

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Fall, 2009

Second Isaiah

VIII: Isaiah 52:13–55:13
The Arm of God Manifest in Suffering

The poetic corpus of Isaiah 40–55 reaches its climax in a final set of prophecies in Isaiah 52:13–55:13. The fourth and most celebrated of the Servant Songs dominates this division, presenting the Servant taking his orientation of other-centeredness to the farthest extreme. His sacrifice makes many righteous as he bears their iniquities. God’s salvation floods to earth, and Daughter Zion thrills at the presence of miracle children abounding on her heights. The new children turn out to be the *offspring* of the Servant (Isa 53:10), extending his ministry on earth. The role of Israel was concentrated on the person of the Servant for a season (Isa 49:3), but it now branches out to bloom as an expansive community of “servants of the LORD” (Isa 54:17). They enjoy majesty as God’s royal vicars, and the nations run to bask in their beauty (Isa 55:5).

The Sacrifice of the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Brace yourselves as we move into the fourth, climactic Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. The poem has entranced brilliant minds and devout spirits for centuries. Examining it, we encounter the Servant to the profoundest extent yet in our study and wrestle most directly with our response to his work. The fourth Servant Song is unique in guiding us through the changing reactions of witnesses to the Servant’s sufferings.

Reading the first six verses of the Song, we hear the Servant described as repulsive to those around him. His appearance is “marred” (Isa 52:13); he is “despised and rejected” (Isa 53:3). The figure comes across as repellent, someone people treat as scum. The Hebrew adverb “surely” at the start of v. 4, however, emphasizes a new perception, indeed, an about-face.

As of v. 4, the chorus that has been describing the Servant confesses to a radical conversion. The narrators have reached a startling new understanding of the Servant’s sufferings and have entered into an amazing new relationship with

him. By setting pronouns such as “our” and “we” together next to pronouns such as “he” and “him,” the poetry of vv. 4, 5, and 6 conveys the narrators’ new experience of relationship to the Servant and each other.

The repeated pronouns interlock the parties, while at the same time driving home the wonder of their mysterious solidarity. “Our burdens are piled on him, on him!” The sound of the poetry reinforces this truth, since the words “he” and “our” in Hebrew both use long-u sounds. The same sounds also project an eerie awe: u-u-u-u, u-u-u-u. Through careful poetic composition, the chorus is expressing how, for them, the Servant has startlingly become the significant-other of existence.

As we reach v. 6, we experience the narrators’ consciences as fully awakened. They have linked the Servant’s suffering directly to their own wrongdoing, selfishness, and apathy. “Our sins did this to him, our sins!” To have made such a link is to have experienced a rush of empathy for the Servant in his miseries. The chorus is letting us know they have come to care deeply about the Servant’s fate, for which they realize their responsibility.

The rise of conscience in v. 6 presupposes the reality of new closeness between the chorus and the Servant. Our narrators have become preoccupied with the Servant’s intentions and actions, his very being. They have embraced him both as innocent sufferer and as friend, someone who has acted with nothing but their welfare in mind. In a core way, as we observe in the spiritual transformation of the chorus, our poem is about the rise of intimacy on earth.

The Song lays bare our human crisis of avarice, displaying it openly in the world’s treatment of the Servant. Twice in v. 3 the poem describes the Servant as “despised,” a Hebrew term for evaluating worth. People assign the Servant no worth because they believe him under God’s curse and of no use for them. Verse 3 ends by reporting, “We held him of no account,” of zero value based on a calculus of usefulness. “Struck down by God” (v. 4), his moral debts seemed to negate his importance for others. Utilitarian calculation is everyone’s standard for evaluating this figure.

It is a poverty-stricken world where people are objects, evaluated in utilitarian terms. To make another person a thing is not only to dehumanize him or her but also to become estranged from one’s own true self. Eventually, of course, the poem prohibits this view of the Servant, this view of the world.

The chorus confesses that the Servant's agonizing ordeal renders the world's normal logic impossible.

The most powerful event in the poem is the chorus' perception of the Servant as innocent, falsely accused. No economic or moral calculus can account for what he endures at the hands of his fellows. Far from a worthless sinner or a piece of scum, the Servant suffered and died undeservedly. Once this truth comes out, everything in the poem immediately changes. The Servant is no mere object, safe to ignore, but a subject, a significant other, an intimate.

The one everyone considered subhuman turns out to be their best friend on earth, a friend with everything to live for who gave it all up for them, profitlessly. Discovering a friend like this can change one's whole stance towards the world. It removes utility and calculation from the human equation, making everything new.

The sacrificial death of an innocent victim is a shocking, senseless act, but something blessed may come of it. The potential of a ritual sacrifice lies in its very lack of sense and gain. Since the victim's death is blatantly and horribly for nothing, it violently severs all connection between him and the cold, calculating world of mundane life. No longer can anyone consider the victim a commodity, an object, or a thing. In one blow, with his profitless "consumption," the world of avarice is short-circuited.

The violent, profitless consumption involved in the horrible excesses of ritual sacrifice necessarily overturns all cold calculations, withdrawing the victim from the order of things. The sacrificial drama moves victim and witnesses together to a place where they find a true intimate participation in each other's existence. It brings them to a place where they rediscover their mysterious, human solidarity. The Servant's violent immolation is a horrible but necessary means of renewing human mutuality on earth.

When all is said and done, the Suffering Servant undergoes the horrible ordeal that he must undergo if he is to undo the reduction of others to things, that is, to objects of use. The reader is rightly filled with remorse—even anguish—that intimacy and community have vanished from earth to the point where such extremes are necessary. It is not our place, however, to renounce the Servant's gift of himself, his gift of intimacy. Our world is so cold, so flat, and so full of avarice, the Servant cannot set it right without embracing the primal violence of his mission. Submission to deadly violence is the harsh price

he pays for birthing a new world of intimacy, of human mutuality. To him, the price is worth it.

As we read through to the end of the Song, the Servant's ordeal emerges clearly as a ritual sacrifice. Directly, v. 10 declares that he presents himself before God as an atonement offering, specifically an offering for sin. Images in the surrounding verses, including the figure's lack of moral blemish (v. 9; cf. Lev 1:3) and his comparison to a lamb led to the slaughter (v. 7), reinforce this ritual interpretation of his work. Just as ritual sacrifices, especially certain key types, aimed to make things right between God and Israel, the Servant, by means of his suffering, literally "bore the sin of many, / and made intercession for the transgressors // " (v. 12; cf. Exod 28:38; Lev 10:17; 16:22). His anguish serves to "make many righteous" (v. 11).

Israel's priestly instruction, as seen in books such as Leviticus, included a variety of specialized offerings, each designated with technical vocabulary, and Isaiah 53:10 reflects a careful choice from among this range. The Servant's death is not just any sacrifice but a "reparation offering." Such an offering atones for sacrilege, that is, failure to respect God's burning sanctity. This is significant, for in the book of Isaiah, Israel's primary ailment, and the reason for its exile, is its uncleanness in the face of God's transcendent holiness (see Isa 6:5, 11–12).

Among ancient Israel's sacrifices, the reparation offering aims to make people come to grips with their wrongdoing through giving up and profitlessly turning over a precious part of their lives. The guilty provide this type of sacrifice when they realize their guilt, take responsibility for it, and make restitution.

Taking responsibility for sin is central to Isaiah 53's poetry. The Servant's sacrifice shocks people into realizing their embedded selfishness. By getting to know the Servant and his experience, the chorus begins to realize their personal guilt: We have all gone our own way, taken our own self-centered course, they admit (v. 6). This has had a violent, murderous effect on others. One in particular was tortured (v. 7), beaten bloody (v. 8), and thrown in a grave with criminals (v. 9). All this happened despite the Servant's innocence, since he had never hurt a soul (v. 9). With this deeply profound realization, the witnesses of the Servant's death accept blame for their part in the world's alienation and estrangement.

Perhaps more significant, the witnesses of the Servant's sacrifice are mysteriously able to make profound restitution by means of his ordeal. They come to discover the Suffering Servant as one who dies as their representative—that is, as a vicarious sacrifice on their behalf. “By his bruises we are healed,” they confess (v. 5). As such a sacrifice, his death not only substitutes for one that they deserve but also provokes within them, as a profound effect, the demise of a dear part of themselves. The Servant's suffering death, in other words, entails what theologians call an inclusive place taking. In his death, those who understand and identify with him in some profound sense die as well.

How precisely do we who witness and embrace the Servant's ordeal die with him? I believe the mystery of servanthood, as Second Isaiah upholds it throughout its poems, provides the answer. When a true servant of God puts love for neighbor first, giving the self a back seat, the neighbor's need for self-protection and self-promotion vanishes, at least within that particular relationship. The neighbor's self is sufficiently upheld by the unconditional love of the servant-friend that self-centeredness begins to wither and die. Upheld by the friend, the neighbor is pushed to let go of self-concern and turn outward in friendship, love, and intimacy toward the other. The focus on “our own way” of Isaiah 53:6 vanishes.

In the Servant Songs of Isaiah, we have the ultimate gift of freedom from the prison house of self-concern. The Servant puts not just any neighbors before himself but his enemies, that is, those who perpetrate an unforgivable violence against him that cries out for revenge (Isa 50:6–7). As the Servant makes this sacrifice, the chorus of witness realizes that the narcissistic world in which they have been living is upside down. As he dies, the Servant's ordeal converts them from judgmental scoffers to frail, self-convicted human beings (Isa 53:5–6). He includes them in his death and they embrace a death-judgment for their self-centeredness.

The Renewal of Daughter Zion: Isaiah 54:1-17

As we have seen, Daughter Zion is a second major dramatic player in Isaiah 40–55 alongside the Servant of the Lord. She desperately needs the proffered salvation, since the devastations wrought by the Babylonians have left her a “barren one,” a “desolate woman” (v. 1). Blessedly, an effortless new fecundity is in store for her, and she lets loose with joy over her new children (vv. 1-3). As in Isaiah 49:21, her mood is one of utter surprise. When Isaiah 60

again repeats the scene, Zion's heart thrills and rejoices (vv. 4-5). In Isaiah 54:3, the motif of multiplication and dominion fulfills Genesis 1:28; 22:17.

According to Isaiah 54:4–8, God is no divorced spouse (cf. Isa 50:1) but a husband-redeemer, permanently bonded to Israel. A *redeemer* (vv. 5, 8) is a close kinsperson—a husband or father if possible—who stands up for a relative in trouble. Often, the redeemer ransoms the relative from indentured servitude. Such an act is an obligatory moral duty, deeply incumbent on the kinsperson. If the kinsperson is a husband-redeemer, there is more than kinship bonding and kinship honor at stake. It must often have been deep marital love that compelled the husband to redeem.

God's irrevocable agreement with Noah (Gen 9:8–17) is a fine example of the unconditional and eternal nature of God's commitment to Daughter Zion in Second Isaiah. The unshakeable quality of this covenant made it the perfect model for vv. 9-10 to draw on in following up on the "Redeemer" language in vv. 4-8. Referring directly to Genesis 9, Isaiah 54:9 reads, "Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you."

Chapter 54's concluding poetry in vv. 11-17 lavishes exuberant promises on Daughter Zion. As earlier in Second Isaiah, adornment in beauty is central in her salvation. "Sapphires," or lapis lazuli, will be her foundations. Dark cement will set off the stones of her walls just as "antimony," ancient mascara, highlights the eyes.

God uses God's uncanny, beauteous *holiness* as a healing balm to bring about a new spiritual centeredness within the people. In the presence of such beauty, the mind clears up to perceive a larger, more encompassing fairness and majesty in reality than it had previously apprehended. The world around tears at the seams and a new universe reveals itself, in which the human subject is standing in a new position with balance and fairness restored to life.

Of special interest is the spirituality of Zion's new children, the redeemed remnant. When v. 1 refers to their great number, the Hebrew terminology echoes how the Servant "shall make *many* righteous" (Isa 53:11). When v. 3 refers to them as "descendants," it uses the same Hebrew term that describes the Servant's anticipated *offspring* (Isa 53:10). And when v. 13 describes them as "taught by the LORD," the phrase specifically echoes a trait

of the Servant stressed in Isaiah 50:4. It appears that Zion's miracle children will live lives incorporating and extending that of the Suffering Servant.

Verse 17 confirms the impression. It specifically identifies those to inherit Zion's new glory as "the servants of the LORD." The use of the plural term "servants" is unique in chapters 40–55, and it marks a watershed development. The remnant of promise that has been developing as the prophecies have built on each other has now emerged in full divine vindication. The third major division of Isaiah in chapters 56–66 will treat the "servants" in greater detail.

The Majesty of Servanthood: Isaiah 55:1-13

Isaiah 55:1-5 proclaims that God's new servants on Zion will rise up established in David's royal covenant, God's "steadfast, sure love for David" (v. 3). God promised him this covenant back when Israel's monarchy first emerged (2 Sam 7). Its blessings, to which God is committed forever, must now blossom on earth. Zion's children are to be royal vicars of the Lord, leading earth's nations in God's worship.

Genesis 17 anticipates Isaiah 55's vision of an entire community of royal servants, an expansive, inclusive sacral kingship. It presents Abraham and Sarah as a royal couple, progenitors of kings (v. 6) and mentors to the nations (vv. 4, 5; cf. Ps 47:9). Long before David, God elevated Abraham to royal status and made all his seed—not just a single dynasty—beneficiaries of an "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:7 // Isa 55:3). The authors of Second Isaiah had no need to resort to innovation and creativity in proclaiming the majesty of the remnant. This was all part of God's original saving plan.

The great corpus of Isaiah 40–55 comes to its conclusion in Isaiah 55:6-13. Here, its basic assumptions find definitive reiteration. God's salvation draws near; now, at this moment, "he may be found" (v. 6). The power of divine salvation is wrapped up in God's otherness, God's transcendence "higher than the earth" (v. 8). It must be accessed in humility and frailty, since the only really objective, solid reality in this cosmos is God's word (cf. Isa 40:8). It is neither airy nor dreamy, but bracing like cold rain or snow (v. 10). Its hard-hitting smack speaks to us of God's programmatic intention for us.

Beyond programmatic, the game-plan of God for history is failsafe. Like the sprouting of healthy crops after seasonable weather, the effectiveness of

God's word is assured. Verse 11 describes how the divine word gets results and achieves prosperity. Like natural precipitation, it is fully effective apart from human stress and strain. Given its guarantee of success, it would be foolish not to align our lives with it.

Verses 12-13 announce again the great homecoming to Zion (cf. Isa 40:11; 52:12), where a lifestyle in tune with God's will is honored. A naturally teeming fertility will accompany the march home, embodying the effortless grace of living life *reverently*. Adapting our ways and thoughts to God's game-plan makes for natural, efficient living. Why exhaust ourselves rowing against the stream, when our sails can easily fill with God's wind? Why dig irrigation ditches, when we can count on water from heaven?

Questions for Discussion

1. Modern people are often troubled by the violence in the Bible. What do you make of v. 10's claim about the Servant that "it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain"? Why was the Servant's violent death necessary?

2. As you encounter the Servant through this text, does he become a "significant other" for you? If so, how does his person and work question, bend, and transform you? Does he cause you to see yourself or your world differently? What has changed?

3. According to Isaiah 57:15, God—“the high and lofty one”—dwells most intimately with “those who are contrite and humble in spirit.” Does the humble suffering of the Servant bring God near? Witnessing his sacrifice, do we experience intimacy with God?

4. Isaiah 54:9-10 compares the exiles’ emerging from Babylonian captivity to Noah’s emerging from the great flood of Genesis 6–9. Do you see the similarities? What is the point of this comparison?

5. Second Isaiah has a *communal* vision of salvation rather than an *individualistic* one. What are the inspiring and/or challenging dimensions of spreading out the role of servant to form new human community on earth?

For Further Study

David J. A. Clines, “Selections from *I, He, We, They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53*,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Stephen E. Fowl (Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 210-218.