication that the description there applies to him. The issue of establishing justice very much seems to be at the forefront of the imagery there. Through the next few chapters over and over again the focus appears to be clearly upon Israel. At 44:21, once again Jacob is referred to as the servant of Yahweh. The focus over and over again appears to be a call to the people of Israel to come and be what God has called them to be. At 49:1; and 5, there is a reference to one who was formed in the womb to be Yahweh's servant and to bring Jacob back to him. It is here that you begin to get a hint that

¹⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, pp. 410-422.

perhaps the idea of the servant does not simply and completely refer to Jacob.

Brueggemann says, "These verses constitute an enormous problem in Isaiah studies because they celebrate "the servant of the Lord," whose identity is unfathomable." He goes on to point out that the usual Jewish interpretation identifies the servant as the community of Israel. Of course Christians see here an anticipatory allusion to Jesus. For those who seek to find a person that would have been known to the audience who first read these words, someone historically accessible to them, the question of the identity of the servant presents an enigma that at the present time is beyond resolution.¹¹ This means that there is no historical character that has received widespread acceptance as a historical character either contemporary, or preceding that original audience that fits the description of the text. To be certain this is troubling to us and makes us resort all the more quickly to what we see as a ready and easy answer to the enigma, namely that this refer to a character far into

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 109.



the future from that audience and is indeed a foretelling of the coming of Jesus.

Perhaps it should be the case that the quest for the exact identity of a historical individual that this, and perhaps the other places refer to, should be abandoned. Perhaps it should be enough for us to recognize that Yahweh has said there will be such an individual and to trust in that fact. This agent will indeed bring healing and emancipation into the world. Such an approach permits us to attend to the text without getting so wrapped up in the question of identity that the message is lost to us. Whoever, the original audience may have thought the person was, or was to be, Yahweh is the force behind that person and the entire mission.¹² Surely this is where focus should be at any rate. The source of the initiative, the source of the power, and of the plan has, was, and always will be, Yahweh.

Let us return again to our text and walk through some points of this text. The double theme of *humiliation and exaltation* are a constant plot line within this poem. At verse 14 the servant appears

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 109-110.

to be a figure that is marred, or marked in some way. The servant is not one of the “beautiful people.” Despite this appearance as we move into verse 15 it becomes immediately apparent that he startles the kings of the earth and that they are awed by him. This entire poem is epitomized by this marred figure who inspires awe in the powerful. The only way for this to happen is through the power of Yahweh. For the Jews this imagery reflected how God would deal with Jerusalem, and for Christians there has been Jesus who in humiliation is crucified and in resurrection is exalted. So often we get tied up in the debate so tightly about who is correct that sometimes we fail to see that perhaps there is merit in both perspectives and that rather than being contradictory these two viewpoints complement one another. Both point to a trust in Yahweh and a reliance upon him to make this a reality.¹³

As we move on to 53:2, we find the beginnings of the life story of the servant from birth at verse 2 to death at verse 9. There is not an auspicious beginning here, rather it is marked by humiliation. Despite the inauspicious beginning, verse 4 introduces us to a

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 141-145

surprise. This nobody, from whom nothing is expected, is about to do something monumentally decisive. He takes upon himself disabilities, diseases, hurts caused by sin, punishments and as he takes all of this on he is crushed and bruised. We are not told how hurt and sin can be reassigned to him. This is not the purpose of the poem. It simply tells us that it happens and that Yahweh stands behind all that occurs. At verse 6 it is made plain that our sin is laid upon him because we are all like sheep that have gone astray.¹⁴

At verse 7 we are told that though he was oppressed and afflicted he did not protest. We are informed at verse 8 that by a reversion of justice he was taken away and that he was killed. This happened because of the transgression of God's people. We are then told that his grave was made with the wicked, and that his tomb was with the rich. He is grouped among the despised ones that the world thinks have succeeded, the rich. At the end of verse 9 we have the end of his life and we would expect to have the end of his suffering and pain, and yet at verse 10 we are told that there is more. Yahweh's plan was to deploy an affective sufferer. He did not die in

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 145-146.

vain, or suffer in vain; his suffering was advantageous and propelled the plan of God onward, and through this dead man the will of God would prosper.¹⁵

The poem ends with a powerful affirmation from God. This suffering servant will be exalted and the exaltation will come because he poured himself out to death. He fulfills his destiny before God and the appearances of his death were false. He was willing to be humiliated and to die in order to fulfill the plan of God. Without a doubt the imagery of not only this “Suffering Servant” passage but all the other fits with the life, death and mission of Jesus Christ, and certainly none of the other proposals even come close by comparison. We need to recognize the power that a mystery can have and that this mysterious passage has had as it compelled people through the centuries to await the marvelous revelation that Yahweh would bring.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 146-148.

Synopsis

As we approach this text we need to note the great difficulty in providing a translation of this beautiful, complex and difficult Hebrew poetry. As we approach this text it is important to struggle with those difficulties and not to just sweep them under the carpet and pretend they have been dealt with properly. Yahweh is indeed an awesome God and his ways are challenging and enigmatic to us. This passage is one that draws us into the mystery of that great and awesome God. One of the things that is always right and proper in interpreting the Old Testament, or for that matter any Biblical passage, is to ask what would the original audience have understood from this passage. Something that we need to be aware of is that we are not the same as they were, and our questions are not the same as the original audience's questions. As we have explored these "Suffering Servant" passages it seems likely that in some way the original audience will have understood the Jewish people as a whole to be that "Suffering Servant." Certainly it is the case that the Prophet Jeremiah bears many resemblances with the "Suffering

Servant” imagery given here, but there are also an incredible number of incongruence as well.

It is certainly the case that from the Christian perspective no one fulfills the things that are given in these passages like Jesus does. To be certain that original audience will not have been able to comprehend the fullness of who he was, but perhaps some will have understood that the thing that was most crucial in interpreting this passage is that Yahweh is behind everything, bringing his marvelous plan into reality. It should be no surprise that God is mysterious and that we are continually surprised as more and more of his nature is revealed. This passage powerfully reveals a God who yearns to embrace his people and to reach out to them. This passage has inspired and caused marvel in those who have sought Yahweh down through the hallways of time. In part it is because of the mysterious nature of this passage that it has been so inspirational.

Questions

- 1.** Why do you think we as human beings are so often attracted to beautiful people?
- 2.** Why are we startled when ugly, or deformed people do marvelous things? Does this perspective have anything to do with our view of God?
- 3.** Why do some people like surprises and others not like surprises?
- 4.** What are some traits that attract you to other people? Why?
- 5.** What do you think it means for “the Suffering Servant” to carry our infirmities, or diseases?
- 6.** How can it be just for Jesus to bear the sins of the unrighteous?
- 7.** How can God be fair if he punished an innocent person?
- 8.** Why do you think “the Suffering Servant” does not protest his innocence?
- 9.** Why do you think the oracle equates the rich and the wicked in verse 9?
- 10.** Why would Yahweh be pleased to crush an innocent man? How does this benefit God? Was Jesus God and if so how does that affect what is happening here?
- 11.** How would it be possible for any human to fulfill this prophesy?
- 12.** How can God allot a portion with the great, and a division of the spoils to a dead man (verse 12)?
- 13.** How can a dead man make intercession for the transgressors?
- 14.** How does the fact that this is poetry affect our interpretation of it?