

Asbury Theological Seminary

SERVANTHOOD:
A THEMATIC STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

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OT630 Exegesis of Isaiah

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The book of Isaiah addresses issues facing Israel spanning three empires and hundreds of years. Concepts of identity, faithfulness, judgment and restoration are all intertwined through a mix of poetry and prose. In this complex amalgamation of ideas it is difficult to identify a single theme that transcends all the others; yet without question, the subject of servanthood is a driving force through the entire book. In fact, John N. Oswalt states, “It is my conviction that the overarching theme of the book of Isaiah is servanthood.”¹ Building on this assertion, this paper will track the concept of servanthood and the ways the author(s) develop the theme throughout the book.

Oswalt has laid forth the following servant-centric outline of Isaiah: He argues chapters 1-5 serve as an introduction to God’s people – they are sinful yet called. Chapter 6, the call of Isaiah, provides the solution to this discrepancy. Chapters 7-39 address an implicit aspect of servanthood by discussing the Israel’s need to trust God. In these chapters, Israel is reminded they can choose to trust God or trust the nations – their choice reflects whom they will serve. Chapters 40-55, the section known as second Isaiah, outline the “Vocation of Servanthood.” The first nine chapters remind Israel of her calling and provide the motivation to trust God, while the following nine chapters detail how Israel can become a servant – through the model of “The Servant.” Finally, Oswalt contends chapters 56-66, traditionally called Third Isaiah, serve as a guide on how servanthood is achieved by providing the marks of servanthood contained within the divine character.²

¹ John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39* (The New International Commentary of the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1986), 54.

² Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 21-24, 51-54; John N. Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 7-11

Within this overall thematic flow several individual high points emerge; each represents a significant element in the Isaianic concept of servanthood. Within the first 39 chapters two explicit examples of servanthood are found; each centers on individuals living into the role of YHWH servant. First we find Isaiah son of Amoz who answers the call to be the prophet of God. Second, we find King Hezekiah who must live out the tension of being the ruler of Israel, while still being the servant of YHWH.

Servanthood is not limited just to an individualistic understanding; there is certainly a corporate element as well that is often exemplified in the nation of Israel. In fact, this paper will argue the rhetorical flow of the servanthood theme revolves around this tension between individual and corporate understandings of servanthood. The paper will end with a discussion of the most familiar and recognizable pericopes on servanthood in all of Isaiah: the so-called Servant Songs. As we shall see, these passages serve as the lynchpin for tying the entire theme together. When the book of Isaiah is viewed as a whole, a reader must be able to grasp the role servanthood plays in understanding the larger will of YHWH in relation to his people and the world.

Prophetic Servant: Isaiah

The existence of the book of Isaiah hinges on the prophetic call of its author. A reader needs to progress no further than the prolific call narrative of chapter 6 to get the first glimpse of servanthood in action. It is here that servanthood is first mentioned in relation to an individual. The entirety of the book exists because Isaiah the person was willing to answer the call to serve God. His prophetic message not only calls Israel to servanthood, but also exemplifies what it means to follow and obey YHWH. Through Isaiah, we learn how a sinful, arrogant Israel can

become the holy people of God, called to serve YHWH. Isaiah 6:1-8 is the foundation of Isaiah's entire ministry, a ministry that is founded on the glory, majesty, holiness, and righteousness of God. The call narrative outlines Isaiah's response to seeing God face to face; what matters here is not how he saw YHWH, but rather that he saw Him to such a degree that it changed the outcome of his life.³ That changed life is exemplary of a person who chooses servanthood in light of their relationship with God.

The call narrative of Isaiah also points to a larger reality: the divergence between God and humanity. YHWH is indescribably holy and humanity is not, yet God still chooses to use people to carry out his plans. Isaiah 6:1 conveys this by using imagery to portray the fear of YHWH; the reader can almost feel the terror Isaiah felt in His presence. It was in YHWH's presence that Isaiah came to understand holiness by grasping the distinctiveness of God's character from all other things. Here we see the character of God defines the character of his followers: Israel was a nation called by God to be holy by behaving ethically. This understanding of holiness is corporate and individual. To be a servant, one must abase and become humble before YHWH. By taking a coal to his lips as outlined in verse 6, Isaiah understands not only holiness, but also redemption and grace – a central tenant of the book as a whole. This purification of Isaiah shows God's ability to take away sin and iniquity caused by arrogant self-sufficiency in his quest to raise a people of servanthood.⁴

What makes chapter 6 interesting is the way Isaiah is called to serve YHWH and carry out His plans and purposes. Isaiah was called to relay a message of judgment to God's people while proclaiming a greater hope. Even though God would bring Judah to desolation, Israel's

³ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 49-55; Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 170-179.

⁴ Ibid; 180-186.

offspring would be holy to the Lord, fulfilling YHWH's promise to Abraham.⁵ Thus, the servanthood of Isaiah is instrumental in bringing about the servanthood of Israel.

Servanthood of a King: Hezekiah

Hezekiah's servanthood is portrayed much differently; he holds the power to rule a nation but does so as a one who must serve YHWH first. Central to the character of Hezekiah as a kingly servant is the resounding need to completely trust in God. This is clearly portrayed as he comes face to face with the Assyrian Empire in chapter 36. Hezekiah, as the person, must decide whether Israel as a nation will choose to trust in worldly powers or in the powers of YHWH. Even with an active plot by Rabshakeh to undermine his position, Hezekiah trusted God and would not even answer the Assyrian king, not embracing fear and refusing to abandon hope in God.⁶

In chapter 37, when faced with a perilous situation, Hezekiah tears his garments and puts on sackcloth, indicating mourning, repentance, humiliation and ultimately humility. This is a personal response that indicates Hezekiah's principle interest is the honor of God; instead of being first concerned with his or his nation's survival, he is more concerned that their actions have provided the means by which God's name had been brought to contempt. Thus, he knows that if he makes God's glory principal, the nation will survive.⁷ In light of potential destruction, Hezekiah, as a faithful servant, continues to trust in YHWH. This episode reveals God's desire to evoke repentance and trust.

⁵ Ibid, 55-60; 186-191.

⁶ Ibid, 267-274; 627-644.

⁷ Ibid, 274; 644-647.

Chapter 38 continues the narrative of Hezekiah and delves into servanthood by exploring the issues of trust in light of mortality. Hezekiah is given words of hopelessness as Isaiah proclaims the severe nature of his illness. However, instead of withdrawing completely, or raging against God, or demanding healing based upon his services, he merely speaks the confessions of his wounded heart to a heavenly father. As a servant of God, he realizes his own brokenness and incompleteness and is willing to trust completely in the power and will of YHWH. Hezekiah promises to not live the remainder of his life carelessly, but that he will live humbly and gracefully. As the story progresses, the reader finds Hezekiah's life is extended. This illustrates God's ability to bring blessing to those who humbly seek and serve him. Hezekiah as an individual, like Isaiah, serves to illustrate what it means to be a servant to YHWH. The lives of both men reveal the need for trust and holiness in light of God's character and will.

A Nation as Servant: Israel

As the theme of servant is carefully examined and the various meanings of the word "servant" come to light, it is important to realize the ways this concept refers to individuals as well as to collective units. There seems to be a different use of the word and its meaning when comparing the first 39 chapters of Isaiah to chapters 40–66. In the first 39 chapters, there are nine occurrences of the word "servant" and in each of these occurrences the word simply means "one who serves."⁸ In chapters 40–66, "servant" occurs 31 times and only twice is it used in the same sense as it was in chapters 1–39. For the most part, in this second half of Isaiah, the word

⁸ Dennis Bratcher. "The Servant of the Lord: Verse Commentary on Isaiah 52:13-53:12." *CRI/Voice Institute*, 13 July 2006. <<http://www.cresourcei.org/isa53.html>> (1 May 2009).

"servant" is used to describe a collective group. In most cases, as we shall see, this corporate entity is the nation of Israel. This can be clearly seen in Isaiah 41:8-9:

But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant', I have chosen you and have not rejected you." (NIV)

This same wording appears in various other places in this second section of Isaiah such as 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20 and 49:3-6. These verses leave little question that servanthood extends beyond individuals and into the collective group of the nation of Israel.

A major issue arises when the reader begins to understand Israel as the servant of YHWH. It is not that the nation is unable to live into the servanthood YHWH has called them to; rather, it is their unwillingness to perform that role. Oswalt asks the question, "How can the broken, sinful Israel ever be the servants of God as he has promised?"⁹ This collective unfaithfulness can only be corrected through the work of an individual. This ultimate servant provides the answer to Israel's own lack of servanthood. Oswalt's premise on the whole theme of servanthood revolves around the fact that the servant being talked about and prophesied about is an individual. This individual "will be what the people of Israel could not, and indeed will be that for all people, they can become what God has promised: his servants who can reveal his redeeming light."¹⁰ Chapters 54 and 55 reveal that through the ministry of this servant, a collective people can become servants of God. These people have become redeemed and clean (54:8). They have become a witness to God's glory and a light to the nations (55:4-5).

Childs also talks this ultimate servant as a person affects the Israel as a group as they are redeemed and thus become "the servants of the Lord." Childs writes, "The suffering innocent one of chapter 53 is seen as having his life, in some way, extended and incorporated through his

⁹ Oswalt, Isaiah 1-39, 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

suffering by those who are now designated 'the servants of the Lord'" (Isaiah, 430). These people are now bearers of the true faith in the next generation.

And so, after careful consideration of how servanthood refers to both an individual and to a collective group of people, one must conclude the two realities are inexplicably linked. The author prophesies about a person who will come and redeem Israel and deliver the people from captivity. The author also mentions "my servant, Israel." Oswalt goes on to describe the total Servant concept in Isaiah as that of a circle, meaning that "the movement is from the circumference to the center and back again."¹¹ This means that God calls his people to be his servants in the world so that the world will continue to know who he is. There is only one way that this is possible. It is through the work of The Servant and the fact that He has redeemed his people and made the people the evidence of God's true nature. Thus, servanthood is always about the individual and the group. "On one hand, the Servant is the people of God. But on the other hand, the Servant is the One who incarnates servanthood and Godhood, who shows us the nature of servanthood and in doing so enables us to become that servant."¹²

The Ideal Servant: Isaiah's Servant Songs

Undoubtedly the climax of the servanthood theme in Isaiah lies in the servant songs found in Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55. These four passages detail the ultimate servant and are found in Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-6, 50:4-10 and 52:12-53:12. In addition to their role as thematic high points, according to Duhm, these songs clearly stand out in ambiance and language from the narrative that surrounds them. For example, the wording of the four songs is more striking and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

descriptive than the typical usage of language in Isaiah. Likewise, the phrasing in these passages lays out a thorough message of the Servant's obedience and humbleness, while detailing all that the Lord's Servant will achieve for the welfare of the world.¹³ Each of these songs will be explored individually.

First Servant Song

This First Servant Song (42:1-9) serves to introduce this epitomic figure to the reader. The word "servant" in these four passages does not necessarily designate a specific office or role. However, it does point to someone who has been installed or sent forth to achieve a particular mission or proclaim a certain message.¹⁴ Therefore, in this first song, the emphasis is placed on the Servant's "designation, his task, his approach, and his success."¹⁵ In these verses, we find that this Servant is appointed God's elect. His task is to bring justice and righteousness to the people of Israel, as he acts with gentleness and mercy upon those who are frail. Lastly, his success is imminent, for he will not quit until he accomplishes all that God wills for him to complete.¹⁶ This song also assures the children of Israel that they may live in confidence, for the Lord God confirms that redemption for God's chosen people will be part of their future

Second Servant Song

The Second Servant Song of Isaiah is found in chapter 49:1-6. In this song the Servant is speaking, not to the people of Israel, but to those in distant lands and along the coastlines. This is

¹³ Ibid., 107-108.

¹⁴ Childs, *Isaiah*, 324.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

a change from previous addresses, where the discourses of God are aimed only to the children of Israel. This expansion of audience, listeners and readers is acknowledged in verse 6, "...that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (NRSV).

The language used in this song is very similar to the language found in the First Servant Song - "42:4//49:1; 42:1//49:6; 42:3//49:4; 42:6//49:6."¹⁷ These parallel verses describe the commissioning of the Servant and the mission given him by God. According to Childs, the main point of this song is found in Isaiah 49:3: "And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified'" (NRSV). While there are several opinions as to the meaning of "Israel," in this verse, most believe that the Servant has simply been given the office of "Israel," and has not taken on a "corporate personality." The Servant, therefore, remains a single person who now has a new title.¹⁸

Verse 4 is the first person statement of the Servant's personal failure, for he believes all his labor and strength has been for naught. Yet, the Servant continues to express his faith in God, and knows that as he persists and perseveres in his divine call, God will reward him; for God is faithful and will redeem the people of Israel. The next verse once again refers to the appointment and mission of the Servant, while verse 6 continues to focus on the office of the Servant as "Israel." Once again, commentators are divided. Some say that God felt the task of restoring Israel alone was too small an accomplishment for the Servant, and so, expanded the range of his influence to include other surrounding nations. However, others argue that nowhere in the book of Second Isaiah is Israel's redemption to be in contest with other nations.¹⁹ Perhaps, J. Skinner's explanation best describes the true meaning of verse 6: "'To restore Israel is the least part of thy

¹⁷ Ibid., 382.

¹⁸ Ibid., 384.

¹⁹ Ibid., 385.

vocation as my servant.’ Rather, his mission as a light to the nations forms the true climax of his divine calling as servant to the God of all creation.”²⁰

Third Servant Song

The Third Servant Song is found in Isaiah 50:4-10. According to Oswalt, this song accentuates the physical and emotional suffering of the Servant. In fact, it is because of the Servant’s faithful obedience to God that such anguish abounds.²¹ While the word “servant” never appears in verses 4-10, the references before and after this song lead us to understand that this is indeed a monologue spoken by God’s divinely elected one.²² Three times, the Servant refers to his God as *Adonai YHWH* – the Lord God or Sovereign God (vs. 4, 5, and 9). Through this term, he is describing the potency of his calling.²³ The Servant declares that he has been a disciple who has been taught, “not information, but to accept the experience of suffering and shame.”²⁴ Through such experience, he can now speak words of comfort to the weary, for he knows what the people of Israel are going through in their feelings of turmoil and abandonment. The Servant is so inclined to obey God that he opens himself up every morning to the teachings given him by his Master. He does not turn back from the pain of his calling, nor does he rebel against the one who calls him.

Verse 6 finds the Servant describing the cause of his suffering, for he did not retreat from those who beat him and pulled the hair from his beard. Likewise, he did not run from those that

²⁰ Ibid., 385.

²¹ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 394.

²² Childs, *Isaiah*, 394.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

spit upon him and hurled insults at him. From there, the Servant emphasizes his continuing trust in his Lord, and his determination to proceed according to the mission given him. Through three questions, the Servant once again stands upon his faith in God: “Who will contend with me? (8b). Who are my adversaries? (8d). Who will declare me guilty? (9b). For he then declares that the fate of those who oppose him will be ruin; their accusations will be full of holes, just as a garment is full of holes when eaten by a moth. They will be devoured by their own lies.

The Servant concludes this song by stating that all those who trust and fear the Lord will not be alone in their journey for righteousness. The Servant will always be there to walk alongside them through the darkness of life that threatens to defeat them and cause them to lose their way.

Fourth Servant Song

As one turns their attention to the Fourth Servant song found in Isaiah 52:12-53:12, the issue of collective versus individual servanthood once again comes to the forefront. The passage opens “Behold my servant will prosper” and can be interpreted as either a corporate or singular reference. As we have seen the term “servant” is quite often used in the book of Isaiah as a collective or generic term that Isaiah often uses to refer to Israel. Thirty-six other times Isaiah uses the term “servant” to refer to the righteous remnant within the nation of Israel.²⁵ However at other times, this phrase is clearly referring to an individual – this certainly seems to be the case with the first three Servant Songs.

If we are to correctly understand this fourth song, it is vital to maintain a clear distinction between “servant” referring to the nation of Israel and “servant” referring to an individual who

²⁵ C.f. 41:8-9; 42:18-19; 43:10; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; and 49:3

has a multi-faceted ministry to the nation of Israel.²⁶ If one sits down and reads all of the verses mentioned above where Isaiah uses the term “servant” and reads the contexts of each verse, it is relatively easy to understand when Isaiah is referring to the nation of Israel. Isaiah makes it abundantly clear in the context either by rebuking Israel for her sin, by linking the terms “Jacob”, “son of Abraham”, and “Jeshurun” to “servant”, or by linking the return from the Babylonian Captivity to “servant.”²⁷

The text of this final Servant Song is rich in imagery and language. In essence it describes the final and complete redemption of the Jews to which the stunned nations will bear witness; this contradicts everything Israel’s gentile neighbors had ever previously anticipated, heard, or considered (52:15). “Who would have believed our report?” the kings will ask with their mouths wide open in amazement (53:1). The curtain of blindness is finally lifted when the “holy Arm of the Lord before the eyes of all the nations, all the ends of the earth will witness the salvation of His people” (52:10).²⁸ This “arm of the Lord” shows a direct connection between this section and the preceding sections. Previously Yahweh had said that He would restore Israel to Him with His mighty “arm” (40:10; 48:14; 51:5; 52:10) and with the same “arm” they would be reconciled to Him. God had delivered His people with His “arm” so that they could become servants to the entire world. The implications are clear: this passage reveals the role of the servant of Christ as well as the future role of His people as servants in the same sacrificial and servant-like manner as God’s own son would be cast.

While some may advocate for a reading of this passage that understands the servant to be Israel, this reading cannot be preferred when one considers the larger implications of the passage.

²⁶ See Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-9; and 50:4-10

²⁷ Childs, 410.

²⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 382.

It does not make sense for Israel to suffer and die as a servant and thus result in others' salvation. Furthermore, a collective servanthood reading does not make sense in light of the following statement in 53:8: "He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due"? When the Jewish prophet Isaiah (who was born in Israel) writes "my people" he is obviously referring to Israel, is he not? So how could Israel die for Israel? Since the Servant in this chapter 53 suffers voluntarily for the sins of other people and then dies, resulting in our well being, who else could this servant be except Messiah Jesus?

Reading through Isaiah 53, we are confronted with the fact that the Servant of the Lord suffers even though He was innocent. This is brought out very clearly in verses 8 and 9. If the Servant of the Lord was Israel, then this would be the only chapter in the Bible where Israel ever suffered even though she was innocent and completely blameless. In Isaiah 53:7, the Servant suffers in a voluntary and quiet way. He of His own choice "poured out His soul to death" (53:12). The only one who has suffered without uttering a word is the Lord Jesus Christ. Just like any nation, never in the history of Israel have they suffered without complaining about how unfair their suffering was.

Franz Delitzsch made an extraordinary but true comment about Isaiah 53 when he says this chapter is "the most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved."²⁹ When a Christian reads Isaiah 53 he is struck by how amazingly the chapter describes what our Savior Jesus Christ went through in His sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension.

²⁹ Franz Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973.

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. The suffering of the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus help us to see a Divine plan of endowing the suffering of those especially called into God's service with ever deepening role. 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. This is a picture of the servant that is contained in this segment. It calls on all of us to be a "suffering servant" like Christ Himself was. It is this "servant" who is seen in this segment, Isaiah 52:12-53:12.

In the First Servant Song we find that the one divinely elected by God was called to bring justice to nations. Through the Second Song, we learn that the Servant will redeem Israel and bring her back into a place of restoration. In the Third Servant Song, we see how the Servant suffered because of his call from God. Yet, he remained ever faithful to God, refusing to turn back or disobey. In these three songs, we see the transfer of Israel, from "the servant nation... to the suffering individual who now embodies the nation's true mission."³⁰ In the fourth and final song we are brought to a realization of ultimate purpose and plan for this suffering servant—the messianic implications are clear. When these passages are viewed together the conclusion is obvious, the role of the Suffering Servant is to bring the people of God back to the point where they can be servants themselves.

³⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 395.

Conclusion

The theme of servanthood in Isaiah constantly oscillates between a corporate and individual understanding. Individuals such as Isaiah and Hezekiah remind the reader of what it means to serve YHWH. However, these men's service is part of a larger calling to servanthood that is extended to and expected of all Israel. To be the people of God means living as a servant; unfortunately Israel as a nation largely failed in this role. This failure is corrected through the epitomic servant figure found in the Servant Songs. Through the work of an individual, the way is established for a corporate embodiment of servanthood. This tension between a corporate and personal call to servanthood project beyond just the nation of Israel and provides the framework for understanding our own role in YHWH's redemptive work. Because of the work of Jesus, the ultimate servant, we are able to become a part of a people called to servanthood, but we must live into this servanthood in our individual actions.

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