

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE SUFFERING SERVANT FOR FIRST MEETING

Introduction

The suffering servant is an unnamed individual who appears in four poems scattered through the middle third of the book of the prophet Isaiah. He speaks the word of God but receives from his people disrespect, scorn, and ridicule. The poems are interpreted very differently by Jews and Christians.

The four Suffering Servant songs have been of supreme importance for Christians, who interpret the figure as Jesus. Since the prophet Isaiah lived centuries before Jesus, the poems are seen as ancient prophecies of the life and death of Jesus. The poems are part of the reason that Christians regard the Tanakh/Old Testament as essentially a Christian document since it proclaims Jesus' upcoming glory. More than that, Christians also interpret the poems as explanations for why the Jews of the first century CE rejected Jesus.

Jews, on the other hand, regard the Suffering Servant poems as speaking about the people of Israel, or the House of David.

Today it is believed the book of Isaiah was written by several people. Isaiah the prophet lived in the 700s BCE, Assyrian times, but from Isaiah chapter 40 and onwards, the texts and prophecies are dated to the 500s and 400s BCE, Babylonian and Persian times, respectively. They refer to events that happened during that time, and since the identity of these later writers is not known, they have been dubbed Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah. Some claim that there are more than three contributors to the book of Isaiah.

A short chronology of the most relevant historical events

722 BCE – Assyria destroys the Kingdom of Israel in the time of the prophet Isaiah

612 BCE – a Babylonian, Median and Persian coalition destroys the Assyrian empire

605 BCE – after beating Egypt, Babylonia replaces Assyria as the region's dominant power

597 BCE – After allying with Egypt in rebellion, Babylonia lays siege over Jerusalem and spares it in exchange of having the royal family, court, ministers, general and thousands of workers taken captive to Babylonia. The prophet Ezekiel, among others, is taken to the Babylonian city of Tel Abib. This is also the time of the prophet Jeremiah

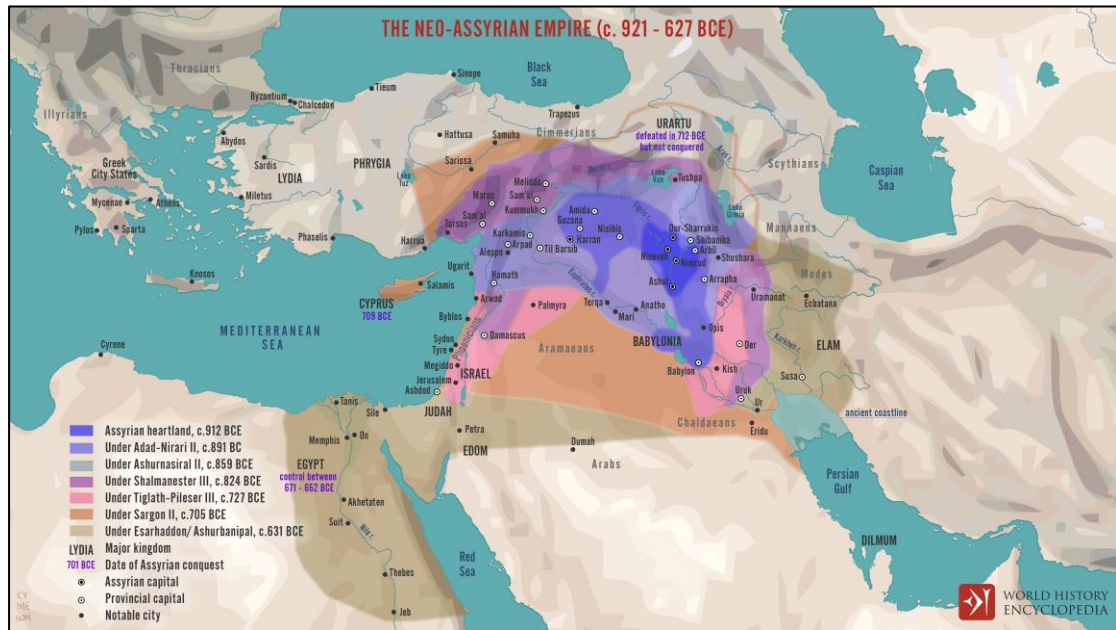
587 BCE – Following another rebellion, Babylonia destroys Judea and Jerusalem, and its temple and takes thousands more captive. Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch survive to document this period in the book of Jeremiah, including the end of the First Temple Period, following the mass immigration of Hebrews to Egypt.

539 BCE – the Persian empire conquers Babylon and becomes the world's sole superpower

538 BCE – the Persians allow all captive peoples, including Hebrews, to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. An era of peace, stability and prosperity begins.

Maps

Map of Assyrian Expansion between 921-627 BCE



Map of the Babylonian empire c. 600 BCE



Map of the Persian Empire c. 538 BCE



Prominent relevant historical figures

Isaiah the prophet: (1-2 sentences by Garry)

Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon: destroyed Judea and Jerusalem and took thousands captive

Jeremiah the prophet: warned the Hebrew leadership that rebellion against Babylonia would bring about disaster, but was ridiculed, ignored and tortured.

Cyrus King of Persia: removed the Babylonian yoke, brought peace and stability and freed all political prisoners.

The Relevant Judean Kings (most relevant in **Bold**)

King	Dates	Prophet	Events
Amaziah	802–786 BCE		
Uzziah (Azariah)	785–760	(First) Isaiah?	
Jotham	759–744	(First) Isaiah	
Ahaz	743–728	(First) Isaiah	Ahaz convinces Assyria to aid him against his enemies Israel (!) and Aram-Damascus. Not a good idea.
Hezekiah	727–699	(First) Isaiah	722: Israel destroyed by Assyria. Refugees flood into Judah. Hezekiah launches pro-Yahwist reforms. Isaiah offers foreign policy advice. Sennacherib of Assyria fails in his siege of Jerusalem.
Manasseh	698–644	(First) Isaiah killed?	Wicked king, but long ruled. Vassal of Assyria. Reforms halted.
Amon	643–642		
Josiah	641–610		Re-introduces Hezekiah's reforms. Much lauded in the Bible. Assyria attacked by everyone, especially the Babylonians. Josiah stupidly decides to ally with the Babylonians, and is attacked by pro-Assyrian Egypt. Josiah is killed.
Jehoahaz II	609	Jeremiah	Pro-Babylonian. Deposed by Egypt. Lamented by Jeremiah, who hates Egypt.
Jehoiakim	608–598	Jeremiah	Installed by Egypt. Despised by Jeremiah. After Egypt is evicted from the area, Jehoiakim becomes a vassal of Babylon. Foolishly revolts against Babylon, hoping for support from Egypt.
Jehoiachin (Jeconiah)	597	Jeremiah, Ezekiel	Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon takes Jerusalem (597), but spares it. First Jewish deportation to Babylonia. Jeconiah spends 30 years in Babylon.
Zedekiah	597–586	Jeremiah, Ezekiel	Fails to pay Babylonian tribute. Nebuchadnezzar again sieges Jerusalem, and this time he destroys it. End of the kingdom of Judah. Second Jewish deportation to Babylonia.

The Songs

The four poems are, in order:

- A. Isaiah 42:1–4
- B. Isaiah 49:1–6 (our poem for this course)
- C. Isaiah 50:4–11
- D. Isaiah 52:13–53:12

The translations are from the NRSV Updated Edition.

Portions in *italics* are quoted directly or indirectly in the New Testament. Starting with the poem we will focus on in our course, in Isaiah 49:

Isaiah 49:1–6

Isa 49:1 1 Listen to me, O coastlands;
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born;
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
3 And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my cause is with the Lord
and my reward with my God."
Isa 49:5 And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength—
6 he says,
*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

Isaiah 42:1–4

Isa 42:1 *Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;*

I have put my spirit upon him;

he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 *He will not cry out or lift up his voice*

or make it heard in the street;

3 *a bruised reed he will not break,*

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 *He will not grow faint or be crushed*

until he has established justice in the earth,

and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Isaiah 50:4–11

Isa 50:4 The Lord GOD has given me a trained tongue,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.

5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious;
I did not turn backward.

6 I gave my back to those who struck me and my cheeks to those who pulled out
the beard;

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

7 The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to
shame;

8 he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand in court together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

9 It is the Lord GOD who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?

All of them will wear out like a garment;

the moth will eat them up.

10 Who among you fears the LORD

and obeys the voice of his servant,

who walks in darkness

and has no light,

yet trusts in the name of the LORD

and relies upon his God?

11 But all of you are kindlers of fire,

lighters of firebrands,

Walk in the flame of your fire

and among the brands that you have kindled!

This is what you shall have from my hand:

you shall lie down in torment.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Isa 52:13 See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up
and shall be very high.

14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him
—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—

15 so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

53:1 *Who has believed what we have heard?*

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

4 *Surely he has borne our infirmities*

and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

5 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.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,*
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter

and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

*For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.*

9 They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb with the rich,

although *he had done no violence,*

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with affliction.

When you make his life an offering for sin,

he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

11 Out of his anguish he shall see;

he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,

and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,

because he poured out himself to death

and was numbered with the transgressors,

yet he bore the sin of many

and made intercession for the transgressors.