

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

Introduction

In the book of Isaiah, four sections have the poetic form of a song and in these four songs the servant of God is the object (Isa.42:1-7; Isa.49:1-9; Isa.50:4-9; Isa.52:13-53:12).

In the first song, he is introduced and called. The LORD himself speaks and calls him: *My servant, whom I uphold; my elect, in whom my soul delights;* Then the LORD declares that his servant has the commission to establish justice on earth.

In the second song, the servant of God himself first sings of his calling and preparation and then of his contempt by Israel. The LORD calls his servant to mediate the covenant after Israel's return from exile and sends him out as a light to the nations.

The entire third song is sung by the servant of God himself, describing his willing suffering and his justification by the Lord God.

In the first three songs, the servant of God carries out his ministry through his word. In contrast, in the fourth song, His ministry is silent suffering.

The fourth song begins and ends with the words of the LORD. In between, eyewitnesses sing about the suffering servant of God.

Who is the Servant of the LORD?

Four different groups and individuals are referred to as servants of God in the book of Isaiah. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify the question of who is meant as the servant of God in the four songs.

1.) The people of Israel:

The first place where the LORD names his servant is Isaiah 41:8: *But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen,*

The people of Israel are referred to as servants of God seven times: (41.8; 44.1; 44.2; 44.21; 45.4; 48.20; 49.3).

2.) The Messiah:

The beginning of the first Servant song shows that in this case, the servant of the LORD is the Messiah, for he is anointed with the Spirit of God:

Behold my servant ...I have put my spirit upon him (cf. also Is.11).

However, it is an open question whether it is a personal or a collective Messiah for God promised to the faithful of Israel: *I will put my spirit within you* (Ez.36,27).

3.) The faithful remnant of Israel:

In Isa.43, the LORD calls those people of Israel whose sins He has forgiven, "my witnesses and my servants." Isa.43:10: *You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen.* Isa.43:25 *I, even I, am he that blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and will not remember your sins.*

4.) Cyrus:

The Persian king Cyrus is described in Isaiah 44/45 as God's shepherd and anointed.

Isa.44:26 *That confirms the word of **his servant**, and performs the counsel of his messengers; that says to Jerusalem, you shall be inhabited;*

Isa.44:28 *Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, You shall be built; and to the temple, Your*

foundation shall be laid. Isa.45:1 Thus says the LORD to **his anointed**, to Cyrus.

So, we find the term "servant of God" or "servant of the LORD" both in the collective sense for the people of Israel or for a selection of the people as well as for individuals.

The First Song: Isa. 42, 1-7

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my elect, in whom my soul delights; **I have put my spirit upon him**: he shall bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth justice unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth: and the coastlands shall wait for his law. Thus says God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which comes out of it; he that gives breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk in it: I the LORD have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant to the people, for a light to the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

In this first song, the LORD introduces his servant and describes his commission. The servant is God's chosen one and should bring justice to the nations. To fulfill his mission, the servant is given the Spirit of God. The servant will tirelessly and non-violently hold on to his mission until it is accomplished: " *he shall bring forth justice to the Gentiles... He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth.*"

Before justice is established on the whole earth, however, the Messiah will execute judgment on the lawless on earth (cf. Isa. 63:1-4).

The day of vengeance was yet to come when Jesus Christ read the following words from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue of Natareth:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, (Isa. 61,1-2a).

At this point in the sentence the Lord stopped and said: *This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears (Lk.4,21).*

However, the second half of the last sentence and verse 3 read:

and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To provide for them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

After the execution of the judgment on the enemies of Israel follows the judgment on the living (Mt.25, 31-46), which represents the beginning of the Messianic Kingdom of Peace.

Mt.25,31-32 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

Then the promise of the first Servant song will also come true:

I the LORD have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant to the people, for a light to the Gentiles.

The Second Song: Isa.49,1-9

*Listen, O coastlands, unto me; and hearken, you people, from afar; The LORD has called me from the womb; from the body of my mother has he made mention of my name. And he has made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand has he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver has he hid me; And said unto me, **You are my servant, O Israel**, in whom I will be glorified. Then I said, I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing, and in vain: yet surely my due justice is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God. And now, says the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel: I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation unto the ends of the earth. Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despises, to him whom the nation abhors, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD who is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he has chosen you. Thus says the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard you, and in a day of salvation have I helped you: and I will preserve you, and give you for a covenant to the people, to establish the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages; That you may say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Show yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places.*

In the second song, the servant of God himself sings in verses 1-3 of his calling and preparation; then follow his contempt by Israel and his sending to the nations as light. From v.6 onwards the LORD speaks and in verses 8-9 calls his servant to be the mediator of the covenant after Israel's return from exile.

In this song, the LORD calls the people of Israel his servants: „*You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified*“ (V.3).

When Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus, Jesus Christ appeared to him in His heavenly glory and asked him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" (Acts 9:4). With these words the Lord identified Himself with the people who belonged to the church of probation.

The Lord uses a corresponding identification at the judgment at the beginning of the messianic kingdom. He explains to the righteous: "*What you did to one of these least of these my brothers, you did to me*" (Mt.25:40). These least of the Lord's brethren are the faithful remnant of Israel, who have just been saved by the Lord from the most intense tribulation of all time (cf. my article: God's Plan for Israel). Here, the Lord identifies himself with the people of Israel (cf. also Dan.7,14 & 27, where the Son of Man is equated with the people of the Highest).

In verse 4 the servant describes how futile his ministry seems to him: "*But I said, 'I have labored in vain, in vain, and spent my strength in vain.'* The LORD had prepared him from his mother's womb for the task, "*to bring Jacob again to him*".

But since his efforts for Israel were initially in vain – *Israel was not gathered* – the LORD now says: "*It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel: I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation unto the ends of the earth.*"

These words show that this servant cannot be the people of Israel. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is that servant. But since Israel is referred, too, as God's Servant in this song, we want to ask ourselves whether Israel, along with the person of the Messiah, may not also be called in the future to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

Our Lord said (Mt.24,14): „*This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.*“ This prophecy will be fulfilled after the rapture of the church, whereby I believe the 144,000 sealed ones from the 12 tribes of Israel will carry out the proclamation. Afterwards, in the Messianic Kingdom of Peace, God's original plan with his people Israel will be fulfilled: *You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation* (Exodus 19:6). Through this, too, Israel will be God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

In verse 8 the LORD describes his servant as despised by everyone and addresses him again: "*I will preserve you, and give you for a covenant to the people.*"

The fact that the servant of the Lord was despised by everyone is also described in the fourth song: *He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not* (Is.53,3).

After the people have rejected him, the LORD will give him to the people as a covenant. – This is the same promise as in the first song of the Servant of God. As part of this new and everlasting covenant (Jer.31:31-40; Isa.61:8), the servant of the LORD will restore the devastated inheritance to the people of Israel and set its captives free.

The third song: Isa. 50,4-9

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he awakens morning by morning, he awakens my ear to hear as the learned. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned backward. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked out the beard: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore, shall I not be confounded: therefore, have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He is near that justifies me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is my adversary? let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD will help me; who is he that shall condemn me?

Throughout this song, the servant himself speaks and describes how, as a faithful disciple, heeds God's voice and carries out his difficult commission as a suffering Messiah:

I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked out the beard: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

His trust in the Lord God is strength in all his sufferings, and he knows, "*Behold, the Lord GOD will help me.*"

He asks the rhetorical question: *who is he that shall condemn me?* He's the only absolute sinless person.

In the first song, only the LORD God speaks. In the second song, both the LORD and the servant speak. In the third song, only the servant speaks. In the fourth song, the LORD speaks, and people who watch and ponder the suffering servant – the servant suffers silently, *he did not open his mouth like a lamb being led to the slaughterhouse.*

The fourth song: Is.52,13-53,12

Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at you; so his appearance was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he startle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider. Who has believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he has no stately form nor splendor; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own

way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief: when you shall make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, and the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore, will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he has poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

The LORD himself is speaking at the beginning and at the end of this song:

Behold, my servant...and ***Therefore will I divide him a portion.***

This fourth song develops the theme of the third song, the suffering of the Servant of God. This song begins and ends with words of the LORD (52:13 and 53:11b-12).

The suffering and further history of the servant of God are sung by eyewitnesses. There is much to suggest that the people of Israel are these eyewitnesses. In Zech.12:10 it is reported prophetically how they look at the one they pierced about 2000 years ago.

The LORD Himself introduces the song with a preview of His servant's glorious future: *Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high.*

The Targum of Jonathan Ben Uzziel comments on this verse with the words: "*So shall my servant the Messiah prosper*". Today, on the other hand, almost all Jewish interpreters see the people of Israel as the Servant of God, who suffer among the nations.

After the introductory word of the LORD about the glorious future of his servant, the life and suffering of the servant of God are described from the point of view of eyewitnesses. First, they compare his poor origins with a root shoot from dry soil.

The image of the root shoot is also used for the Messiah in Isaiah 11:10: *In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, who shall stand as an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his place of rest shall be glorious.*

The witnesses report that they greatly despised the servant and looked away from him. They believed his sickness and pain to be God's punishment. But in the meantime, these eyewitnesses have recognized and testified: "*Surely, **he** has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem **him** stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But **he** was wounded for our transgressions, **he** was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon **him**; and with **his** stripes we are healed.*"

Note the constant exchange between the **servant of God** and the people.

They continue to report how the servant of God did not defend himself at his trial and was finally executed. At that time, it never occurred to anyone that he was enduring all this on behalf of the people, although he had done no wrong.

Then the people declare that in this vicarious suffering and death of the servant, the will of God was fulfilled.

Finally, the LORD himself appreciates the sacrificial death and the intercession of his righteous servant for the evildoers and promises him a rich reward.

Who is the servant of God in this fourth song?

In the second song, the people of Israel were collectively referred to as the servant of God along with the Messiah. Another example is Isaiah 49:3, where the Lord says: *You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*

Ibn Ezra (12th century) writes: *"The pains and diseases are the hardships and tribulations of the exiles"*, and Mahari Kara (11th century) adds: *"Because no other nation had such pains and diseases, Israel was despised and proscribed."*

This interpretation of the old rabbis is supported by Psalm 44:11-14:

You have given us like sheep appointed for food; and have scattered us among the nations. You sell your people for nothing, and do not increase your wealth by their price. You make us a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us. You make us a byword among the nations, a shaking of the head among the people.

Then the Psalmist asks the reason for this suffering of Israel and gives the following answer (Ps.44:20-22):

If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god; Shall not God search this out? for he knows the secrets of the heart. Yea, for your sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.

It is therefore wrong to define all of Israel's suffering as God's punishment for the sin of this people. Job's three friends also made this mistake. But God sent Elihu to Job, who showed him his friends' false image of God and his own false image of God.

Christianity has maintained for centuries that God finally rejected Israel because of the rejection of Jesus Christ and put the Church in Israel's place (Replacement Theology). However, the task of true Christians is to explain God's thoughts to the people of Israel in the same way Elihu did to Job (cf. my essay: God's plan with Israel).

On the other hand, because of accusations from Christianity, Israel has moved its understanding of the Bible more and more away from the Christian view over the centuries. This development is particularly evident in the changing understanding of Isa.53.

Abraham (15th century) writes of Isaiah 53: *The first task is to clarify to whom this Scripture refers, for the learned among the Nazarenes*

(Christians) point it to the man who died near the end of the Second Temple was crucified in Jerusalem and was the Son of God, taking flesh in the womb of the Virgin, as their scriptures say. Jonathan Ben Uzziel interpreted them in the Targum to mean the coming Messiah; this is also the opinion of our scholars of the Midrash.

Here we see something of a change in the rabbinic understanding of scripture.

Rabbi Moses Alshekh (Safed, 16th century) writes about Isaiah 53: *From ancient times our sages have attested to the tradition that this chapter refers to the Messiah. For this reason, we follow them and regard the person of this prophecy as David, the Messiah, who appears in this way.*

Rabbi Elia de Vivas (also Safed 16th century) also takes this view: *So, the Messiah suffered for our sins and was wounded; those who do not want the Messiah to be wounded for our transgressions could choose to bear their own sins and suffer for them.*

A passage from Zohar to Isa.53 (Zohar, Amsterdam ed. Shen-arth, p.98) expresses that the Messiah bears and alleviates all sufferings and diseases of Israel: *The souls of the dead will come to the Messiah, and when they tell of the sufferings of Israel in the dispersion, that they are guilty because they do not want to know their Lord, then He will weep for the guilty, as it is written It says: 'He was pierced for our transgressions and he was crushed for our transgressions'. And then these souls will stand up and stand in their places. And there in the garden there is a castle called House of the Sick. On that day the Messiah will enter this castle and cry out, "May all the sicknesses and all the sufferings of Israel come upon me!" and they will come. Unless he relieved Israel's suffering and loaded it onto himself, no one could suffer because of Israel's oppression. That is why it is written in the Torah: 'And it is written: In truth he bore our sickness'.*

We now want to examine the text of Isa.53 and investigate whether there are statements to be found that cannot refer to the people of Israel or a selection from these people.

Verse 8 reads:

He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

This and the verses 9 and 10 raise the following questions:

Verse 8:

- # Has Israel ever been tried and executed?
- # Is it possible for Israel or an election of Israel to be plagued because of my people's transgression?

Verse 9:

- # Can Israel or a selection of Israel be said to have done no wrong?

Verse 10:

Can Israel, or a selection of them, offer their souls for a trespass offering?

Since Israel was not executed, it cannot live long after the guilt offering has been completed, i.e. rise again.

The trespass offering had to be completely flawless. This is emphasized three times in the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 5:15; 5:18; 6:6).

Not a single descendant of Adam is perfect; Solomon said this in his prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:46): *there is no man that sins not.*

On the other hand, the servant of God was crushed by the LORD and made a trespass offering, *although he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.*

The LORD himself calls him the righteous one, who takes upon himself the faults of others and justifies them: *by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.*

This extraordinary servant of God is the Messiah, whose origin was from the days of eternity (Micah 5:1) and of whom the LORD says (Psalm 2:7): *You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.*

What does the New Testament say about the Servant of God in the four songs?

The theme of the four Servant Songs runs through the entire New Testament. At the baptism of Jesus Christ, a voice came from heaven: *You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* (Mk. 1:11 – cf. Isa.42:1).

After Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist proclaimed: *Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world* (Jn.1:29 – cf. Isa.49:6; 53:5 & 8 & 11).

Jesus Christ announced his death and resurrection to the twelve disciples three times and thus also refers to Isa.53. The third announcement of suffering reads:

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully treated, and spit on: And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again. (Lk.18:31-33 – cf. Isa.50:6; 53:8 & 10).

The perfect sacrifice of the Messiah is described in Hebrews 9:12 & 15:

Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us... And for this cause, he is the mediator of the new covenant, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, they who are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

The exaltation of the Messiah after redemption is accomplished is described in Heb.10:12:

after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God; (cf. Ps.110:1; Isa.52:13; 53:10-12).

The apostle Peter explains that the atoning death of the Messiah was God's plan before the world was created and that he, having been raised from the dead, received glory from God (1st Pet.1:18-21):

Since you know that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain manner of life received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was

foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.

We want to compare the following excerpt from Isaiah 53 with texts from the New Testament:

he was cut off out of the land of the living ... though he had done no violence ... when you shall make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days ... my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

In 1st Pet.2,22-24 Peter quotes from Isa.53 verbatim:

Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judges righteously: Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes you were healed.

The apostle John also refers to the atonement of Jesus Christ (1st Joh.2, 2):

he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

In the last book of the New Testament, Revelation, Jesus Christ is shown and sung as a lamb slain (Rev.5,6 & 9):

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth...

And they sang a new song, saying, You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open the seals thereof: for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation;

All creatures will one day join this song of praise (Revelation 5:13):

And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.

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