

The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52 and 53

by Curtis Boozer

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF ISAIAH 52 AND 53



A Research Paper

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Dr. Eric Mitchell

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for Basic Old Testament II: Writings and the Prophets: OLDTS 3323 I

by

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF ISAIAH 52 AND 53

FORMATTING

The book of Isaiah provides a message to the nation of Israel and is one of the most powerful books of prophecy in the Bible. The prophet spoke of events to come that many have attempted to discern. Scholars, rabbis and Christian clergy differ in their interpretations of these passages in Isaiah 52 and 53.¹

2

This paper will address these biblical passages in Isaiah 52 and 53, which describe a “suffering servant” to the Lord God. There has been a debate as to whether these passages were describing the Messiah who would come to restore Israel as God’s

FORMATTING

chosen people, or if the passage was describing the nation of Israel as the “suffering servant”. Christian scholars and clergy view these passages as describing Jesus whom they affirm as the Messiah. The text is written in a poetic form and flows from one subject to another; however, many view these passages as an extremely detailed prophecy

1st Person

about the Messiah to come. I will point out key passages and explain how these passages provide clarity about whom the writer was speaking. This paper will point out why Jesus is the “suffering servant”, who is mentioned in Isaiah and explain why the “suffering servant” is not the nation of Israel as others propose.

FORMATTING

¹ I have used the NIV translation throughout this paper, unless otherwise noted.

1st Person

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3

Jesus Came to Serve as a Sacrifice

Jesus of Nazareth is believed by Christians to be one of the Holy Trinity, comprised of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As such, Jesus as the Son, is regarded as divine. Even though He held this status, Jesus submitted Himself to a process that ended with His torture and death. He is regarded as having lived a sinless life, which qualified Him to serve as an unblemished sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

Prove it.

The Jewish sacrificial system of offering an unblemished lamb as a sin-offering was put in place to illustrate the sacrifice that Jesus would ultimately make on behalf of mankind.

His divine status was put aside so that He could serve His Father's will to redeem mankind, and His motivation was His love for His Father and His love for man. Jesus' actions exemplified those of a willing and selfless servant. Phil 2:5–8, explains that Jesus made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. The passage continues to acknowledge that Jesus was found in appearance as a man, that and He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. This amazing act of service confirms His role as the Messiah foretold by Isaiah.

Del.

Cite Sources

Modern Jews believe that the Messiah will be merely a man, will not be divine, and will lead Israel to dominate their enemies militarily and politically. Their monotheistic belief in God alone makes it difficult for Jews to accept the concept of the Trinity and the person of Christ within the Trinity as their Messiah. They view this passage as representing the nation of Israel who has suffered due to their rebellion, but believing that God will restore them to their Promised Land and that they will be His chosen people as they pursue righteousness and faithfulness to God alone. Their inability to recognize Jesus as God has made it difficult for the Jewish people to perceive Jesus'

Prove it.

3

actions documented in the New Testament as the fulfillment of the prophecies regarding the Messiah. Jews in Jesus' day were equally unaware of who He was and it led to their rejection of Him. It also helps explain why they were so willing to kill Him, as He did not meet their expectations of a military leader, a political leader, and certainly not a divine person. Lawrence Boadt said, "For Christians, on the other hand, it is just as legitimate to see in the person of the servant the key to understanding Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection as redemption for all nations. God's hand that guides the faith of Israel can easily prepare human understanding for Jesus' life and teaching."²

5

FORMATTING

Jesus Adopted a Lifestyle of Service to Others

In Isaiah 53:4, the writer foretells that the "suffering servant" lifted up man's illnesses and carried their pain. Isaiah 53:11 tells us that the "suffering servant" will suffer and will understand that His actions will bring righteousness to many. These actions by the servant show an attitude of sacrificial service toward others. The Servant chose to draw near to those in need and allowed Himself to be subjected to discomfort and suffering so that He could bless others. These actions were demonstrated by Jesus, who reminded the Pharisees in Matthew 22:36–40 that we must first love God completely, then we must love others as we love ourselves. Robert Chisholm noted, "this King (Jesus) suffers rejection by His people, but His suffering is redemptive and ultimately He is vindicated and exalted. Jesus identified Himself as Isaiah's royal servant, offering the kingdom with the full realization that He must first suffer rejection. But His

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² Boadt, Lawrence, Daniel J. Harrington, and Richard J. Clifford. *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2012.)

suffering qualifies Him to be king, a fact that Paul wrote about in Philippians 2:8–10.

He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”³

Modern Jews believe that the Messiah who will come will be a man with a kind heart who will serve the nation of Israel and God with all of his heart. He is envisioned as a good king who will rule Israel justly.

CITATION-EXAMPLES

Jesus came to serve His Father. He dutifully pursued the task that the Father had given Him and modeled to His disciples the value of being a servant to others. This attitude of service permeated His ministry and is a defining attribute of the Messiah.

Jesus Submitted to Emotional, Spiritual, and Physical Suffering

Isaiah explained that the servant he wrote about would be a servant who suffered. In Isaiah 53:1–6, he expresses that the servant would experience emotional turmoil. Isaiah 49:7 describes that the servant would be despised and rejected by the nations. He would experience angry people who were his adversaries (Isa 41:9–10). Isaiah foretold that people would insult him and spit upon him (Isa 50:6). These actions would place any individual under duress and be defined as emotional suffering.

Isaiah also related that the servant would experience intense physical suffering. In Isaiah 50:6, the servant explains that he would offer his back to those who attacked him. This alluded to the fact that the servant would be beaten and have his back scourged with whips. The servant also shared that he would offer his jaws to those who would tear out his beard (Isa 50:6). In Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the prophet conveys that the servant



³ Chisholm, Robert B, Jr. *"The Christological Fulfillment of Isaiah's Servant Songs."* (Bibliotheca Sacra 163, no. 652), 387-404.

would be so badly beaten that he would no longer look human. These descriptions give a detailed profile of a person who would suffer physically.

Isaiah also described that the servant would bear the sins of the nations. Since God is Holy and could not be in the presence of sin, the servant would be separated from God's presence as he bore those sins. This would result in the servant experiencing spiritual suffering due to this separation of relationship with God the Father. Peter Dray wrote, "you see that is exactly what Isaiah is prophesying the Servant will do: 'He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed'! We are healed spiritually – made right with God – because the Servant takes the punishment that we deserve. God can't just forgive sin and magic it away. God can do only those things which are consistent with his nature. He is a holy God. He must punish sin. He can't just forgive it. And through sending his Servant, this is what he does. Through sending his Servant, and placing our punishment on him, God has found a way of forgiving guilty people like us whilst remaining holy and pure in character."⁴

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CITATION-EXAMPLES

These passages are interpreted by Christians to represent Jesus as this "suffering servant". Luke 4:28–29 describes that Jesus encountered verbal abuse from the people in His hometown, in cities where He ministered, and ultimately by the religious and political leaders in Israel. Others chronicle the physical abuse He experienced as He was prepared for crucifixion. In Mark 15:34, Jesus cried out asking God why He had been forsaken, as He experienced spiritual suffering brought on by His

⁴ Dray, Peter. *"Isaiah 52:13-53:12: Isaiah on the Suffering Servant."* (Evangel 26, no. 2), 33-36.

separation from the Father. Ivan Friesen noted, “This suffering and death illustrate the power of one person, solidly obedient to God’s will, inspiring future generations to faithfulness (53:1–10).”⁵ Dr. Allen Ross reminds us that “human experience feels it has found its highest and holiest form of love when the innocent is willing to take the blame for others. ‘Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,’ and greater spiritual service can no one do for others, than to suffer with them and for them that they might be healed spiritually.”⁶

Modern day Jews would interpret Isaiah’s words as describing the conditions the nation of Israel will experience while they await the Messiah whom God will use to lead

Cite Sources

them when He determines it is time for this to happen. Mordecai Schreiber explains how Jeremiah was actually the “suffering servant” described in Isaiah 53. He shares that “Jeremiah may be considered the first Jew, while Abraham is the first Hebrew. In comparing the language of Isaiah 53 to Jeremiah’s, it is clear that this Mystery Prophet was a disciple of Jeremiah, in whom he saw the savior of Judaism.”⁷ William Dumbrell argues, “in 52:13 our attention is drawn to the Servant’s active obedience and thus blessedness. The Servant’s action has been wise and well thought out. But if the Servant is acting in the way of obedience and living rightly in covenant relationship with Yahweh the question arises, why does he suffer? The answer lies in 53, for it is by the way in

⁵ Friesen, Ivan. “*Isaiah*”. (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2009).

⁶ Ross, Allen. “*The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)*” (Bible.org, October 29, 2004).

⁷ Schreiber, Mordecai. “*The real “suffering servant”: decoding a controversial passage in the Bible.*” (Jewish Bible Quarterly 37, no. 1), 35-44.

which the Servant had performed his task of suffering that the speakers of 53:1–12 are given Shalom and are healed. On the face of it, this does not seem to apply to Israel, who remained unperceptive right throughout the experience. Understanding for her could only come after the exile (Isa. 41:20).”⁸

These noble acts of accepting suffering which was not warranted affirms for Christians Jesus’ love for them and His willingness to do whatever it takes to save them and have a relationship with them. At the same time, it reminds those who acknowledge His divinity that He loves the Father and serves Him completely and obediently.

Conclusion

The prophet Isaiah wrote to communicate to the nation of Israel and would redeem His people from the oppression they experienced. God also revealed to the nations of the world that He was sovereign and would accept men from all nations into the new kingdom that He would establish through His servant. God explained that He planned to rescue them by sending a servant who would suffer on the people’s behalf. This servant would be blameless and yet would accept the task of suffering in order to redeem God’s people. He would do this service selflessly and would experience physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. God expressed that He would be very pleased with the servant and would exalt Him for his obedience and sacrifice for the others. The Jewish people were unable to discern that God was speaking of Jesus, and they failed to recognize Him as the Messiah when He appeared to them. Their monotheistic views did

⁸ Dumbrell, William J. *"The role of the servant in Isaiah 40-55"*. (Reformed Theological Review 48, no. 3, 1989), 105-113.

not allow them to see that Jesus was divine and yet would submit to suffering and physical death. They wait for a Messiah who will be a good king, who will be willing to serve all equally, and who will be known as being just. They still await a military and political Messiah who will lead them to pre-eminence in the world. Christians have interpreted Isaiah's prophecies as a very detailed description of Jesus, and see these passages as powerful confirmation of God's intent as they see the prophecies fulfilled in the life and service of Jesus Christ. Jesus came as a servant to His Father's will and was willing to endure suffering because of His love for His Father. In doing so, He set aside His rights as one of the Trinity to serve His Father and mankind. The prophecies in the book of Isaiah are not alone in their description of Jesus as the Messiah. The writers of the New Testament often quoted Isaiah's words and explained how they pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. When a reader considers how these passages reference Jesus' life and actions, it becomes a very compelling message of love and purpose taken by the Lord Almighty. This paper has shown that the prophecies in Isaiah regarding the "suffering servant" were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and that the "suffering servant" should not be interpreted to be the nation of Israel.

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The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52 and 53

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

75/75

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

Curtis,

This is a good draft. I've left comments throughout the paper, but here's a summary:

The grammar and formatting issues that I have highlighted are representative of problems throughout the paper. You will need to edit the entire paper for similar issues.

You are overly dependent on direct quotations from others. You have several very long quotes that need to be reworked. You can summarize these in your own words, and interact with the ideas presented in them, and then footnote the original source.

At times your arguments are in need of additional support. Remember that only evidence can support the claims you make in your arguments. You must provide evidence because the reader is not going to take your word for anything. Go through your arguments and look for areas where you can strengthen them with additional evidence.

Rubric Scores:

Topic 5

Quality of Sources 5

Integration of Sources 2

Claim 4

Argumentation 3

Organization 4

Mechanics 4

PAGE 1



Comment 1

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PAGE 2

QM

FORMATTING

Formatting: review the SWBTS style manual.



Comment 2

52–53

QM

FORMATTING

Formatting: review the SWBTS style manual.

QM

1st Person

Avoid the use of first-person pronouns.

QM

FORMATTING

Formatting: review the SWBTS style manual.

QM

1st Person

Avoid the use of first-person pronouns.



Comment 3

This footnote belongs on the first biblical quotation.



Comment 4

New International Version

PAGE 3

QM

Prove it.

When you write an academic paper, assume that your reader is a skeptic who refuses to trust anything you say and demands to see the evidence. Your job is to convince this reader that your claims are true, but he isn't going to take your word for it. Rather, you must convince him with evidence, and with arguments that explain the evidence. You cannot make unsubstantiated claims. You may only assert something to be true without providing evidence if it is generally considered to be common knowledge in the field; everything else requires validation via evidence.

QM

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Delete

QM

Cite Sources

Sources must be cited according to the guidelines in the SWBTS Manual of Style.

PAGE 4

QM

Prove it.

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Comment 5

What is the relevance of this statement to the point that you are making in this paragraph?



FORMATTING

Formatting: review the SWBTS style manual.



NEEDS BLOCK QUOTE

Any quotation that touches more than three lines should be formatted as a block quote.

PAGE 5



CITATION-EXAMPLES

Statements like this need to cite examples.



Comment 6

You are not interacting with enough scholarship. As a general rule of thumb, you should average about 3 footnotes per page, which means you should have about 12 by this point.

PAGE 6



NEEDS BLOCK QUOTE

Any quotation that touches more than three lines should be formatted as a block quote.

Additional Comment This is a very long quote. It would be better to summarize something like this in your own words.



CITATION-EXAMPLES

Statements like this need to cite examples.

PAGE 7



Cite Sources

Sources must be cited according to the guidelines in the SWBTS Manual of Style.

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