

Isaiah 42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 42. Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk in it.

I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare. Before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth. You who go down to the sea, and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits. Let the habitants of Selah sing for joy. Let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare his praise in the coastlands. The Lord goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war, he stirs up his zeal. He cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes.

For a long time I have held my peace. I have kept still and restrained myself. Now I will cry out like a woman in labour. I will gasp and pant. I will lay waste mountains and hills, and dry up all their vegetation. I will turn the rivers into islands, and dry up the pools. And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know. In paths that they have not known, I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them. They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, you are our gods. Hear you, death, and look, you blind, that you may see. Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send, who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the Lord? He sees many things, but does not observe them. His ears are open, but he does not hear. The Lord was pleased for his righteousness' sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious.

But this is a people plundered and looted. They are all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons. They have become plunder with none to rescue, spoil with none to say, restore. Who among you will give ear to this, will attend and listen for the time to come? Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So he poured on him the heat of his anger, and the might of battle.

[3 : 34] It set him on fire all around, but he did not understand. It burned him up, but he did not take it to heart. There are four passages in the book of Isaiah commonly known as the servant songs, after the work of Bernhard Duhm. The first of these so-called songs is found at the beginning of chapter 42. While some commentators add 61 verses 1 to 3 as a fifth, the generally recognized servant songs are found here in chapter 49 verses 1 to 6, in chapter 50 verses 4 to 9, and in chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12. The identification of these passages as servant songs has not been uncriticized.

Duhm's original theory treated them as secondary and independent bodies of oracles that were later added to the text that surrounds them. Commentators were thereby encouraged to abstract these from their contexts. Importantly, many who have accepted Duhm's identification of these passages as servant songs have resisted his disconnection of them from their contexts, rather

regarding them as a series of texts bound together in a meaningful narrative sequence and firmly embedded in their immediate settings.

The conviction that the recognition of this common form of text need not entail the fragmentation of the text more generally does not by itself settle questions of what is called redaction history, the historical processes of compilation and editing by which the text was molded into its final form. Many who would emphasize the unity of the final text would nonetheless regard the servant songs as later additions, which were carefully and sensitively woven into the fabric of their surroundings to form a unified literary work. However, I see no reason why such an explanation for these texts' presence, is required. The question of the identity of the servant figure in these passages has received extensive attention. This question has clearly been around for a long time, as the book of Acts describes the Ethiopian eunuch asking Philip concerning Isaiah chapter 53, about whom, I ask you, does this prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?

The Ethiopian eunuch's initial supposition about the likely figure in view, that it might be the prophet himself, is one that still has plenty of currency in academia today. John Goldingay and Norman Wybrae argue that rather than thinking in terms of some unknown servant figure speaking, we should generally interpret these as the prophet's self-characterization, the prophet in their understanding, being whoever wrote so-called Jutero-Isaiah. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, characterizes himself in ways that sound similar to the figure of Isaiah chapter 53, in Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 19.

[6 : 21] But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more. Christians have unsurprisingly followed the New Testament use of these passages concerning Christ. For instance, the words of Isaiah chapter 53 are applied to Jesus in places like 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 21 to 25. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. When reading Isaiah, however, it is important that we read it on its own terms. There are several

Old Testament passages that are applied to Jesus in the New Testament, which nonetheless clearly don't have Jesus or the Messiah as their immediate referent in their initial context. The New Testament writers read scripture typologically, recognizing the ways in which a passage could truly refer to Christ typologically, even when Christ was not its direct referent. For instance, the young woman who would conceive and bear a son, whose name would be Emmanuel, back in chapter 7 verse 14, almost certainly does not directly refer to Mary and Jesus. But the Gospel of Matthew is accurately reading that text when Matthew sees that text as indirectly referring to them and fulfilled by them.

Throughout the book of Isaiah we have seen examples of telescopic prophecy, where different horizons of fulfilment are present for a single prophetic word. There is no reason in principle, then, why we should reject readings that relate the servant to some figure other than Jesus, provided we recognise with the New Testament authors that Jesus is, in some sense, the true fulfilment of the figure of the servant. The identification of the servant with Israel finds some support in the wider context. In chapter 41 verses 8 and 9, for instance, we read, But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend, you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, You are my servant, I have chosen you, and not cast you off. At the end of this chapter the blind and deaf servant is Israel. Likewise the descriptions of Israel at various points closely match descriptions of the figure of the servant. They are both chosen and have the spirit given to them. The servant, some have argued, should be seen as a personification of Israel, which is often spoken of as if it were a single person, as Jacob, for instance. Yet considering the fact the servant ministers to Israel, for example in bringing back the remnant of Israel in chapter 49 verse 6, a simple identification of the servant with Israel seems to have its problems. There are various individuals with whom the servant might be identified. Probably the most obvious contender is a Davidic or Messianic figure, given the royal characteristics of the servant, and the fact that David is referred to as the Lord's servant on many

occasions in scripture, not least in chapter 37 verse 35. In connection with Messianic themes, commentators frequently observe the concept of corporate representation, where a single figure could stand for the entire people, the destiny of the whole devolving onto one representative or representative group. Some have also seen mosaic parallels, which given second exodus themes in Isaiah would not be entirely surprising. Given the way that the figure of Cyrus is spoken of in this section of

Isaiah, he is a further possibility that some have suggested. We could also follow those who question why we need to look for a single servant, rather than recognise different figures being addressed under this title, perhaps with a progression from a failed to a faithful servant. The true picture of the servant, however, is one that will most clearly emerge as we work through the actual text of Isaiah, and it requires that we read the servant material in its proper context. At the end of the preceding chapter, the Lord displayed the emptiness and impotence of the idols. Now, in contrast to the vain idols of the nations, the Lord presents his servant. The choosing, commissioning and equipping of the servant is suggestive of a royal figure. In considering the concept of the servant, we might easily think of the servanthood in view in terms of menial labour and low social standing. But here, as often is the case elsewhere, the concept is an elevating one. The servant is the one who acts in the name of the Lord, appointed by him to act with effective authority in the world, to bring about his purposes. When the Lord calls David his servant, for instance, it carries this sort of sense. The servant here is the one by whom the Lord will bring justice to the nations, not merely to Israel, setting things to rights. [11 : 45] In so doing, he will be upheld and empowered by the Lord's own spirit. In the Old Testament, we see the spirit of the Lord coming upon anointed deliverers and kings at several points in the history of the nation. The task of the servant, as described here, could be seen as a fulfilment of the calling of Israel, as Abraham was chosen in order that the nations might be blessed through him.

The behaviour of the servant, however, would not be that expected of a mighty king. His establishment of justice would be distinguished by gentleness and compassion towards the weak and the faltering, towards those who would easily be broken, crushed or quenched by a typical ruler in their might and zeal. He would be patient and persevering in his pursuit of justice, and would not grow weary or give up before he succeeded in this task. In such behaviour, he would truly reflect the character of the Lord himself. The Lord speaks concerning and to the servant in the verses that follow. Once again, the Lord reminds us that he is the creator and sustainer of all, the one who gives all life and breath. The Lord underlines the fact that he is the one who called the servant. The servant is acting in his name, power and authority. The Lord called the servant in his righteousness, as an expression of his commitment to his promises and covenant, and he is going to uphold his servant in the entirety of his mission. The servant is given as a covenant for the people, likely Israel, and as a light for the nations. In describing the servant as a covenant for the people, we might perhaps see him as the one who represents the fulfilment of the Lord's covenant promises, such that his sending can be identified with the gift of the covenant itself. All of the promises of God find their yes in him.

To the nations, he would bring deliverance from the darkness of ignorance and the imprisonment of oppression, injustice and idolatry. Throughout this section of Isaiah, the contrast between the Lord and the idols and the false gods of the nations is prominent. This contrast once again comes to the foreground in verses 8 and 9, recalling statements like those of chapter 41, verses 21 to 23. Set forth your case, says the Lord. Bring your proofs, says the king of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome, or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. Do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.

The work of the servant would serve as a demonstration of the Lord's sovereignty in history and his sole claim to worship. The glory belongs to the Lord alone, and any worship of idols denies him his proper due. We should remember that this is all still part of the Lord's debate with the nations and their false gods, which began at the beginning of the preceding chapter.

[14 : 43] At several points in the Psalms, for instance Psalms 96, 98 and 149, the psalmist speaks of singing a new song to the Lord, an expression that we also find on a couple of occasions in the book of Revelation.

The new song seems to be a fitting response to a remarkable new manifestation of the Lord's majesty and righteousness, here displayed in the commissioning of the servant and his actions within history at this time. Verses 10 to 12 describe the assembled voices of the peoples, united in praise of the Lord in their many and various locations, locations from the furthest extremities of the earth to the nearby desert regions. The Lord himself is going forth like a champion for battle, roaring as he charges his foes. For so long it seemed as though the Lord was silent, even absent, but now with the Lord's mighty shout all of that will change. The Lord compares himself to a woman at the point of labour, about to deliver her child into the world. As she gasps and screams in her pangs before bringing forth something remarkable and new, so will be the Lord's action in the world at this time. Imagery of birth pangs elsewhere are used of arrival at the point of crisis. Verdant places will be made barren and well-watered places parched. When the Lord crushes his foes as a mighty warrior, he will deliver and guide his helpless people, providing for them all of the way, keeping his covenant commitment to them. Once again we might hear reminders of the exodus here. No idol, the Lord declares, could perform such wonders. All who trust in such idols would be put to shame. Having just spoken about the servants delivering and leading the blind, verse 19 might surprise us as it speaks of the Lord's servant as himself blind and deaf, describing the servant in a manner that should remind us of chapter 6 verses 9 to 10. And he said, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn, and be healed. The blind and deaf servant is clearly Israel, insensitive to the word of the Lord, and manifestly incapable of performing the mission of the one in whose name he is supposed to act. The Lord had chosen Israel out of all of the nations, and commissioned him to bear his word, committing the oracles of his truth to them, revealing his glorious law to them at Sinai. The purpose of the Lord was for the revelation of his righteousness. But the people are languishing, spiritually insensible, and oppressed by their foes, with none to deliver them. No one even seems to be reflecting upon their sorry history in order to draw its proper lessons. The prophet himself addresses Israel concerning some of the lessons that should be learned from its painful experience. Its condition is on account of their rejection of the Lord and his ways. The Lord is the one who brought disaster upon them. Israel, the Lord's failed servant, has not considered its sins and the Lord's judgments. They have not taken the appropriate lessons to heart, and amended their ways. It would presumably only be as the Lord raised up his faithful messianic servant, that the failed servant of Israel would be restored, and in the messianic servant, enabled to perform its divinely intended mission. A question to consider. Matthew speaks of verses 1 to 4 of this chapter being fulfilled in chapter 12 verses 17 to 21 of his gospel. How might the prophecy of the servant here be related to Jesus?