

## Reformation Fellowship Notes • May 11, 2014

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### Handout #3

### The Servant Songs in Isaiah

#### I. The Jewish Interpretation (Dr. Uri Yosef)

Quotations are from Dr. Yosef's paper, "Who is the Suffering Servant in 'Isaiah 53'? Part I—The Jewish Interpretation: Valid or Not?" (<http://thejewishhome.org/counter/Isa53JP.pdf>)

##### A. Dr. Yosef makes three observations:

1. "Terms used in the Hebrew Bible for the promised Messiah, such as David, son of David, or king, are conspicuously absent" from Isaiah 53.
2. The Christian reading of "a suffering and dying Messiah" in Isaiah 53 does not match "the traditional Jewish messianic paradigm, according to which the promised future king of (a united) Israel, shows up only once and will successfully execute the messianic agenda... during his reign."
3. "My servant" is explicitly identified as Israel eight times in Isaiah, and the term "servant" usually refers to Israel in Isaiah, especially in this section.

##### B. Dr. Yosef's comments on passages from Isaiah:

###### 1. Isaiah 52:13-15

"Isaiah quotes what the (Gentile) nations will be saying about Israel in their astonishment. The dismayed (Gentile) nations will see a people, thought to be disfigured and 'sub-human', become exalted and successful, and people who have God with them and not against them. Isaiah reassures his people, Israel, that those who had such visions of them will be stunned when they see that Israel is the one who is exalted in the end."

###### 2. Isaiah 53:1-4

"In the opening passage, Isaiah 52:13-15, it was the 'voice' of God as recorded by Isaiah. As Chapter 53 opens, an abrupt change occurs in the 'voice'. From Isaiah 53:1 through Isaiah 53:8, the prophet conveys the words of the (Gentile) nations, i.e., the text reads as if it were coming from a spokesperson for, or the leaders of, the (Gentile) nations."

"The (Gentile) nations acknowledge that Israel was the victim who bore the dire penalties which the iniquities of others have incurred. The Jewish people have been forced to carry ills and pains caused by the direct actions of the (Gentile) nations. They have borne the consequences of the (Gentile) nations' sickness, and have suffered (and continue to) suffer because of them. The (Gentile) nations have held that the Jewish people are cursed by God, and they were (and many still are) determined to see that they suffer the consequences of this alleged curse. Although it cannot be denied that some of Israel's suffering was due to its own transgressions of Torah, the (Gentile) nations, by 'going overboard' with their misdeeds, inflicted most of the suffering on Israel, and not God punishing Israel for its sins. God has, indeed, used the (Gentile) nations as a 'rod' against Israel for its misdeeds, but He

is not pleased with the way they have exceeded their ‘license’ in this function (e.g., Zechariah 1:15).”

### 3. Isaiah 53:5

“The Jewish rendition relates that the servant was hurt due to the sinful acts of the (Gentile) nations, i.e., this was caused by the conduct of the (Gentile) nations against the servant, and the effect was his being hurt. The KJV rendition creates the perception that the servant vicariously took on the sins of the people, which caused him, and not them, to bear the consequences. In other words, the preposition ‘for’ in the KJV implies that the servant took on the iniquities of the (Gentile) nations and, thereby, causing their sins to be expiated through his suffering. This idea contradicts what the Hebrew Bible teaches, according to which (human) vicarious atonement is strictly forbidden; each person is responsible for his or her own sins (e.g., Exodus 32:31-33; Numbers 35:33; Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; Jeremiah 31:29 [30 in Christian Bibles]; Ezekiel 18:4,20; Psalms 49:7-8).”

“The meaning of this verse, with Israel as the servant, is consistent with the history of the Jewish people, and with their promised future, as was already shown in the previous segment. The (Gentile) nations realize that their own sickness (perhaps it is the sickness of anti-Semitism) became the vehicle for oppressing the Jewish people throughout the years. They brought suffering on the Jews for their own selfish purposes; it was not, as they had claimed, God punishing Israel for its own sinful behavior, such as the claim by some (Gentile) nations regarding Israel’s rejection of Jesus. Whereas the (Gentile) nations had believed that Israel was experiencing divine retribution for her sins, they have come to the realization that the suffering of Israel was mostly due to the actions and sinfulness of her oppressors.”

“An often asked question is: How will Israel’s wounds heal the (Gentile) nations? In other words, what is the process by which this healing is effected? This is a good question, the answer to which provides additional insight into the eventual redemption of Israel and its impact on the (Gentile) nations of the world.”

“As was noted above, the (Gentile) nations have believed, and many still do, that the wounding and suffering of the Jewish people was inflicted by God because they have been cursed. This is not true....This reproof, which has resulted in wounds and suffering will lead the people to repent and...repentance will bring restoration, it will put Israel back on the right path, at which time Israel will merit to be healed.”

“In the end, when Israel merits the arrival of the messianic era, the (Gentile) nations will also benefit—they will be healed of anti-Semitism, idolatry, and other abominations. In other words, Israel’s suffering will eventually lead to the world’s redemption, from which the (Gentile) nations will also benefit.”

### 4. Isaiah 53:6-7

“The fact that the Jewish people have suffered through the sins of the (Gentile) nations is hardly disputable. Yet, in spite of all the troubles that befell the Jewish people throughout their history, there always existed a righteous remnant who never blamed God for their troubles. As far as their relationship with God was concerned, they voiced no resentment and, though led to their deaths, they remained meek as sheep. Is it not interesting that the Jews were both shorn and slaughtered in the Nazi death camps? And when they were led

on their death marches to the gas chambers or to the front of mass grave pits to be shot, all they had on the lips is the Sh'ma (Deuteronomy 6:4).”

5. Isaiah 53:8

Two observations: (1) Land of the living = Land of Israel

(2) The end of the verse should be translated “...because of the transgression of my people, a plague came upon them.” (David, see p.28 of Yosef.)

“As noted earlier, a change in attitude by the (Gentile) nations takes place in Isaiah 53:4-7, as a new realization of Israel’s grandeur was settling in their minds. In Isaiah 53:8, [my people] iniquities inflicted the suffering on Israel. When Israel’s exile finally ends, the leader of the (Gentile) nations will marvel at a people who survived the expulsion(s) from the land of the living...along with all the unfair and unjust treatment throughout their time in exile.”

6. Isaiah 53:9

Observation: “Deaths” is plural, and the pronoun is plural.

“...it follows that the servant cannot be an individual. Therefore, it must be a compound entity, a plurality, which is entirely consistent with Israel as this entity.”

7. Isaiah 53:10

Observation: The word “asham” means “guilt offering” not a “sin offering.”

“In the correct context of the Hebrew phrase, and without violating what the Hebrew Bible teaches, it is impossible for someone to bring himself or herself as a guilt offering.”

“...the term *seed* in this verse refers exclusively to progeny, to physical descendants, and never to figurative (or spiritual) children.”

“Christians generally view this phrase as being synonymous with *eternal life*, while Jews see it as a *long mortal lifetime*.”

“...God continues His response to the (Gentile) nations and affirms that some of Israel’s suffering was, indeed, punishment for the nation’s own sins. However, when Israel, as a nation, will acknowledge its iniquity by repenting, the Jewish people will be redeemed and rewarded with growth in numbers, prolonged life, and success as God’s light unto the nations.”

8. Isaiah 53:11

Observation: “Righteous” does not modify “servant.” In this sentence it must be a substantive.

This verse should read, “...with his knowledge my Servant will vindicate the righteous before the multitudes, and their iniquities he shall carry.”

“Israel will eventually discover and understand that God has had a special purpose in allowing such wickedness by the (Gentile) nations, and will not challenge God’s actions. In the end, Israel will vindicate mankind though the knowledge of God and Torah, a theme often encountered in the Hebrew Bible in terms of Israel being a light unto the (Gentile) nations and teaching them.... Also, as was noted in the analysis of Isaiah 53:4, Israel was

the victim who unjustly bore the penalties from the iniquities of others. The (Gentile) nations' own misdeeds were what inflicted the excessive suffering on Israel, The Jewish people have been forced to carry ills and pains because of the direct actions of the (Gentile) nations throughout history, and they have suffered (and continue to suffer) the results of the (Gentile) nations' sickness. The (Gentile) nations have held that the Jews are cursed by God, and they were (and still are) determined to see that the Jews suffer the consequences of this supposed curse that is upon them.”

9. Isaiah 53:12

“Isaiah 53:12 foretells that the people of Israel, as God’s servants, will be compensated for having had to carry the ills afflicted on them throughout the ages, and will be rewarded for choosing this fate rather than abandon the Jewish faith and follow other gods their forefathers had not known. As was previously noted, the idea that Israel has borne the results of the wicked acts of others is not a new concept, neither is the fact that exiled Jews have interceded and prayed on behalf of those who ruled over them. The Jewish people will finally be vindicated...”

C. With respect to Dr. Yosef’s presentation, I would make four comments:

1. He does not address the other servant songs. They raise other interpretive problems for his proposal for the identification of the servant.
2. The switch to the thoughts of the gentile nations in chapter 53 is strange. There are many strange things in Isaiah, I will admit, but this switch seems particularly unlikely to me. An extended speech from the perspective of gentiles would be highly unexpected.
3. If this section is from the mouths of gentiles, the gentiles are identifying themselves as being like sheep who have gone astray. This kind of imagery is used with respect to the people of Israel and their relationship to God. But I am not aware of anywhere this imagery is used with respect to gentiles.
4. Most of Dr. Yosef’s resistance to seeing the servant as a Christ-like figure is his insistence that (human) vicarious atonement is contrary to Old Testament teaching. I question this. As his parenthetical insertion reminds us, the sacrificial system was built on the assumption that animals could, in some sense, die for the sins of others. Furthermore there are many indications that God is willing to forego the punishment of some in light of the righteousness of others (cf. Jeremiah 5:1).

## II. A Second Moses (G. P. Hugenberg)

Quotations are from Dr. Hugenberg's paper, "The Servant of the Lord in the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah: a Second Moses Figure" (<http://images.acswebnetworks.com/1/934/ChristintheOTa.pdf>).

### A. Dr. Hugenberg discusses "The Servant as a Second Moses":

"Indeed, the prophet may have drawn from such a rich diversity of sources for the composite picture he paints that any attempt to identify the servant figure is necessarily reductionistic."

Rabbi Simlai advanced the hypothesis in Talmud in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that the servant is a second Moses.

"[I]t is widely recognized that the controlling and sustained theme of these chapters is that of a second exodus."

Isaiah grounds his promise of a second exodus in the reality of the first exodus.

"Moreover, since Yahweh personally led Israel out of Egypt and provided light for their way, once again Yahweh will personally lead his people and turn their darkness into light (42:16; 52:12). As the original exodus was intended to draw God's people into a covenant with himself, so also this second exodus will result in an 'everlasting covenant' according to 61:8 (*cf.* 42:6; 49:8; 59:21). Since the original exodus resulted in Israel's calling to be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6) and the subsequent establishment of the Levitical priesthood (Ex. 32:29), so this new exodus will issue in a renewed calling to be 'priests of Yahweh' (61:6) and a surprising new selection of priests and Levites: 'And I will also take some of them [of Tarshish, Lybia, Lydia, Tubal, and Greece] as priests and as Levites, says Yahweh' (66:21). Furthermore, as Isaiah 48:20f. makes clear, because Yahweh miraculously provided water for his people in the original exodus, a similar provision is assured for the second exodus:

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it forth to the end of the earth; say, 'Yahweh has redeemed his servant Jacob!' They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split open the rock and the water gushed out."

"As noted by G. von Rad, the prominence of the second exodus theme in Deutero-Isaiah invites, if it does not demand, an identification of the servant of the Lord with a second Moses figure. Isaiah 63:11-19 offers important evidence for this association. In their desperation, the people cry out for a new exodus and with it, at least implicitly, a new Moses:

Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses, his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea...? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit, who caused his glorious arm to march at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them...?"

B. Dr. Hugener's points in favor of an identification of the servant with a second Moses:

- 1) Except for David, no individual is more frequently identified as 'servant of the Lord' than Moses (18), and "all four of the occurrences of 'servant of God' ... are applied to Moses."
- 2) "Second, all the evidence cited earlier for the royal, priestly, and especially prophetic characteristics of the servant figure is easily accommodated if the figure is understood as a reference to the promised 'prophet like Moses' mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:14ff. and 34:10ff."
- 3) "An identification of the servant with a second Moses figure provides a ready solution for the problem of the corporate vs. individual identity of the servant figure. At Israel's own request, Moses was the representative of his people (Ex. 20:18-19). Furthermore, not only was Moses' life exemplary in terms of faith and obedience, but also it provided a pattern for Israel's experience: his calling was in large measure theirs."  

"In other words, the relationship between Moses and Israel is analogous to the relationship between the servant and Israel posited above. The servant is the representative of and model for his people: they share a common calling to be the servant of Yahweh, a light to the nations, etc."
- 4) "Two appellations in the servant songs besides the term 'servant' are at least consistent with, if they do not support, the proposed second Moses identification. The first is the term 'my chosen' in 42:1; Moses is called 'his chosen' in Psalm 106:23. The second is the term 'Israel' found in 49:3: 'He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."' While Moses is never called 'Israel,' on three occasions he would have been so called had Yahweh prevailed in his expressed wish. The first of these was immediately after the golden calf incident in Exodus 32:9f.:  

Yahweh said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

Employing the vocabulary of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:2 (*cf.* 17:20; 18:18; 21:18), which was reapplied to Jacob/Israel in Genesis 46:3, Yahweh promised Moses that he would now become the sole heir of that covenant: he would be the new Israel."
- 5) "The enduement with God's spirit mentioned in 42:1 may find its source in the emphasis on Moses' possession of the spirit in Numbers 11:17ff."
- 6) "The servant's calling to establish 'justice,' which is repeated in 42:1, 3, 4, and which is paralleled with the promise that 'the coastlands wait for his law' in 42:4, suitably escalates in its universal application the work of the original Moses, who established justice and law for Israel (*cf.* Ex. 18; 21:1; 24:3; Nu. 11; 27:5; Dt. 1; 4:1, 13; 7:11f.; 10:4). Like Isaiah's servant, Moses was more than a prophet; he was a law-giver."
- 7) "Although the call narrative in 49:1ff. offers significant parallels to Jeremiah 1:4-10, it is widely recognized that the narrative in Jeremiah is itself based on the call of Moses. More particularly, the servant's objection to his call and sense of futility in 49:4, as well as his unpromising origin in 53:1f., find a plausible antecedent in the complaint of the self-doubting Moses in Exodus 3:11, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and

bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ Likewise, the theme of meekness in the servant’s demeanor and proclamation in 42:2-3a may echo Moses’ unimpressive, at least by his own estimate, locution (*cf.* Ex. 4:10; 6:12, 30; *cf.* Nu. 12:3).”

- 8) “Although the expression ‘to give/present as a covenant’ is nowhere used of the original Moses, it seems entirely apt to describe one whose role is modeled on Moses as the mediator of the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 24; 25:22). To obey Moses was to obey the covenant (Ex. 20:19; *cf.* 16:8; 17:2).”
- 9) “The recurrent themes of the servant’s rejection by the people, his suffering, and his submissive response to opposition have obvious relevance for a second Moses figure if his experience is to parallel that of the original Moses.

“The mentioned ‘grave with the wicked’ in Isaiah 53:9 may continue the themes of rejection and the apparent miscarriage of justice that was the immediate cause of the servant’s sufferings and death: ‘They made his grave with the wicked... although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.’ Alternatively, it may recall Moses’ burial site in the wilderness, the place in which an entire generation of disobedient Israelites was condemned to die (Nu. 26:65; 32:13; Dt. 4:21f.; etc.; *cf.* *b. Sot>ah* 14a).”

- 10) “Isaiah 53:12 concludes the fourth servant song: ‘...yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.’ Consistent with the view that Isaiah’s servant refers to the expected second Moses, Psalm 99:6, quoted above, highlights Moses’ ministry of intercession as a prominent aspect of his priestly calling.”
- 11) “In 53:5 the healing that comes through the servant (‘by his bruises we are healed’) may also support a second Moses theme. The Pentateuch offers several examples of Moses’ healing ministry (Nu. 12:13; 21:9; *cf.* Ex. 15:26; Dt. 28:60f.), which may also have contributed to the emphasis on healing in the ministry of Elijah, who is widely recognized as a second Moses figure.”
- 12) “In terms of the fourth servant song, perhaps the most significant aspect of Moses’ intercessory work was the fact that in his attempt to make atonement for Israel’s idolatry with the golden calf he invoked upon himself the well-justified wrath of Yahweh (Ex. 32:30-35). Given the many examples in the second exodus of escalation over the original event (*cf.*, *e.g.*, the lack of ‘haste’ in 52:12 by contrast to Ex. 12:11), a similar escalation in the experience and calling of the ‘prophet like Moses’ should not be unexpected. Although the original Moses was not permitted to endure the wrath of Yahweh on behalf of his guilty people, this second Moses would be: ‘But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed’ (53:5; *cf.* 53:8b, 10, 11b, 12b).”

“Finally, it is possible that the promise, ‘he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days’ (53:10), implies an additional escalation of the experience of the original Moses. If, as observed by R.J. Clifford, the expression ‘prolong days’ has the meaning that it does in Deuteronomy (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Dt. 22:7, ‘Let the mother [bird] go, taking only the young for yourself, in order that it may go well with you and you may live long’), then the second Moses will be allowed to enjoy life in the Promised Land. Moreover,

given the ample evidence in the immediate context for the metaphorical use of the term ‘seed’ as a reference to Israel (43:5; 44:3; 48:19; 54:3; etc.; cf. 49:20f.), it appears that the second Moses may experience the realization of Yahweh’s cancelled promise/threat to Moses in Exodus 32:10 to raise up from him a new Israel.”

### **III. Servant Songs Summary (David Crabtree)**

#### 1. Isaiah 42:1-9—First song

The servant is one who has been chosen by God to bring justice to the world. He will gently and persistently go about his task until it is finally accomplished. He will bring light and freedom to people all over the world.

#### 2. Isaiah 49:1-9—Second song

The servant was called from the very womb to have a mouth that serves as a secret weapon in God’s arsenal and through whom God will show his glory. The servant will face a time of futility and disappointment, but God will bless his efforts. God originally gave the servant the mission of restoring Israel to God, but decided to expand that mandate and have the servant take salvation to the entire world. Although the servant will be despised and abhorred, he will be given a covenant of the people and will free his people and lead them back to their land.

#### 3. Isaiah 50:4-11—Third song

The servant is a very obedient disciple of God, and he has been blessed with the ability to sustain the weary with his word. He endures the punishment and dishonoring of others quietly and gracefully because he knows that man is mortal and insignificant and God will stand up for him and vindicate him.

#### 4. Isaiah 52:13-53:12—Fourth song

The world will be amazed by the fact that the servant will be unattractive and unpromising, but, in the end, he will amaze even the most mighty people in the world; they will see things they never dreamed of.

Who would believe it? The servant started out vulnerable and unexceptional. He was despised by others because he was weighed down with sorrows. Ironically the sorrows he bore, for which we deemed him cursed by God, were our own. We had all gone astray, and he was punished for our sins so that we might have peace. He quietly bore our punishment and was killed. And even though he died the death of a wicked man, he was buried with the rich because he was righteous. It pleased God to give him eternal honor, since he allowed himself to be punished on our behalf. By knowledge of this righteous servant the many have been justified.

#### 5. Isaiah 61:1-3—Fifth song

The servant was anointed by God to bring good news and freedom to those who suffer, to proclaim salvation and judgment, and to comfort those who mourn. Those who receive this good news will be monuments of righteousness bringing glory to God.