

Suffering Servants

BY WALDEMAR JANZEN

In the prophets, the suffering servant, and Jesus, the suffering of those called into God's service is clothed with ever deepening significance. Their suffering is not glorified, for it proceeds from the sinfulness of those resisting God's leading. But this sin-generated suffering is endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.

A line of sufferers in the Bible, long recognized as somehow belonging together, include the Old Testament prophets, the (suffering) servant of Isaiah 40-55, and Jesus. Understanding their suffering is important for making sense of large portions of the Bible, but it becomes even more so when we realize that we as Christians are invited to join their group. What links them to one another and to us?

THE PROPHETS

The suffering prophet *par excellence* is Jeremiah. He is called by God against his own protestations, mocked and persecuted by his fellow villagers of Anathoth and others, and forbidden by God to marry or have children. Beaten and put in the stocks by the priest Pashhur, he barely escapes the death sentence demanded by a mob and must go into hiding for his preaching during the reign of King Jehoiakim. He is accused of being a traitor for announcing God's judgment on Jerusalem through the Babylonians. After being thrown into a dry well to perish, he eventually is rescued and kept in a prison, only to be carried off to Egypt against his will.

Jeremiah is not the only suffering prophet. While some, like Nathan, are respected at the royal court and their message is sometimes heeded (2 Samuel 7; 12:1-15), others, like Elijah, have a message that challenges the powerful in society and thus encounters resistance (1 Kings 18 ff.). Resistance to the prophets flared up in the eighth century B.C., when Israelite

society was increasingly stratified socially, evoking announcements of God's judgment by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah on behalf of the down-trodden. Persecution reached an apex a century later, when Jeremiah said the Babylonian invasions, destruction of Jerusalem, and deportation of many Judeans to Babylon, were God's judgments on his unfaithful people.

Obedying God's call, no matter how heavy the burden or how harsh the persecution, is central to the prophetic ethos. A quaint story of an unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13 underscores this point, as does the book of Jonah.

Suffering under this burden of obedience to proclaim a message painful to the prophet himself and hateful to his hearers is portrayed most articulately in the so-called Laments of Jeremiah (11:18-20; 12:1-6; 15:10-12,15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). They resemble the individual lament psalms, but their content is tied to the specifics of Jeremiah's life. He cries out:

O LORD, you have enticed me,...
 you have overpowered me,....
 If I say, "I will not mention him [the LORD],
 or speak any more in his name,"
 then within me there is something like a burning fire
 shut up in my bones;
 I am weary with holding it in,
 and I cannot....
 Why did I come forth from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?

Jeremiah 20:7a, 9, 18

Though some statements seem to construe Jeremiah's sufferings as sacrificial or vicarious—like "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (11:19)—von Rad rightly denies this, but perhaps too categorically, when he says: "Never for a moment did it occur to him that this mediatorial suffering might have a meaning in the sight of God."¹ Did Jeremiah simply cry out in anguish? Why then did he commit these intimate prayers to writing, for others to read? Sheldon Blank argues convincingly that Jeremiah realized his suffering, though not propitiatory for others in the sight of God, was a paradigm that transcended his personal experience; it was representative for the coming suffering of his people, and thus was in some sense significant for them. This is evident most clearly in Jeremiah 16:1-9 (though a Divine word, rather than a prophetic lament), where Jeremiah is told by God not to marry and raise a family, in this way projecting—we might even call it "pre-living"—for his people a future devoid of hope.² Thus Jeremiah's prophetic suffering proceeds from two sources: the external resistance and persecution, and the internal burden of paradigmatically embodying or "pre-living" his people's approaching Divine judgment.

THE (SUFFERING) SERVANT

Our consideration of prophetic suffering leads inevitably to Isaiah 52:13-53:12 ("Isaiah 53" from here on), one of four "Servant Songs" in the section of the book widely called "Second Isaiah" or "Deutero-Isaiah."³ Many interpreters identify the unnamed servant in it with Jeremiah or with the prophetic author of the text, but other theories abound. It is also a key text in the New Testament's interpretation of the suffering role of Jesus.

Who is the servant in the Songs? Some identify the servant in *all* servant texts in Second Isaiah with the people of Israel, who now are called to a prophetic role for which Jeremiah provides the model.⁴ Certainly, in the servant-texts *outside* the Songs in Second Isaiah, the servant is the people of Israel. In a general sense, this also may be true of the servant in the Songs, but to establish this, we need to reflect more on the context of each Song.

In keeping with newer perspectives in Isaiah-scholarship that recognize the editorial unity of the *whole* book of Isaiah, I no longer interpret the Songs in isolation, but see them as part of the unfolding "inner movement of the prophetic narrative extending from chapter 40 to chapter 55."⁵ This approach leads to a more nuanced and satisfactory picture of the servant than the simple identification of him with the people of Israel.

In Isaiah 40:1-11 God calls (in a heavenly council?) for the comforting of Israel in exile: her punishment is completed and her salvation is now to be proclaimed. The Divine voice takes precedence over identifiable prophetic speakers. Then in the first Servant Song (42:1-4, explained in 42:5-9), God commissions his servant, the people of Israel. Elected by God and endowed with the spirit, the servant (Israel) will, in a gentle but persistent way, bring justice to the nations, who are awaiting God's teaching (cf. Isaiah 2:2-4). Yet Israel apparently fails to see or disregards God's commission.

As a result, a human voice, so far unidentified but possibly the human speaker of chapters 40-48, appears: "And now the Lord has sent *me* and his spirit" (48:16b). In the second Servant Song (49:1-6, expanded in 49:7-13), this human speaker tells of his earlier prophetic commissioning (1b-3), reminiscent of Jeremiah's call, and his lack of success in carrying it out (4a).

Who is the prophetic figure addressed as "servant" in 49:3? This verse, often taken to identify the servant as the people Israel ("You are my servant, Israel"), is better read in context, "You [second person singular] are my servant, [you are now] Israel...." As Childs puts it: "The task that the nation Israel had been given and failed to accomplish (42:1-9) had been transferred, not away from Israel, but rather to one who would incarnate Israel."⁶ Despite his lack of success (49:4a), the servant further reports, God has not only reaffirmed his call, but extended it beyond being "a light to the nations" (42:6) to include restoring "the survivors of Israel" (49:5-6).

In the third Servant Song (50:4-9), this servant emphasizes his obedient acceptance of suffering and indignity, but also his persistence and his unwavering confidence in God's help and triumph.

In the final Servant Song (52:13-53:12), other voices speak about this servant. God pronounces that “my servant,” who has experienced unprecedented suffering and degradation (has been “marred beyond human semblance”), will be “exalted and lifted up,” a fact that will be recognized far and wide, by many nations and kings (52:13-15). Then a group of persons, “we,” report with astonishment that they have seen incredible things: an individual whom they had considered “struck down by God, and afflicted” because of his ungainly appearance, rejection in society, weakness, sickness, pain, quiet submission, and eventual death, is seen by them now in an entirely different light (53:1-11a). They recognize that he was innocent, that he bore all these sufferings, laid on him by God, as an “offering” for their own transgressions, but that God would not give him up.⁷ In a final speech, God affirms the correctness of this insight (53:11b-12). God will indeed exalt the servant (cf. 52:13) because “he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). The “we” confessing this new understanding can be seen as those in exiled Israel who, albeit after some time of doubt, have accepted the message of salvation preached by the servant (embodying Israel; 49:3) and recognized his own role in bringing it about. They seem like a vanguard of those far and wide, who will recognize the servant’s true significance, according to God’s introductory speech (52:12-15).⁸

In sum, the servant in Second Isaiah is “Israel,” cast in a prophetic role by Israel’s commission to bring a message of salvation to the nations. The role of this “Israel,” if the people fail to accept it, can be embodied by an individual—not by one who replaces Israel, but one who shoulders the calling of Israel and extends this calling to address both the nations and his own renegade people. The historical identity of this individual is deliberately left veiled, so that the emphasis falls fully on the servant-role, a role marked not only by proclamation in words, but by suffering unto death. Others in Israel, also veiled as to historical identity, recognize that this servant has taken upon himself for them the suffering prophetic role that Israel as a whole has rejected.

This servant’s suffering has two chief dimensions. One is continuous with earlier prophetic suffering, but adapted to a new situation. While Jeremiah suffered by “pre-living” his people’s coming judgment, the servant/Israel has already endured that judgment and now can be comforted (Isaiah 40:1-2). Further, with Israel’s new commissioning as prophet-servant comes the suffering that typically results from (internal Israelite?) opposition to a prophetic calling. Beyond such prophetic suffering that—as in Jeremiah’s case—results from opposition, the suffering of the servant of Isaiah 53 is broader: it embraces in a spirit of gentleness, meekness, and submission the wide range of suffering that marks the human condition.

The second dimension of the servant’s suffering is his “vicarious” bearing of the sins of others. The biblical roots for such vicarious suffering

include: (1) the prophetic office, which involves intercession (e.g. Amos 7:1-6; Jeremiah 18:20); (2) substitution of animal sacrifices for human guilt in the cult;⁹ (3) royal suffering, for the king was seen to embody the people and bear their fate;¹⁰ and (4) Moses, a royal and prophetic figure, who intercedes for the people, suffers on account of their disobedience, and bears some of their punishment (e.g. Exodus 5:22-23; 17:1-4; Deuteronomy 4:21).¹¹

We need to consider the prophetic roots of the servant's suffering as primary, but recognize in addition a distinctive development proceeding from God. The servant, in prophetic manner, obediently shoulders the burden of his commission to embody Israel (49:3)—unlike Elijah, who becomes despondent on the (incorrect) perception that "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life" (1 Kings 19:10)—and to accept the consequent suffering unto death (50:4-9; 53:1-11a). God's new move consists of not rejecting Israel for failing as a people to follow the call to be God's servant (42:1-4), but "reducing God's expectation" of Israel to the obedience of *one* person and accepting it as vicarious for the people. Remember God's "concession" to Abraham to spare Sodom on the basis of the righteousness of *ten* of its inhabitants (Genesis 18:32 f.). Here, God accepts the obedience of only *one*.

The servant as Israel is fully human, and his exaltation (Isaiah 52:13; 53:10-12) is described in earthy terms ("he shall see his offspring," "divide the spoil with the strong"). Nevertheless, the servant-theme in Second Isaiah depicts a dimension of God's accommodation to human sinfulness that is not exhausted by a restoration of Israel—or even a faithful remnant of followers (53:1-11a)—to their land in the sixth century; it has an openness to further embodiment in the future that may be called eschatological.

THE SERVANT AND JESUS

From its earliest beginnings, the Church has interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus by means of the servant-paradigm of Second Isaiah, and especially Isaiah 53. Numerous quotations and echoes in the New Testament go back to the servant-passages, though many are brief and uncertain, or do not refer to Jesus' suffering or its vicarious nature.¹²

Here is one example of the complexity of establishing intertextual relationships. In Acts 8:26-39, Philip meets the Ethiopian Eunuch, who is reading Isaiah 53:7b-8a. On the Eunuch's request, "starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (8:35). The Isaiah passage quoted tells of the servant's suffering, but stops just short of referring to its meaning, interpreted in Isaiah 53:8b as being "stricken for the transgression of my people." This poses a question basic for other references as well: How much of Isaiah 53 did Philip (or the author, Luke) include when he proclaimed to him "the good news about Jesus"? Some would like to limit the intertextual connection strictly to the words quoted (here and elsewhere). Others argue that a brief reference to an Old Testament text evoked for hearers the wider context as well, in this case all of Isaiah 53.¹³

In spite of such uncertainties in the case of cross-references, however, there are clear associations of Jesus' mission with that of the servant. Simon, for example, greets the infant Jesus as the one who will fulfill the servant's call to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isaiah 49:6). 1 Peter 2:22-25 draws on several verses of Isaiah 53 to develop an argument that indisputably includes the atoning nature of Christ's suffering in line with the church's customary perspective. Morna Hooker also finds a clear echo of Isaiah 53 in Romans 4:25: "[Christ] who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."¹⁴ There can be little doubt that the church's use of the servant-theme of Second Isaiah, including the vicarious atonement in Isaiah 53, to interpret the ministry of Jesus begins in the New Testament itself rather than later.

Furthermore, Jesus takes up the Isaianic servant's total calling (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6) to be "a light to the nations" and to "restore the survivors of Israel" (49:6). Jesus not only atones for the sins of both through his suffering and death, but also extends God's salvation by reaching out to those suffering in many and various ways. Thus Matthew 12:18-21 (citing Isaiah 42:1-4), one of the clearest New Testament quotations linking Jesus to the Isaianic servant, does so on the basis of his healing ministry (12:15-17).

Scholars debate whether Jesus himself interpreted his ministry in light of the Isaianic servant.¹⁵ We must not forget, however, that Jesus and/or the New Testament writers turn not only to the servant-theme in Second Isaiah for an interpretation of Jesus' suffering, but also to other accounts of suffering. For example,

Jesus places himself into the widespread Jewish view that the role of the prophets generally (not only of the "suffering servant") includes suffering (cf. Nehemiah 9:26; Luke 13:33-34).¹⁶ In view of his approaching passion, he extends prophetic suffering to embrace other righteous sufferers, including "sages," "scribes,"

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and "righteous Abel" (Matthew 23:34-35). Jesus also links his suffering to that of the sufferers in the lament psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Matthew 27:46 with Psalm 22:2). Passages like "this is the blood of my covenant" (Matthew 26:28) suggest a cultic-sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death (cf. Exodus 24:8; or perhaps Romans 3:24-26). When the soldiers mock Jesus with a purple robe, a crown of thorns, a

staff, and sneering obeisance, and when Pilate's superscription on the cross identifies him as king, the evangelists present this as an unwittingly correct witness to Jesus' suffering royal role (Matthew 27:27-31, 37; Mark 15:16-20, 26). Here, as in many texts, he is the suffering royal Messiah. And finally, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus turns to the two disciples and, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about

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himself *in all the scriptures*" (Luke 24:25-27; my emphasis).¹⁷ Jesus' scriptural basis for his sufferings was thus comprehensive, and not limited to the servant-theme of Deutero-Isaiah. That his suffering also brought a radically new dimension through the

incarnation—*God* is suffering with and for humanity—cannot and need not be developed here.

FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORY

The suffering of the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus help us to see an unfolding Divine economy of endowing the suffering of those especially called into God's service with ever deepening significance. Suffering is not glorified as a desirable human achievement; it continues to proceed from the sinfulness of those resisting God's word and leading. But this sin-generated suffering can be endowed in God's service, and through God's own accommodation to it, with power to advance God's kingdom.

Each group of texts speaks to us as disciples. The prophets' obedience to their call against all resistance addresses our call to proclaim the gospel entrusted to us. If opposition and suffering result from obedience to our call, this too—as in the case of Jeremiah and other prophets—may make our lives a witness to the world around us.

Similarly, the servant role of Israel, whether lived out by the people called to faith or represented only by a faithful remnant or one individual, is a challenge to the church and each member. In a "post-Christian" and increasingly secular society, it assures us that God's commission can be carried out by a small remnant, and this is due to God's grace that accepts such a remnant, even if it were reduced to one, to represent before God, in its suffering and rejection, "the many" who have turned away.

The total impact of these passages reaches us when we appropriate the Isaianic servant's fuller embodiment in Jesus Christ, whether it was prophetically understood before Jesus, applied to himself by Jesus, or appropriated for the interpretation of Jesus by the New Testament writers and the church. In him we see the Divine realization of the servant's commis-

sion to proclaim the good news to the nations, to deal gently and salvifically with the sick and the downtrodden, to endure obediently the humiliation and suffering heaped upon him, and to bear both representationally and substitutionally our own burdens and sins.

The trajectory we discover in these texts must not stop, however, before we ourselves identify with the “we” of Isaiah 53:1-11a and the equally astonished post-resurrection disciples of Jesus. Their shocked astonishment at God’s grace that accepts the servant’s lowly life and despised death as that which has a future in God’s sight, makes possible a new individual and communal beginning in this world, and opens up hope to be “exalted and lifted up” with him to eternal life with God.

NOTES

1 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, volume II (London: SCM Press, 1965), 206.

2 Sheldon H. Blank, “The Prophet as Paradigm,” in James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis, eds., *Essays in Old Testament Ethics: J Philip Hyatt, In Memoriam* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 111-130, especially 122 f. For a similar situation in Ezekiel, see 123 f. On the paradigmatic role of the prophets as obedient sufferers, see my *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

3 In 1892, Bernhard Duhm initiated the practice of interpreting four Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) together and independently of their context in Second Isaiah. I will retain the traditional term “Second Isaiah” for chapters 40-55, though some scholars apply the term to chapters 40-66. The twenty uses of “servant” in chapters 40-55 are distinctly different from the eight instances in Isaiah 1-39, where specific individuals are named, and the eleven in Isaiah 56-66 that always occur in the plural.

4 See, for example, Sheldon H. Blank, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1958, 1967), 74-104, and Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 32-72. (The servant-texts *outside* the Songs, but in chapters 40-55, are Isaiah 41:8, 9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5, 6; 50:10; and 54:17.) Sommer states that “Jeremiah serves as a pattern for Israel, especially when the nation is depicted as a servant figure in...the ‘servant songs,’” both through his prophetic ministry (to Israel and the nations) and through his tribulations (63-64).

5 Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah (Old Testament Library)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 382, speaks especially to chapter 53, but his point is applicable to all Servant Songs. My understanding of the servant is indebted to this work and to Christopher R. Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, volume 6 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 307-352.

6 See Childs, *Isaiah*, 383 f. (the quote is on p. 394); Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 429.

7 The sufferings listed for the servant, which are typical of the lament psalms, do not allow for a reconstruction of a historical situation. The servant’s suffering was possibly inflicted at least partially by those in Israel who had hardened their hearts against his message, but references to unimpressive appearance and sickness seem to extend the range of suffering beyond human persecution. The word translated “offering for sin” (*ašam*) mostly refers to a cultic sacrifice (e.g. Leviticus 5:15), but it can be used more generally (e.g. Genesis 26:10).

8 Therefore many interpreters (e.g. Blank, *Prophetic Faith*, p. 87) assume the speakers of 53:1-11a to be the kings and nations introduced in 52:12-15. I am more convinced, however, by the understanding of Childs (p. 413) that these speakers are a group within Israel. It is also intriguing to ponder the suggestion of Seitz (p. 460f.) that these Israelite

“servant followers” of the servant are the means by which we hear the anticipated (astounded and confessing) voices of the nations. Not to be identified with these followers, according to Seitz, are the servant followers who shaped the present Song and perhaps are responsible for Isaiah 40-66.

9 Especially the understanding of *ašam* (53:10) as “guilt-offering” (but see note 7) evokes a cultic association. Childs rightly points out, however, that the context of chapter 53 is not cultic (p. 416).

10 The last Judean kings suffered greatly, but the dynasty was not totally extinguished (cf. 2 Kings 25:27-30), and great hopes for the people’s restoration were attached to it. The royal traits of the servant, however, are not nearly as clear as the prophetic ones.

11 See Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 461 f. and R. E. Clements, “Isaiah 53 and the Restoration of Israel,” in William H. Bellinger and William R. Farmer, Jr., eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 47 ff.

12 See Morna D. Hooker, “Did the Use of Isaiah 53 to Interpret His Mission Begin with Jesus?” in Bellinger and Farmer, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*, 88-103, as well as other essays in that volume.

13 See Morna Hooker on this passage, in “Did the Use...?”, 91. C. H. Dodd (pp. 28-60) argues that the early church thought in terms of *testimonia*—clusters of Old Testament Scripture that could be called to mind by brief quotations or allusions to any part of them. Otto Betz, “Jesus and Isaiah 53,” in Bellinger and Farmer, *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*, 70-87, works with a similar assumption: “There are words and formulas that point to this prophetic text [Isaiah 53] in an abbreviated way” (p. 73).

14 Morna Hooker, “Did the Use...?”, 101-103.

15 In “Did the Use...?” Morna Hooker reaffirms the negative answer she argued in a classic monograph, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant-Concept in Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1959). While I tend to favor the positive answer (see the new arguments in its support presented by Otto Betz, “Jesus and Isaiah 53”), Hooker is right when she states that her position does not at all invalidate the church’s theological interpretation of Jesus in light of Isaiah 53 (“Did the Use...?”, 89).

16 In *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 154-159, David Aune shows how the designations of Jesus as a prophet are closely associated with his suffering role, and he concludes that this “probably provided a decisive influence on Jesus’ understanding of his own mission and destiny” (p. 159).

17 Sheila Anne Klassen-Wiebe perceptively develops how Jesus, in this story, leads the two disciples from their inadequate understanding of him as a martyred prophet to the fuller one that he is the Messiah, who, according to all the scriptures, had to suffer to be raised to glory. See her *Called to Mission: A Narrative-Critical Study of the Character and Mission of the Disciples in the Gospel of Luke* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, Bell and Howell Information and Learning Company, 2001), 494-499.



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