

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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Second Isaiah

VII: Isaiah 49:1–52:12
God's Servant and God's Bride

To this point, the great corpus of Second Isaiah in chapters 40–55 has been focused on King Cyrus of Persia as the instrument of God's new creative work on earth. Toward the end of chapter 48, however, the Servant of the Lord, whom we met in Isaiah 42:1-4, spoke up. He interjected his own voice as a way of marking a shift in orientation within our poetic corpus. "Now the Lord GOD has sent me and his spirit" the Servant proclaimed (Isa 48:16). As we move forward with the poetry of Second Isaiah, we learn much more about the role of the Servant and the ordeal he must endure as God's instrument of salvation. We also read of Jerusalem personified as Daughter Zion, the bride of God, and her coming glorification in God's new world.

The Witness of the Servant of the Lord: Isaiah 49:1-13

Immediately at the start of this division of Isaiah, the Servant presents his programmatic testimony (vv. 1-6). He bears witness to key themes of his life's work, including his special divine election and his commission to display God's splendor. God is glorified as the Servant works to realize all God's expectations (v. 3). These include not only restoring the tribes of Jacob to God but also becoming an instrument of salvation for earth's many nations (v. 6). Due to him, God's salvation becomes *global*. Both Israel and the Gentiles are about to have their worlds inverted, and be left greatly in the Servant's debt.

The poetic lines of v. 1 betray a remarkable tension. The first summons a global audience; the second exposes an inner self. Isaiah's poetry challenges modern convention here, for many today consider it awkward or incorrect to broadcast the details of private and complex relationships, especially spiritual ones. The Servant is asking us to put aside niceties and politeness for a moment, to open ourselves to the possibility of inner transformation. Indeed, he is not just asking. The "sharp sword" and "polished arrow" of his poetry (v. 2) pierce the rigid enamels of custom and conditioning that nowadays encrust our true selves.

Pride and egoism do not motivate the Servant in expressing his personal calling by God, for he does so from a position of vulnerability. He admits flat out that his qualifications for God's global mission include little more than marginality and obscurity. He speaks twice of his *hiddenness* in the poetic lines of v. 2, driving home his peripheral status through Hebrew parallelism. In v. 4 he confesses he has nothing yet to show for his life. His exertions, to all appearances, have been in vain, only for empty breath.

What a contrast to the standard autobiographies of earth's great leaders. Ancient Near Eastern kings, such as Assurbanipal of Assyria and Pianchi of Egypt, made similar claims to divine election from the time of the womb, but primarily to buttress their royal position. The Servant's motivation and purposes are far different from theirs, and it is the differences that allow him to invert the world. First, admitting his frailty, he allows God to be his strength (v. 5). By moving his self out of the way, he points to another: he lets *God* shine (v. 3). Unlike earth's rulers, the Servant's obscurity and humility provide a mirror reflecting God's grace and glory on earth.

Second, whereas Near Eastern kings subdued human beings through campaigns and conquests, the Servant empowers them through word, through example, and through openness to relationship. His opening language of prenatal experience evokes a mood of transparency. To think of the Servant in the womb is to imagine him powerless. The Servant is even more open and vulnerable in v. 4, where his parallel statements admit to frustration and failure: "I have labored in vain," "for nothing and vanity." These are surely honest words of human frailty.

Israel's infertile ancestress Sarah cared enough about God's work, and about Abraham, her husband, to become vulnerable like Isaiah's Servant. Determined that God's promise of numerous descendants for Abraham should triumph, she shared her husband sexually (Gen 16:2), shared her own status as his wife (Gen 16:3). The move was self-sacrificial, and it exposed her to contempt (Gen 16:4; cf. Isa 49:7), but in making it she became a co-worker with God, a servant of the Lord, at least for a time. Hagar the Egyptian was also the Lord's servant. Though a powerless slave-girl, severely abused, she distinguished herself through her patience (Gen 16:7), self-sacrifice (Gen 16:9, 11), and her faith (Gen 16:13). She accepted a great promise from God, and allowed the Lord to work a blessing on earth through her (Gen 16:10). These

echoes of Abraham and Sarah's story, which represent the birth of Israel, are summoned by v. 1's image of the Servant *in embryo*.

Isaiah 49 provides powerful poetic metaphors that help us believe incredible claims, namely, that servants of the Lord will transform the world. Consider the poetic lines of v. 2, whose artistry encapsulates a profound paradox. Each begins with a metaphor of the Servant as an elite weapon, daunting and effective. Here is the scandal of Isaiah's vision in its essence—the book's exceptional claim is that frail mortals are God's instruments, sharp, select, and polished. Readers may justly raise eyebrows about such theology, the poem's first readers—powerless exiles, captive in Babylonia—no less than we today. Isaiah's carefully chosen metaphors, however, confront all doubts. They are full of power to transform our thinking, as we experience firsthand when we ponder the final versets of the lines we are studying: “In the shadow of his hand he concealed me”; “In his quiver he hid me away.”

Swords and arrows are often concealed weapons, bearing hidden potential. And potentials are *not* publicly manifest. They lie in preparedness, available for display at just the right moment. This metaphorical truth fuels a breakthrough deep in our spirits. The present frailty and obscurity of God's servants is not the basis for skepticism or discouragement that we thought, but is as natural as a sword in its sheath, an arrow in its quiver. The humble, selfless qualities of servants are perfectly compatible with the lofty status they hold in God's divine plan.

God wills to confront earth's challenges through what appear to be extremely unlikely means and instruments. Instead of meeting arrogance with arrogance and oppression with oppression, God's approach is servanthood. Servanthood, with all its frailty and vulnerability, is the necessary means and cost of setting things right on earth. As we begin to take up a lifestyle of servanthood, just as Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar did, we become God's chosen instruments in guiding history toward its divinely determined goal.

God speaks up and responds to the Servant Song in the subsequent poem, Isaiah 49:7-13. The Holy One, the Redeemer of Israel, wants to affirm and second the spiritual paradox to which he has given voice. His obscurity and humiliation will indeed be pathways to worldwide vindication and recognition.

There is a flash-forward here to Isaiah 52:13-15, part of the fourth Servant Song. By flagging that upcoming text here, Second Isaiah makes it clear

to readers that God’s redeeming work comes at the cost of the Servant’s being despised, abhorred, and a slave. As God carries out Zion’s restoration (v. 8), the new exodus (v. 11), and the re-gathering of Israel’s remnant (v. 12), God will be working through the Servant’s frailty and mortality, as becomes clear in Isaiah 52–53.

God Responds to Daughter Zion: Isaiah 49:14–50:3

Alongside the Servant of the Lord, a second major dramatic player in this division of Isaiah is Daughter Zion, the city and temple of Jerusalem personified as God’s wife. She makes her appearance in Isaiah 49:14-21, voicing her agonizing struggle with loss of children and lack of fertility. In the wake of the tragic devastations leveled against her by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C.E., Zion was left “bereaved and barren...all alone” (Isa 49:21). God responds to this tragedy of barrenness and sterility by granting Zion beauty and new life, which issue in an awesome supernatural fecundity.

For Zion to experience God’s beauty is for her to enjoy effortless fertility—miraculous progeny. Verse 18 leaves us with little doubt: beauty is actualizing itself as fecundity in this passage. Zion’s newborns are beautiful gems, worn like jewels on a bride. As the jewels draw her focus, she finds that they act like small tears in the surface of her world, pulling her through to a vaster space. In the presence of a beauty that seems incomparable and unprecedented, Zion senses a newborn world, and moves toward a stance of welcome and embrace. She rediscovers harmony with God.

Verses 22-26 of chapter 49 have been anticipated by Isaiah 11. The Second Isaiah authors edited that chapter to show how the appearance of God’s “signal” (Isa 49:22), the root of Jesse (see Isa 11:10), will cause the nations to embrace subservience and restore the remnant of God’s people (49:23). The role of Jesse’s scion encompasses the reverence of the nations and the formation of Daughter Zion’s newborn children.

In the final poem of this section, Isaiah 50:1-3, God challenges the exiles to come up with Daughter Zion’s “bill of divorce.” They cannot, for in Second Isaiah’s theology, God’s commitment to Zion is unilateral and eternal. Isaiah 54:4–8 will expand this understanding. God is no divorced spouse but a husband-redeemer, ransoming his estranged wife from indentured servitude.

The Self-Transcendence of the Servant: Isaiah 50:4-11

Isaiah's Servant of the Lord practices an art of living where the self takes a backseat and others get priority. This trait of self-transcendence is remarkable; how far will the Servant go in his commitment to it? An answer begins to emerge in the third Servant Song, Isaiah 50:4-11. It is one thing to meet others where they are in openness and vulnerability (v. 4). It is quite another to sustain this gift of self despite rejection and violence. Yet, v. 6 of Isaiah 50 shows the Servant giving himself up into the hands of the enemy, risking his life. All the while, the Servant remains calmly resolute. Despite all abuse, he simply will not turn backward (v. 5); he has set his face "like flint."

The poem leaves no doubt that the Servant's life of vulnerability is a response to God's direction. Verse 5 presents God's Servant as one who follows divine orders. He understands his life as a sure discipleship; to take a safer course would be "rebellious." According to vv. 7 and 8, the Lord God is the Servant's vindicator. By portraying the Servant's flint-like courage in the face of actual physical and psychological abuse, our poem demonstrates this vindication to be without limits. The true servant of God trusts that God will vindicate him—not let him go down the drain—even if he goes as far as it takes to put others first, even if he puts his life on the line.

For the Servant to take up this life-mode of selflessness is to work at living into humanity's creation in God's image, humanity's *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27). It is to embrace God's intention for a community of friendship and love on earth. And, it is to live the fullest possible expression of human nature, completely real and completely free. It is our nature, as persons, to place the center of our intention and realization outside ourselves in the neighbor. This commitment to others purely for others' sake builds up the entire community of persons. *Everyone's* human potential is actualized when a community of friends upholds fellowship as its ultimate end, an end in itself.

The self-transcendence of Isaiah's Servant—his sacrifice of self—bears incredible spiritual power. Repeatedly emerging with Second Isaiah is the paradoxical theme of God's turning of human frailty and vulnerability to ultimate advantage. We have yet to plumb the full depth of the mystery and the text before us gives only starting points for further progress, not crystal-clear answers. It provides a model for defeating violent enmity, but does not explain how it works.

What is the secret power of purposively bearing others' harm, of openly accepting their violent persecution? Perhaps we do not need our text to spell out the answer. We know from the examples of Jesus, Gandhi, and King the transformative power of nonresistant suffering. Such suffering, in fact, does indeed bear the paradoxical power to disarm violent aggression. The faithful self-sacrifice of God's apprentices has the power to strip human selfishness and sinfulness of all pretension and delusion.

When you turn to beat someone, you figure he or she will fight back or run, not purposely stand there and take it. When you humiliate them, they should spit back or at least offer rebuttal and defense. If instead they hold steady and resolutely bear your attack, you have completely lost the upper hand. If you continue your assault, any righteous veneer to your aggression will quickly shade to abuse. By turns, you will find yourself a brat, a bully, and a brute. In the end, you will make yourself into a sadist who cannot bear to look in the mirror. Your victim's servanthood has triumphed. The victory will be hollow, however, for the real goal of servanthood is to change people's hearts, not to "heap burning coals on their heads" (Rom 12:20).

Genuine servanthood strives not to quash enemies but to turn them into friends, to transform their very natures. Presenting no resistance to violence, it deprives the enemy of its disposition to be hostile. Exposing a soft underbelly, it shows the enemy that it can let go of its fear. By meeting violent malice with the mystery of nonviolent, suffering love, it offers the enemy something much more valuable than victory by force. To receive the freely offered security and worth of true friendship is a priceless gift, which one need not hoard in fear.

Verses 10-11 offer comments supportive of the Servant. Their harsh tone indicates the audience of the Servant Songs has become partially unreceptive, even hostile (cf. Isa 42:20; 48:22). Are some of the Servant's potential tormentors to be found within the very community of the exiles? If so, they should take heed. The Servant and the Lord God have a parallel status (v. 10). Those drawn in by any other flame are likely to get burned.

Awake, O God; You Too, O Zion! Isaiah 51:1–52:12

Isaiah 51:1-8 envisions Zion renewed as a garden paradise. It speaks of God making "her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD" (v. 3). To comfort Zion is to infuse her "waste places" with verdant new life. It is to water and fructify them. God's ability to shower us with new life is

obvious in the miraculous beginnings of God's people. Verse 2 reminds us that all the masses of Israel stemmed from one solitary infertile couple, Abraham and Sarah, whom God "blessed" (see Gen. 17:16) and "made many" (see Gen. 17:2).

Like a community lament from the psalms, the next poem, Isaiah 51:9-11, calls upon God to intervene in Israel's distress. The poetry sets the imminent rescue of the exiles within the widescreen drama of God's age-old work. The restoration will parallel the parting of the Red Sea (v. 10), which itself was a reflex of God's primordial creation (note the ready applicability to the exodus events of hoary poetic and mythological imagery of cosmic genesis). All three epochal interventions—creation, exodus, and restoration—partake of the selfsame, consistent purpose of God with the world. As a striking cross-reference to earlier prophecy (Isa 35:10) confirms, God has long purposed an ultimate divine victory over all "sorrow and sighing" (v. 10). God's triumphant overturning of the world of sorrow, not a mere political repatriation of exiles, is the core vision of Second Isaiah.

God responds to the people's supplication in Isaiah 51:12-16. Comfort and help are promised, as God reiterates Second Isaiah's insistence that God's transcendence dwarfs any and all machinations of mortal flesh. If the Holy One stands with them, the people of the Lord need fear no oppressor. In v. 16, God turns from the people as a whole to address the Servant and all those who purposefully align with him. In this remnant, God is rebirthing a faithful Israel, hidden in the shadow of God's hand (see Isa 49:2), lovingly spoon-fed God's Word (see Isa 59:21). Like an irrepressible green shoot, it will push itself up through dry ground.

The people have called on God to "awake," and Isaiah 51:17-23 now summons Daughter Zion to do the same. The passage is notable for God's acknowledgement of his bride's incomparable suffering. As elsewhere in Second Isaiah God makes the divine self vulnerable, admitting that divine judgment has entailed unspeakable horrors for Zion. She is practically comfortless. Such an admission, which sides with the wife's point of view, is crucial in reestablishing trust and intimacy.

Again, the call for Daughter Zion to awaken to a new world sounds in Isaiah 52:1-6. God now clothes his wife with uncanny, beauteous *holiness* as her garments. Beauty is a key element of God's otherness in Second Isaiah, where the poetry espouses a deity of glorious visage who plans to bathe Zion in

splendor (see Isa 46:13; 49:18; 60:7, 19; 62:3). The grant of splendor is nothing less than the poetic equivalent of salvation (Isa 46:13). To save Zion is to adorn her with beauty, transforming the city into an environment where one comes to know God.

The final poem of this division, Isaiah 52:7-12, summarizes the core themes of comfort and fulfillment that have sounded since chapter 40. The Lord is leading back the exiles to Zion; God's reign is manifesting itself before the eyes of the world. Particularly since chapter 49, a faithful remnant has been taking shape. It consists of those oriented on the Servant (Isa 50:10), those glowing like jewels for Bride Zion (Isa 49:18). The poem emphasizes that this remnant, not some indiscriminate assemblage, is the group returning to Zion. These servants are shining and pure, fit bearers of temple vessels (Isa 52:11).

Questions for Discussion

1. Two dramatic players emerge prominently in this division of Isaiah: the Lord's Servant and Daughter Zion. Do you relate to one of these figures more than the other? What qualities of that persona draw your attention and empathy?

2. How do the Servant and Zion relate to each other? Why are both part of God's plans?

3. It sounds odd to many modern people to consider beauty a central part of God's saving plans, yet Second Isaiah highlights this theme. How do you react to the idea that beauty is of importance in spirituality? Have you or someone you know ever had an experience of beauty that was life-changing, or even life-saving?

4. Have you or someone you've known ever had occasion to emulate the lifestyle modeled by the Servant of the Lord? Have you ever put yourself in harms way out of other-centered caring? Was any person (or persons) affected? Were "hot coals" heaped on anyone's head? If you do not wish to share from personal experience, can you recall any compelling illustrations from literature, the cinema, or the daily news?

5. How do the creation, the exodus, and the restoration from exile "mirror" each other? Why is it important that we understand that they do?

For Further Study

P. T. Willey, "The Servant of Yahweh and Daughter Zion: Alternating Visions of Yahweh's Community," in *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers, 1995*, ed. by E. H. Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 267-303.