

SESSION EIGHT

ISAIAH: THE SERVANT ORACLES

Isaiah 40—53

INTRODUCTION

Closely connected to the study of Isaiah 52:13—53:12 is the topic of the Servant in chapters 40—66 of Isaiah. The term "servant" or "servants" is a very frequent topic in these chapters. The term "servant" occurs twice in the Isaiah 53 passage, which Christians have long interpreted as a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. But if this is true, are we to take all the other references to "servant" as being the Lord Jesus Christ? As one studies the data, there is some obvious tension here. At times, the other references could refer to the Lord Jesus (and often do). At other times, however, the term "servant" is unmistakably a designation for the nation Israel itself. How can we identify the servant in one place as the Lord Jesus, and in other places as the nation?

OVERVIEW OF ISAIAH 40—66

The latter part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40—66 (called by some as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah), is composed of three major movements. Notice the repeated phrase "There is no peace for the wicked" in 48:22 and 57:21, and a similar theme in 66:24 that establishes this structure. I will refer to these three sections as Book 1, Book 2, and Book 3.

Book 1 (40—48) involves the delivering and restoring command of the incomparable Yahweh. The leading subject matter is the Babylonian captivity that will one day come upon God's people. More explicitly, these chapters emphasize the restoration from captivity . . . a mighty salvation-deliverance by God. This is something of a "new exodus" in which Israel is to flee captivity from Babylon and be restored to the land of promise. As Israel may be prone to put her trust in the idols of the victorious Babylonians, YHWH demonstrates His superiority to the idols by recalling His work in creation and proclaiming His ability to predict the future (a feat the dumb idols cannot match).

Book 2 (49—57) deals with the deliverance-restoration and the Servant of Yahweh. YHWH's wrath has ended against His people and there is now comfort for them. However, they must turn to YHWH's salvation based on the Servant's suffering for them.

Book 3 (58—66) has retrospective and prospective features. Returning to the theme of convicting the people of sin, it will be the righteous believing remnant that experiences the deliverance and restoration, while the rebellious will be destroyed.

CONTEXTUAL OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 40—57

Note: I would like to give due credit to Dr. Bruce Waltke and Dr. Kenneth Barker for much of the material incorporated in this synthetic outline.

BOOK ONE**(40—48)**Prologue 40:1-11

YHWH comforts His afflicted people by having His heralds announce that the victorious God will come to His people to deliver and restore them.

- I. The prophet exhorts the weary Israelite exiles to find unflinching strength by waiting for YHWH, whose coming is sure because by His creation He has demonstrated that He is incomparably greater than any foe (40:12-31).
- II. YHWH demonstrates that He controls history, in contrast to the idols, by putting them on trial and challenging them to produce both near and distant prophecies, even as He does (41:1—42:9).
 - A. YHWH sets forth an immediate and distant prophecy designed to give assurance to His people (41:1-20).

Cyrus will be a conquering liberator (41:1-7) while YHWH's people will triumph over their oppressors (41:8-20).
 - B. The idols cannot respond to the challenge of YHWH and the people to give any prophecies (41:21-24).
 - C. YHWH again contrasts His ability to announce the future with the inability of the idols by giving a prophecy regarding Cyrus in the immediate future and a prophecy of His servant in the distant future (41:25—42:9).
 1. YHWH demonstrates that He is the true God by His ability to predict, in contrast to the inability of the idols (41:25-29).
 2. YHWH gives a remote prophecy regarding His servant, who will bring salvation and a proper order to the earth (42:1-9).
- III. YHWH and the prophet exhort the whole creation to sing because YHWH will subdue His enemies, and they exhort Israel to hear so that they may understand the reason for their present distress (42:10-25).
- IV. YHWH promises both to regather His witnessing, created and undeserving servant and to renew them (43:1—44:5).
- V. YHWH is the only God (44:6—45:25)
 - A. YHWH contrasts His ability to order history with the inability of the idols (44:6-23).
 - B. The Cyrus Oracle: YHWH demonstrates that He is the only God by predicting that He will install Cyrus as a shepherd to restore Israel and as a *messiah* to destroy the Gentile world (44:24—45:8).
 - C. YHWH acts sovereignly (45:9-13).
 - D. YHWH promises that the Gentile world will bow down to redeemed Israel (45:14-19).
 - E. YHWH appeals to the Gentile world to note His prophecies and turn to Him for salvation (45:20-25).
- VI. YHWH shows His superiority to the gods of Babylon (46:1-13).

- VII. YHWH predicts the fall of Babylon (47:1-15).
 VIII. Exhortations based on the fulfillment of prophecies in ch 41—47 (48:1-22).

BOOK TWO

(49—57)

- I. The servant, rejected at first by His own people, will bring salvation to the Gentiles; and at an acceptable time He will restore Israel to the land and to YHWH (49:1-13).
- A. His ministry to the Gentiles: The servant, rejected by His own people, is called to bring salvation to the Gentiles (1-6).
 - B. YHWH promises that the Gentiles will worship His despised servant (7).
 - C. YHWH promises His servant that at the appointed time He will restore Israel (8-12).
 - D. The prophet calls upon the creation to praise YHWH who thus saves His people (13).
- II. YHWH assures deserted Zion that one day her sons will return to her (49:14-26).
- III. YHWH exhorts the sons of Zion to walk by faith during the time of His rejection (50:1-11).
- A. YHWH declares that He temporarily put away Zion because she without cause rejected Him (50:1-3).
 - B. The righteous servant who will also be rejected declares that by his rejection he learned to comfort the weary (50:4-9).
 - 1. The servant looks back on his past training by experience (4-6).
 - 2. The servant found confidence to face this rejection because he knew God was on his side (7-9).
 - C. YHWH exhorts the followers of His servant to walk in faith in the darkness rather than suffer punishment reserved for the fault finders who walk in their own light (50:10-11).
- IV. YHWH comforts the righteous remnant and Zion by presenting the prospect of their glorious exaltation (51:1—52:12).
 In 52:11-12, the righteous remnant are exhorted to come home because YHWH will protect them.
- V. YHWH promises to exalt His servant because he voluntarily did his will in dying in the place of the guilty people in order to satisfy the wrath of God against sin (52:13—53:12).
- VI. Restoration of Israel to the place of blessing (54:1-17).
- VII. Appeal to the world to come to God for salvation (55:1-13).
- VIII. Moral exhortations in view of God's salvation (56:1-12).
- IX. Contrast of the contrite and the wicked (57:1-21).

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SERVANT ORACLES

Within these chapters of Isaiah are numerous references to the servant(s). However, scholars have often observed that many of these references fall within distinct units of material dealing with the servant. These are often referred to as the Servant Oracles. There are references to the servant

outside of these "oracles," but there is a distinctive focus on the servant within them. There are four basic Servant Oracles:

Isaiah 42:1-9

Isaiah 49:1-13

Isaiah 50:4-11

Isaiah 52:13--53:12

The famous Isaiah 53 passage is not only the most well known of the group, but is also the climax of the four.

OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO THE SERVANT ORACLES

- A. In the context of Isaiah 40—66, the servant is first mentioned in 41:8ff. Though referred to in the singular, the nation is clearly in view. In contrast to the feelings of abandonment that God's people in exile experience (40:27; cf. 49:14), God assures the nation Israel that they have not been rejected . . . they are His chosen servant.

"taken from the ends of the earth" - recalls the exile of Babylon

"do not fear" - context of captivity in Babylon

The context also deals with the promise and prophecy that YHWH's people will triumph over their oppressors.

- B. First Oracle (42:1-9)

Context: Yahweh is the incomparable God who will not allow the idols (in whom the nations trust) to rob Him of His glory. In 41:21-24, the challenge is hurled to the idols to prophesy. YHWH asserts He can!

1. He can prophesy of Cyrus (41:25-29) - an event in the near future
2. He can prophesy of "His Servant" who will bring about justice to the nations (42:1-9) - an event in the distant future

Observations:

1. 1-3 is quoted in Matt 12:18-21 of Jesus
2. "in whom My soul delights" – He is pleasing to the LORD
3. "My Spirit upon Him" - see 61:1-2 quoted in Lk 4:18-19
4. 42:1d - his ministry extends beyond Palestine to all nations!
5. 42:6 - called to be a light to the nations! (recall Deut 4:6-8; cf. Isa 49:6)

- C. Following The First Oracle

1. Notice 42:18-19 remarking on the blindness and deafness of the servant.
2. In the major section following (43:1—44:5), he promises to regather and renew them. Notice that in 43:10, they are called "My Servant" (sg) but also "My witnesses" (plural)

Hebrew text: "you" (pl) are my witnesses (pl)

3. In the section 44:6—45:25

The nation is referred to as My Servant in 44:21, and then in 44:22 God speaks of wiping out their transgressions.

4. In 45:4, the LORD affirms that He has called Cyrus by name (note 45:1) *for the sake of* His nation Israel (whom He speaks of as "My Servant"). The nation is in view, for it was Cyrus who issued the decree to permit the nation to return (cf. 44:28).

5. In 48:20 - God speaks of redeeming His servant Jacob (in the context of a call to flee Babylon).

D. The Second Oracle (49:1-13)

Context: Book 2 begins with 49:1. The whole section (which focuses on deliverance-restoration and the Servant) begins with a Servant Song.

Observations:

1. 49:3 - referred to as "My servant, Israel"
2. 49:4 - "My reward" may parallel 53:12
3. 49:5 - The Servant's role is to bring Jacob/Israel back to God almost suggesting that the Servant is not the nation at large but an "element" within the nation.
4. 49:6 - Not only will the Servant restore "the preserved ones" of Israel but will even be a light to the nations in which God's salvation goes to the whole Gentile world!
5. 49:7 - the Servant is despised/abhorred by the nation (sg)
6. 49:7 - The latter part of 49:7 may parallel 52:15.
7. 49:8 - The promises to the Servant ("You") include being a covenant of the people, which seems to differentiate the Servant from the nation itself (cf. "His people" in 49:13)

E. The Third Oracle (50:4-11)

Context:

49:14-26 - assurance that God's people (though feeling forsaken by the LORD) will be restored to Zion

50:1-3 - Zion's chastisement was due to their rejection of Him (not that the LORD had forsaken them)

Observations:

1. Notice how vv 5-7 paint the picture of one who is humiliated and struck, although He is obedient. This is in direct contrast to the nation in 50:1-3 who suffers because of her iniquities. (As the servant oracles progress, more emphasis is placed on the Servant's suffering—though he is innocent.)
2. Notice the call for obedience to the Servant in v 10.

OBSERVATIONS ON A SYNTHESIS LEVEL OF ISAIAH 40—66

- A. Outside the Songs, the Servant is clearly equated with Jacob-Israel; the Servant in the Songs is anonymous and ambiguous.
- B. The anonymity of the Servant in the Songs is accompanied by a heightened individualization in the portrait of the Servant (progressively clear an individual is in view).
- C. The character of the Servant in the Songs is different from that of the servant Israel in the rest of the prophecy.
- D. The Servant in the Songs has an active mission both to Israel and to the Gentiles; the servant Israel outside the Songs is the passive recipient of salvation.
- E. The attitude to the Gentiles is more sympathetic in the Songs than elsewhere.
- F. There is a difference between the conceptions of salvation and atonement in the Songs and those in the main prophecy.

THE SERVANT IN RELATION TO THE PROMISE-PEOPLE

Willis Beecher has done a very commendable job of relating the Servant issue to the calling and purpose of the nation.¹ He speaks of the "promise-doctrine" which was delivered to the nation beginning with Abraham (there are numerous references to the Abrahamic covenant throughout the Isaiah chapters). Beecher notes,

. . . Yahweh has made an eternally operative covenant with Abraham, Israel, David, in virtue of which he will bless all nations through them. It is in this character of promise-people, covenant-people, that the chapters speak of Israel as the Servant, not in the character of a mere political aggregation.²

When he comes to the verse in which the Servant has a ministry to Israel, this becomes an important issue.

Is he a new character introduced here without warning? or is he the Israel of the promise, differentiated in thought from the merely ethnical Israel, and conceived of as having relations with him? The second of these alternatives is the true one.³

As the Oracles progress, the distinctions become accentuated, particularly as the Servant is called upon to bear the sins of the covenant people.

Finally, Beecher addresses the struggle of whether to identify the Servant as the nation or as Jesus Christ. He comments,

The truth is, that both interpretations are correct in what they affirm, and incorrect in what they deny. If the Servant is Israel, that does not prove that the Servant is not Christ. If he is Israel, then he is Israel thought of as the promise-people, Israel in all the fullness of his mission to the world, and not in some relatively narrow and circumscribed portion of it. . . . It follows that

¹Willis J. Beecher, "The Servant," in *Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, 187-203.

²Ibid., 193.

³Ibid., 198.

there is no contradiction between the statement that the Servant is Israel and the statement that the servant is Jesus Christ, provided Jesus Christ is the most significant fact in the history of Israel as the people of the promise.⁴

Overall, the Servant in Isa 40—66 is the nation Israel, although there are certain characteristics and achievements that cannot be attributed to the nation at large but only to the purest expression of the nation, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. Ultimately, He accomplishes what the nation Israel was meant to accomplish (being a light to the nations), but so much more. He achieves a universal salvation for all nations (including disobedient Israel) by His innocent suffering.

In this sense, then, the dual role of "servant" (i.e., used for both the nation and the Messiah) resembles the hermeneutical case of *son* in Hosea 11:1.

THE MESSIANIC ASPECT OF THE ANONYMOUS SERVANT

- A. He will effect a proper ordering of all society (42:1; Matt 12:1-21; Matt 25:31-46; Jude 14-15; Heb 9:27-28).
- B. He mediates a new covenant for Israel, effecting both the salvation of the "people" (Israel) (42:6-7; 49:8-9) and the salvation of the land of Israel (49:8; Rom 11:26-27; Acts 3:20,21,25; Rom 9:4; Heb 11:15).
- C. He will become a "light" to the Gentiles (42:6; Jn 8:12; Matt 28:19; Eph 3:6-8).
- D. He is not defeated, nor does he become discouraged and lose confidence in Yahweh during His rejection by Israel (49:4; 50:4-9; Matt 11:25-27; Jn 16:33; Phil 2:9-11).
- E. While rejected by Israel, He brings salvation to the Gentiles (49:5-6; Matt 23:37-39; Jn 10:16; Matt 15:21-28; Acts 13:37).
- F. He suffers vicariously for the sins of Jew and Gentile (52:15; 53:6; 1 Pet 2:24; 2 Cor 5:21; Eph 2:13-16).
- G. He suffers innocently (53:9; Jn 8:46; Heb 7:26).
- H. He suffers silently (53:7; Matt 27:12,14).
- I. He dies during his suffering, and is resurrected to an exalted position before Yahweh (52:13-14; 53:10; Matt 27:50; Lk 24:36-39; Acts 1:3; 2:33,34).

RELATION OF THE FOUR SERVANT ORACLES

"As the first two songs (Isaiah 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). 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."⁵

⁴Ibid., 202.

⁵F. Duane Lindsey, "The Career of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13--53:12," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (Oct-Dec 1982): 313.