

# “Man of Sorrows”: A Christian Reading of Isaiah’s Servant Songs

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## ABSTRACT

The quest to identify Isaiah’s servant as presented in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ has long plagued students of Isaiah. By outlining the prevailing interpretations and noting the use of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the NT the present article offers a possible resolution to the quest. A Christian canonical reading of Isaiah’s ‘Servant Songs’ provides a compelling case for identifying Isaiah’s servant as Jesus Christ.

**KEYWORDS:** Isaiah; Servant Songs; Messiah; New Testament use of the Old Testament

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic it has become customary to wear a face-covering in public spaces. As a result, it is now more difficult to identify people. Unable to see the entire face, it is hard to be certain about an individual’s identity. Something similar occurs in the book of Isaiah. In the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ Isaiah’s reader glimpses something of an intriguing figure but certainly not the whole. They are thus left to discern the servant’s identity.

At four particular junctures in the text of Isaiah there is an undeniable change in atmosphere as Isaiah introduces YHWH’s servant (42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). These four sections, first identified by Duhm in his 1892 commentary, have come to be known as the ‘Servant Songs’.<sup>2</sup> Oswalt is accurate in concluding: ‘However one may evaluate Duhm’s conclusions, one cannot fault his observations: there is an atmospheric change at these four places in the text’.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore necessary to address this atmospheric change and seek to identify the servant.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that ‘song’ is not a technical designation of the literary genre. Rather, its usage in this article is due to its traditional usage. Cf. F. Duane Lindsey, ‘Isaiah’s Songs of the Servant’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 553 (1982): 27 n.1.

<sup>3</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 107.

In this article, while appreciating the complexities involved in identifying Isaiah's servant, it will be argued that a canonical approach to the so-called 'Servant Songs' yields a convincing resolution to this 'unceasing subject of discussion in research.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, this article will identify the five most prominent interpretations of the so-called 'Servant Songs', highlighting the more significant issues involved in holding to these interpretations and argue that a Christian canonical reading of these portions of Isaiah offers a convincing resolution to the discussion.

## PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Before exploring the most prominent interpretations of the so-called 'Servant Songs', it is necessary to highlight a number of preliminary issues regarding interpretation. First, there is some debate concerning the actual demarcation of the songs. Ward notes:

Not only is the identity of the servant debated, but so is the scope of the servant songs. Some scholars regard Duhm's demarcation of the songs as arbitrary and extend the literary units to include additional verses.... Indeed, some students of the problem deny that any clear separation exists between the alleged songs and their contexts.<sup>5</sup> Ward's observation is justified. The context in which each so-called 'Servant Song' is located is undoubtedly important, however the distinctiveness of each passage from its context must not be eroded.<sup>6</sup>

The second, but related, preliminary issue is that of literary criticism, specifically the claim that the distinctive nature of the so-called 'Servant Songs' supports the assertion that they were added at a later date. Such a claim is highlighted by Williamson,<sup>7</sup> who proceeds to state that 'a number of voices have been raised urging that they [the so-called "Servant Songs"] must be regarded as integral, and indeed indispensable, parts of their present literary contexts.'<sup>8</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams assert the same:

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<sup>4</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, trans. Margaret Kohl, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>5</sup> James M Ward, 'The Servant Songs in Isaiah', *Review & Expositor* 65, no. 4 (1968): 434–35.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 6, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 735, appears to flirt with this danger when writing of Isaiah 42:1–25: 'In this part of the book it is not easy to distinguish separate oracles.... Certainly the whole of the present chapter exhibits in the servant theme a point of unity.'

<sup>7</sup> H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, 21.

Although no single identification of the servant figure seems to hold good for all four Servant Songs when the songs are considered apart from their context, a consistent sequence to the songs—and to the identification of the servant figure within them—does emerge when the songs are related closely to their context; indeed the sequence in the Servant Songs follows the sequence of the chapters as a whole.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore imperative that while the distinctiveness of each so-called ‘Servant Song’ is maintained that they are not extracted from their immediate contexts.

The third preliminary issue that requires comment concerns textual problems. Writing of Isaiah 52:13–53:12,<sup>10</sup> North contends that ‘No passage in the OT, certainly none of comparable importance, presents more problems than this.... a glance at the number of marginal renderings indicates the difficulties in which the translators found themselves.’<sup>11</sup> It is of course possible that the prophet purposefully employed cryptic and veiled language.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the student of Isaiah seeking to discern the identity of the servant must wrestle with these textual issues.

The outlining of the above preliminary issues simply reinforces the difficulty inherent in the task of identifying the servant in Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’. It is all-the-more significant that a Christian canonical reading of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ provides the possibility of a convincing resolution to the search for the servant’s identity. Before such a suggestion can be presented the prevailing interpretations of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ must first be detailed.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13, no. 42 (1988): 80.

<sup>10</sup> English versification will be employed throughout this article and the ESV is used unless otherwise stated.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL–LV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary*, trans. David M. G. Stalker, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1969), 93, writes: ‘The cryptic, veiled language used is deliberate.’

## PREVAILING INTERPRETATIONS<sup>13</sup>

The following material will review several of the interpretations on the issue. It is important to list them, as scholars differ widely on the integrity of the book.

### *The Collective Interpretation*

The first prevailing interpretation to be detailed may be termed the *Collective Interpretation*. In close proximity to the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ the nation of Israel is designated ‘my servant’ (Isa. 41:8–9; 44:21; 45:4; 48:20). It has therefore been argued that the servant in these passages is a collective—the nation of Israel.<sup>14</sup> Such a position possesses a strong Jewish heritage yet it is not without its Christian advocates, especially after the advent of the critical era in OT biblical studies. Rowley notes that ‘there came a growing tendency on the part of Christian scholars to accept the common Jewish view that the Suffering Servant was none other than the Israelite nation.’<sup>15</sup> The argument is further strengthened by YHWH’s declaration in the third so-called ‘Servant Song’: ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified’ (Isa. 49:3).

In light of the references to Israel as YHWH’s servant in the surrounding context and the third so-called ‘Servant Song’ it is argued that ‘There can be little question that Isaiah’s servant is at least to be identified as Israel’.<sup>16</sup> Noting that there are some difficulties with this view, Longman and Dillard also assert that the key to unlocking this dilemma is the remnant motif.<sup>17</sup> Focussing on the remnant theme has often been viewed as a credible manner of presenting a legitimate version of the collective interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It should be acknowledged that the five following interpretations are not the only ones proffered within the academy. The most intriguing include: Leland E. Wilshire, ‘Servant-City: A New Interpretation of the Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 3 (1975): 356–67 who suggests that the city of Zion should be understood as the servant. Alternatively, Ward, ‘The Servant Songs in Isaiah’, encourages understanding the servant as an office as opposed to any individual or collective. Christopher R. Seitz, “‘You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified’: The Servant Songs and the Effect of Literary Context in Isaiah’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 39, no. 1 (2004): 117–34, likewise attempts to transcend the necessity to choose one particular option by adopting a fluid interpretation in which the servant must be understood as either an individual or a group at different junctures throughout the so-called ‘Servant Songs’.

<sup>14</sup> See the excellent survey of proponents of this position in H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*, Second, Revised (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 35–44.

<sup>15</sup> Rowley, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 314.

<sup>17</sup> Longman III and Dillard, 314.

<sup>18</sup> R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 72, observes: ‘The difficulties attending the simple identification of the Servant in the Songs with

Notwithstanding the above points, significant issues persist against accepting the *Collective Interpretation*, particularly with Isaiah 49:3 in view. At the grammatical level it is not immediately apparent that the servant should be equated with Israel in 49:3 since there is an *athnach* marker implying a pause or break in the sentence.<sup>19</sup> Within the immediate context of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ textual details make a collective interpretation problematic. Addressing Isaiah 49:3 specifically, Wilcox and Paton-Williams assert that ‘all the obstacles to identifying the servant consistently with Israel occur at or after Isa. 49.4.’<sup>20</sup> In particular it should be noted that the servant is to achieve Israel’s redemption. Israel attempting to redeem herself strikes one as contradictory.<sup>21</sup> Goldingay offers an apt summary: ‘the role attributed to the servant in xlii 1–4 is one which Israel herself is in no position to fulfil. The servant is to establish *mišpāt*; but Israel has *mišpāt* problems of her own (xl 27).’<sup>22</sup> Even the righteous remnant version of the *Collective Interpretation* fails to remedy these issues given that the remnant itself failed to attain the lofty goal of purity and obedience set forth by Isaiah.<sup>23</sup> Undeniably Israel has the title ‘Servant’ applied to her on several occasions throughout Isaiah. However, it is apparent that there are significant issues with consistently identifying Israel as the one referred to in Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’.

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Israel led some scholars (e.g. S.R. Driver, Skinner, Blank) to suggest that he stands for *a section of the nation*: a righteous remnant, “Ideal Israel,” or something similar. Such a righteous group would have been specially chosen by Yahweh as his agent in the redemption of the great mass of sinful Israel.’

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the discussion in Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, The New American Commentary 15b (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 345–46.

<sup>20</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Grogan, *Isaiah*, 6:777, explains: ‘Although a collective interpretation of this passage is not impossible and is naturally suggested by a consideration of v.3, a straightforward application to Israel is ruled out by vv.5–7.’

<sup>22</sup> John Goldingay, ‘The Arrangement of Isaiah 41–45’, *Vetus Testamentum* 29, no. 3 (1979): 292. Cf. John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 2014), 65, who, when referring to the first so-called ‘Servant Song’, observed: ‘This declaration must make readers uneasy, because the description of the servant’s role doesn’t look like one that Israel can fulfill.... a deaf and blind servant is itself in need of a servant’s ministry.’

<sup>23</sup> Longman III and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 315. Cf. J. Alec Motyer, ‘“Stricken for the Transgression of My People”: The Atoning Work of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant’, in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 249, who writes: ‘42:18–25 quickly disabuses us of any thought that, nationally considered, Israel, as Isaiah knew it, is either fit or able for the task. This line of thought continues until it climaxes in the almost strident condemnations of 48:1–22.’

### *The Unnamed Individual Interpretation*

The second prevailing interpretation could be labelled the *Unnamed Individual Interpretation*. If the servant cannot be identified as a collective, perhaps he can be identified as an unnamed individual. A number of features appear to support such a claim. First, while the designation of servant is applied to the collective Israel beyond the demarcation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, within the four songs it is unquestionably an individual being referred to.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, if the prophet Isaiah is the speaker, and thus possibly the subject, in these songs then it is undeniable that the servant is an individual.<sup>25</sup> As much is implied by the use of the first person singular.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the concept of being called from the womb (Isa. 49:1) is reminiscent of prophetic calls of individuals (cf. Jer. 1:5) and thus militates strongly against a collective interpretation.<sup>27</sup> The *Unnamed Individual* interpretation is attractive.

A single, yet significant, point prevents the current author from embracing the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation. Motyer states it most effectively:

To speak of the Servant as a prophetic, covenant figure, however, needs qualification.... the Servant claims to be ‘Israel’ (3) and to be in his own person the Lord’s covenant (8) and salvation (6) – not to be the preacher or even the effectuator of these things, but to be them in himself.... Certainly the Servant is a prophetic, covenant figure, but he is also much, much more than any prophet ever was or claimed to be.<sup>28</sup>

As highlighted above, the role of the servant, as stipulated in the second song, is to redeem Israel (Isa. 49:5). However, YHWH is not satisfied with Israel alone—the servant will also redeem the Gentiles (49:6). Subsequently, Motyer asserts, ‘However such a vocation is to be fulfilled, it runs beyond that of a (mere) prophet – indeed it runs beyond that of a mere human.’<sup>29</sup> Both the vocation and its scope render the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation ultimately unsatisfactory. The role the servant fulfils in accomplishing YHWH’s salvation is too significant for him to remain an unidentified prophetic figure.

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<sup>24</sup> Seitz, “‘You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified’”, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 89, 94.

<sup>26</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1975), 135, notes that ‘in the prophetic books generally the subject of speeches in the first person singular, when it is not Yahweh and not otherwise indicated, is normally the prophet himself.’ Cf. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, 7–8; Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 249, in advocating an individual interpretation, argues that ‘The testimony of the third Servant Song is decisive (49:1–50:11).’ Cf. Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 289.

<sup>28</sup> J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, 1993), 384. The verse references are to Isaiah 49.

<sup>29</sup> Motyer, 389. He also warns: ‘But Isaiah will tell his story in his own time.’

### *The Named Individual Interpretation*

In an attempt to overcome the problem of anonymity with the servant, a third prevailing interpretation could be categorised as the *Named Individual Interpretation*. While there are numerous individuals that could be discussed,<sup>30</sup> and space prohibits a discussion of all the options, perhaps the most convincing is Moses. Baltzer proposes that the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ function as a memorial of Moses.<sup>31</sup> He claims that on the basis that ‘Jewish tradition was familiar with the identification of the Servant of God with Moses’<sup>32</sup> Isaiah’s songs reflect on four different instances in Moses’s life. By way of example Baltzer suggests that the charge ‘bring out’ repeated three times in Exodus (3:10, 11, 12) is present in a thrice-varied form in the first song (Isa. 42:1, 3, 7).<sup>33</sup> After the ‘bringing out’ Moses delivered the Decalogue (Exod. 20), and in the second song’s prophetic emphasis the reader finds ‘a reminder of the proclamation of the Decalogue on Sinai through Moses.’<sup>34</sup> The third song then transitions to the experience of Moses as reflected in Deuteronomy. Baltzer understands Moses being described as both teacher and student (cf. Deut. 1:5; 4:1, 5, 14; 5:31; 6:1) and suggests such is reflected in Isaiah 50:4.<sup>35</sup> The final song, Baltzer argues, is an interpretation of Deuteronomy 34.<sup>36</sup>

Baltzer’s presentation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ as a memorial to Moses is ingenious, but ultimately the links are tenuous at best. Such is conceded by one proponent of the view in writing: ‘there has been a tendency among certain influential scholars to recognise only sporadic Mosaic allusions among the servant songs’.<sup>37</sup> These unnamed influential scholars would appear to be correct in their judgement. The primary issue against the *Named Individual* interpretation is the same that was proffered for the *Unnamed Individual* interpretation: namely, the Servant’s vocation runs not only beyond that of a

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<sup>30</sup> For an introduction to some of the options see Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73–74. It is also worthwhile consulting the argument that the individual is the prophet Isaiah. Initially, see Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 68–70.

<sup>31</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 20–21. Also see, Gordon P. Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press/Baker, 1995), 105–40.

<sup>32</sup> Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Baltzer, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Baltzer, 20. Also see his exegesis of the passage, pp. 392–429.

<sup>37</sup> Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, 120.

prophet, but also of Moses or any other historical figure.<sup>38</sup> Whybray offers an apt conclusion:

[S]uch figures from the past could clearly not have occupied a central place in Deutero-Isaiah's message to his contemporaries. The phrases in question can only have been intended to contribute to the picture of the Servant by seeing him as a 'new Moses,' a 'new Jeremiah,' or the like.<sup>39</sup>

It is therefore justified to conclude that the *Named Individual* interpretation rightly recognises the intentional similarities between the servant and particular individuals who loom large in Israel's history. However, it does not adequately account for the scope of the role attributed to the servant in the so-called 'Servant Songs'.

### *The Messianic Interpretation*

In light of the above critiques it follows that the servant may be a hoped-for figure: a messiah. Hence, the fourth prevailing interpretation is somewhat logically the *Messianic Interpretation*. The so-called 'Servant Songs' do constitute a 'collection of futuristically oriented songs'<sup>40</sup> and in so doing could rightly be understood as pointing to a future figure of salvation. Indeed, 'The view that the Songs are predictions of a figure who has not yet appeared has very ancient roots in the history of both Jewish and Christian interpretation.'<sup>41</sup> At least three arguments can be offered in defence of such an interpretation. First, the beginning of the first so-called 'Servant Song' employs the language of presentation (cf. Isa. 42:1). Oswalt observes:

The first four verses present the Servant to the hearers and readers.... the language here is that of presentation,... It is particularly common with reference to the kings.... When these understandings are coupled with the similarities of this passage to 11:1–9, which describes the Messiah, it seems likely that the Servant here is a messianic figure (cf. 16:5).<sup>42</sup>

In a similar fashion to the presentation of particularly pivotal figures in YHWH's redemption of his people, such as Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Moses (Exod. 14:31) and David (2 Sam. 3:18), so too the servant is presented as a pivotal figure in the redemption YHWH provides for his people—and yet in a greater way.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 389. One can only surmise that Motyer is one of the influential scholars to whom Hugenberger refers.

<sup>39</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> Wilshire, 'Servant-City', 357.

<sup>41</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah 40–66*, 109–10.

Second, all four so-called ‘Servant Songs’ possess a distinctly royal emphasis. In the first song the servant is anointed with the Spirit in order to bring justice (42:1, 3–4) which communicate both a royal empowering (1 Sam. 16:13) and duty (cf. Ps. 72:1–2; 101). The second song may allude to the adoption of Israel’s kings as sons (49:5; cf. Ps. 2:7) but also gives the servant a kingly hue by noting other kings and princes prostrating themselves in his presence (49:7). Royal emphases are not immediately apparent in the third song, and yet it is possible to read the YHWH/Israelite king vice-regency relationship in 50:7–9. The fourth song again envisages kings respecting the servant (52:15). Distinctly royal elements are discernible in each so-called ‘Servant Song’.

Third, not only does the opening of the first so-called ‘Servant Song’ employ language of presentation when introducing a royal figure, it also describes a designation. Westermann explains: ‘The first words plainly describe a designation. This means that someone with the right to so do designates or appoints someone else to perform a task or to hold an office.’<sup>43</sup> He proceeds to clarify that ‘all that can be said about 42.1–4 is that the echo of the royal designation, as well as the proclamation of justice and the sparing of those already under sentence of death, point in the direction of a mediator who discharges his office by way of action’.<sup>44</sup> Together these three aspects of the servant’s description reveal an individual of royal character who has been chosen by YHWH, and such language is commonly attached to messianic thinking in the OT.

Although compelling, the *Messianic* interpretation faces at least two issues that prevent its wide-scale acceptance. First, the language of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, especially the first one, is not dissimilar to the description of Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1–7. He does not operate in a strictly messianic sense. It is not therefore immediately apparent that the servant should be equated with a messianic figure. Furthermore, Hugenberger argues that the presence of royal and Davidic terminology in Isaiah 40–66 has been largely overplayed.<sup>45</sup> Without a strong royal emphasis in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ the *Messianic* interpretation is weakened somewhat. There is a pervasively prophetic emphasis in the songs (Isa. 42:4; 49:2; 50:4). However, to claim that ‘there is no obvious suggestion of royalty in the servant’s multiple calling’<sup>46</sup> is an overstatement of the case. While these two issues offer some resistance to accepting the *Messianic* interpretation,

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<sup>43</sup> Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Westermann, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Hugenberger, ‘The Servant of the Lord in the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure’, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Hugenberger, 117.

it does appear to be more coherent than the first three prevailing interpretations identified above.

### *The Christological Interpretation*

The final prevailing interpretation to be identified in this article marks the juncture at which Christian and Jewish interpretations diverge: the *Christological Interpretation*. Astute readers will have noticed that the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ has received minimal attention thus far.<sup>47</sup> As its testimony is added to the above considerations of the first three so-called ‘Servant Songs’ it emerges that the *Christological* interpretation is perhaps more convincing than is sometimes admitted in OT scholarship.

The attributing of three adjectives (high, lifted up and exalted) to the servant in Isaiah 52:13 is significant given that elsewhere in Isaiah these are repeatedly applied almost exclusively to YHWH.<sup>48</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams write: ‘The implication is not necessarily that the servant is Yahweh, or even divine; but there *is* an implication here that the servant's work is Yahweh's work, and the language used to make the point is daring, to say the least.’<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the substitutionary aspect of the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ must not be overlooked. The servant’s sufferings are undertaken in the place of another: ‘The servant suffers not just innocently, but *for* someone else’s iniquity.’<sup>50</sup> Contrary to Wilcox and Paton-Williams’s suggestion, this development is not wholly new (cf. 49:7; 50:5–6), but it is significant. Commenting on Isaiah 50:6, Smart states, ‘the impression is conveyed strongly that there is some one man who actually felt the blows.’<sup>51</sup> Such is equally true for the servant in the fourth song. However, it is clear in the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ that the blows are delivered on account of another’s sin (cf. 53:5–6, 8–9, 11–12). Therefore, the servant cannot be the prophet himself, as suggested by Smart.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Motyer argues that four essentials for a perfect substitute are present in the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’: identification with the guilty party, free of the guilt of the guilty party,<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ poses many exegetical problems which cannot be examined in any great depth here. See, Grogan, *Isaiah*, 6:796: ‘The text of this great passage presents a good many difficulties.’

<sup>48</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 95.

<sup>49</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, 95. Emphasis original.

<sup>50</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, 96.

<sup>51</sup> James D. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40–66* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 165.

<sup>52</sup> Smart, 165.

<sup>53</sup> Also note the servant’s claim to obedience/innocence in 50:5–6. See, John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 402; Christopher R. Seitz, ‘The Book of Isaiah 40–66’, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 440.

perfectly acceptable to the offended party and voluntarily accepting the role of substitute.<sup>54</sup> Within the Christian canon only one individual matches this description: Jesus Christ. Hence, the warrant behind the *Christological* interpretation.

Such an approach is not, of course, without its difficulties. Foremost among them is the issue of obscurity, perhaps even intentional obscurity and possible corruption of the text.<sup>55</sup> The wisdom of placing so much emphasis on the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ in defence of the *Christological* interpretation may justly be questioned. Furthermore, there are significant, although not unassailable, questions regarding this interpretation’s relevance to the original hearers/readers of Isaiah’s prophecy.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, a consideration of the use of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the rest of the Christian canon alleviates these difficulties.

## THE SO-CALLED ‘SERVANT SONGS’ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In order to discern the identity of the servant in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ one must consider their earliest interpretation, namely the NT. Allusion to and direct quotation of the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in the NT documents is plethora (Matt. 8:17; 12:18–21; Mark 1:11; 10:45; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; 19:30;<sup>57</sup> Acts 8:32–33; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22–25). The striking feature of these quotations and allusions is that they all read Isaiah’s so-called ‘Servant Songs’ in a Christological manner. Of particular interest is the reference in Acts 8, for there the Ethiopian asks the very same question this article is attempting to answer: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (v. 34). As Marshall records: ‘For Philip, the answer is simply Jesus. This implies that even at this early date the recognition that the job description of Isa. 53 fit Jesus, and only Jesus, was current among Christians.’<sup>58</sup> It is evident that Christians in the NT era, and thus the NT authors, followed Jesus’s example of reading the OT Christologically (cf. Luke 24:44–49). It is hardly surprising that the link was made between the fourth so-called ‘Servant Song’ and Jesus given that just ‘as deliverance from physical bondage demanded the servant Cyrus, so deliverance from spiritual bondage calls for the Servant,

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<sup>54</sup> Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 253–56.

<sup>55</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Whybray, *Second Isaiah*, 74, draws attention to such difficulties.

<sup>57</sup> On the linking of the servant succeeding (52:13) and Jesus’s cry of ‘It is finished!’ see, Motyer, ‘Stricken for the Transgression of My People’, 251.

<sup>58</sup> I. Howard Marshall, ‘Acts’, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 574.

One who will be what Israel is not, so that she may have the possibility of becoming what she is to be.’<sup>59</sup>

Considering the testimony of the NT more broadly, the case could be made that the Christological interpretation exemplified in the NT actually incorporates elements of all five prevailing interpretations. Hence, the collective interpretation finds fulfilment in the individual named Jesus. With Isaiah 42 in view, Patston explains that ‘the Gospel writers wanted to present Jesus as the true expression of what the nation of Israel really was and should have been. As Jesus takes up the role of Israel, he necessarily takes up the role of servant.’<sup>60</sup> Indeed, persisting in this line of thought it is possible to see Jesus of Nazareth as ultimately a remnant of one.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, the individual interpretations also find fulfilment in Jesus. Above Baltzer’s suggestion that the servant was Moses was highlighted, but as noted the task the servant was to fulfil extended far beyond what Moses could conceivably achieve. It would take one who was greater than Moses (Heb. 3:1–6). Arguably all of the prevailing interpretations can be satisfactorily incorporated in to the Christological reading.

A brief survey of the NT’s testimony concerning the individual alluded to in the so-called ‘Servant Songs’ does not answer every question. Nevertheless, its testimony is clear: the servant is unmistakably identified as Jesus Christ. Abernethy asserts: ‘It turns out that Jesus, fully divine and fully Davidic, takes on the mission of the servant.’<sup>62</sup> Moreover, this is a mission that stretches across the Christian canon. Despite misidentifying the servant as Israel, Seitz helpfully observes: ‘The promise embedded in God’s word to Abraham and embodied in Isaiah’s servant Israel is here [Mark 1:11–14] manifested in the man Jesus.’<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Wilcox and Paton-Williams conclude: ‘No single answer to these questions may be said to command a consensus.’<sup>64</sup> Indeed, ‘The book of Isaiah does not resolve who exactly would fulfil the role of God’s suffering servant.’<sup>65</sup> In attempting to reconcile these realities with the obvious significance of the servant I find it

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<sup>59</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 59.

<sup>60</sup> Kirk Patston, *Isaiah: Surprising Salvation*, Reading the Bible Today (Sydney: Aquila Press, 2010), 221.

<sup>61</sup> Longman III and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 315.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 40 (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2016), 159.

<sup>63</sup> Seitz, ‘Isaiah 40–66’, 366.

<sup>64</sup> Wilcox and Paton-Williams, ‘The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah’, 79.

<sup>65</sup> Abernethy, *Book of Isaiah*, 158.

compelling to consider Isaiah's veiled presentation of the servant as a fulfilment of Isaiah's commission in chapter 6 to keep the people hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving (vv. 9–10). Perhaps Motyer reveals a similar line of thought by arguing that Isaiah 53:1 'teaches that the Servant can be recognized only as a result of divine revelation. The "Arm of Yahweh" has to be revealed, else he will continue to be seen in merely human terms.'<sup>66</sup> It takes the eyes of faith.

The argument set forth in this article is not that the eyes of faith are the necessary mystical insight for identifying the servant. Rather, the eyes of faith read any section of Scripture with the rest of Scripture in mind.<sup>67</sup> The confusion and debate concerning the servant in Isaiah reveals a reticence to accept the canonical presentation of the servant in Isaiah's so-called 'Servant Songs'. By surveying the prevailing interpretations in light of the details present in the Isaiah texts and permitting the testimony of the NT to carry canonical weight, one can no longer ignore the Christological interpretation as Christian eisegesis.<sup>68</sup> Such a claim does not offer 'demonstrable solutions for all of the problems'<sup>69</sup> but it does present a convincing resolution. If the NT authors identified Isaiah's servant as Jesus Christ it would be dangerous for any allegedly Christian reading of the so-called 'Servant Songs' to ignore that testimony.

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<sup>66</sup> Motyer, 'Stricken for the Transgression of My People', 263 n.28.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Seitz, 'Isaiah 40–66', 469: 'We can see into the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, as did those first witnesses, because God has provided a testimony ahead of time, which will be used to interpret and illuminate and, indeed, guarantee the exaltation of God's servant.'

<sup>68</sup> Abernethy, *Book of Isaiah*, 160, thus concludes: 'though the book of Isaiah does not present the Davidic ruler and the servant as identical figures, we find an unexpected and glorious merging of two unique offices and purposes in one person, Jesus Christ.'

<sup>69</sup> Ward, 'The Servant Songs in Isaiah', 433.

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