

SHORT STUDY

***Who's Who and What's What
in Isaiah 53***

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The despised servant of the LORD in Isa 53:3 was the despised "slave of rulers" in 49:7, who was identified as "Israel" in 49:3. The LORD promised to liberate his people from these rulers (52:3-5). The rulers included "the magnates" mentioned in 53:11b and 12a and the king of the unnamed Mesopotamian "people" mentioned in v. 8. That king spoke (53:1-11a) "to the magnates" v. 11b). The slave was unjustly beaten (50:6-9), oppressed (53:7a), and exploited (v. 7b). The king wanted payment to release the slave to work for the LORD (v. 10), but the LORD, who had already said that the rulers would get nothing (52:3), declared that the "innocent" slave should get a share with the magnates and potentates "under whom he exhausted himself to death" (53:11b-12b).

Key Words: servant, slave, rulers, great ones, magnates, ransom, acquit, innocent, profit, suffer

There is no reason to doubt that the LORD was portrayed as speaking in Isa 52:13-15 and 53:11b-12. Who was portrayed as speaking in 53:1-11a, and to whom was he speaking, and about whom was he speaking? The answers can be found by considering questions in a sequence in which each question builds on answers to previous questions.¹

1. Questions like these have been called "the enigmas of Isaiah 53" by David J. A. Clines (*I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* [JSOTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976] 25). Some answers were attempted by R. N. Whybray (*Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: A Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* [JSOTSup 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978]). An understanding of 53:10-12 has eluded modern scholars, and there is still no scholarly consensus.

Who was the servant of the LORD mentioned in Isa 52:13 and 53:11? The words "he exhausted himself to death" (הֶעֱרָה לְמוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ) in 53:12 recall the servant's complaint in 49:3-4a (NRSV):

And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

Verse 7 calls the servant of the LORD "the slave of rulers" (NRSV), and under those "rulers" (מִשְׁלֵי יָם) the "slave" did not benefit from laboring and spending his strength. "My servant" was identified in v. 3 as "Israel," whose restoration from "hard service" was predicted already in 14:1-4a. The noun "servant" in 49:3, 5, and 6 and the noun "slave" in v. 7 are the same word in Hebrew (עֶבֶד). The despised servant of the LORD in 53:3 was the despised "slave of rulers" in 49:7.² In 49:1-7 the LORD claimed the rulers' slave as his servant, and 50:4, 5, 7, and 9 portrayed his servant as calling the LORD "my master" (אֲדֹנָי). Not everyone called the LORD "master." The Assyrian in 36:4-10, 12-20 did not, and the unidentified speaker in 53:1-11a did not.

Which people could have been called "my people" in Isa 53:8? The servant of the LORD was beaten by more than one person (50:6), and striking the slave is linked to "my people" in 53:8:

Away from restraint and justice he was taken,
and his fortune who could tell?
For he was cut off from a land of kinsfolk (מֵאֶרֶץ חַיִּים),
from the transgression of my people he was struck.³

The identity of "my people" depends on who was speaking. Verse 8 was spoken by someone who did not foresee the slave's future ("and his fortune who could tell?"), someone who therefore was neither the LORD nor his prophet.

Who was envisioned as speaking in Isa 53:1-10? From "my people" in v. 8 it appears that the speaker was not plural (nations and/or kings) but singular (the king of "my people").⁴ Readers whom Babylon showed no mercy (47:1, 5-6) probably understood

2. According to 53:7 Israel was as submissive to the rulers as a silent lamb to a slaughterer and as a silent ewe to shearers.

3. Compare "my kinsfolk" (חַיִּים) in 1 Sam 18:18. "Restraint and justice" may be somewhat like the modern expression "law and order." Occam's Razor suggests that the passive verbs "was taken" in Isa 52:5 and "was taken" and "was cut off" in 53:8 alluded to the same event: exile.

4. Compare Gen 41:40 and Exod 12:31, where Pharaoh called his people "my people."

53:8 to portray a king of Babylon as acknowledging the transgression of his people. His people showed the LORD's people no mercy.

To whom did the king speak in Isa 53:1-10? Plural רבִּים occurs in Jer 39:13, where it is translated in the NRSV as "chief officers." Three of the רבִּים of the king of Babylon are named, but there were more. King + רבִּים = "riders" (משלִיִּם). The same plural occurs in Isa 53:11b, where the LORD says, "He acquits/acquitted . . . my servant to the רבִּים." This refers to v. 9, where the king found the slave not guilty of any rebellion against the rulers. In vv. 1-10 (and probably 11a) the king was speaking to the רבִּים.⁵

Was something physically wrong with the slave? According to Isa 14:3-6 the scepter of Mesopotamian rulers "beat peoples in wrath with unceasing blows." According to 50:6 the slave was beaten on his back. The חלִי in 1:5 was debility that resulted from Israel's being beaten, and, if the חלִי in 53:3 resulted from the beating in 50:6, it should be translated accordingly. Repeated beatings can weaken a man and render him "a man of pains and acquainted with debility" (53:3).⁶ When in poetic v. 4 the king spoke to the רבִּים about "our debility" (presumably singular as in v. 3) and "our pains," he was referring to the debility and pains that the rulers inflicted on the slave:

Surely our debilitation he has borne,
and our pains, he endured them.

The preposition מֵ introduced an immediate cause twice in v. 5:

But he was wounded from our transgression,
crushed from our wrongs;
the chastisement for our health was on him,
and by his bruise it was made well for us.

Why did the slave suffer? The king admitted that they chastised and bruised their slave unjustly for their own well-being (Isa 53:5), that he suffered oppression silently (v. 7), and that he was innocent of any offenses against the rulers (v. 9); but v. 10 did not portray his suffering as vicarious. The LORD gave Israel to Babylon because of Israel's sins (42:24; 47:1-6; 50:1), and in 53:10 the king gave a similar reason for

5. The Hebrew word for "great" (רב) corresponds to the Akkadian word for "magnate" (*rab*), which was used in titles such as Rab-saris and Rab-mag (Jer 39:13). In Isa 53:1-10 a Mesopotamian king was speaking to the Rabs (magnates). The judicial function of magnates as a royal council has been discussed by Raija Mattila (*The King's Magnates: A Study of the Highest Officials of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* [SAAS 11; Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 2000] 167).

6. The sufferings were due primarily to physical ill treatment, according to R. N. Whybray (*Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 135).

the slave's suffering: "But Yahweh wanted the debility [vocalized as יְהַחֲלֵי] to make him contrite."⁷

What is the meaning of נֶשֶׂא in Isa 53:10? One meaning of that noun is "compensation" (compare "ransom" in Mark 10:42-45). If it is in the construct state in Isa 53:10 (compare "price of his life" in Mark 8:37), "the compensation of his life" (נֶשֶׂא נַפְשׁוֹ) is the direct object of the verb. When a second-person singular masculine verb expresses an indefinite personal subject (compare the verb in Isa 7:25), "you" can mean "someone," as in English.⁸ And so in 53:10 the king may have contemplated selling the slave to let him work for the LORD:

If you/someone would give the compensation/ransom of his life,
he could see offspring, he could prolong days,
and what Yahweh wants by his hand could succeed.

In 52:3 the LORD promised to redeem his people "without money."

What is the meaning of צַדִּיק in Isa 53:11b? Both Septuagint and Targum understood it as the direct object of the verb, not the subject of the verb. In 5:23 the same verb means "acquit" (NRSV), and the plural of צַדִּיק means "the innocent" (NRSV). In 50:8-9 the servant of the LORD claimed to be not guilty, and this suggests that צַדִּיק can mean "innocent" in 53:11b: "He acquits/acquitted an innocent party, my servant, to the רַבִּים ." The subject of the verb is the person who spoke vv. 1-11a (the king), the direct object of the verb is the innocent slave, and the רַבִּים together are the object of a preposition. If "to" is the correct translation of the preposition (ל), the רַבִּים be the indirect object of the verb. Just as definite רַבִּים does not mean "many" in v. 12a (NRSV: "the great"), so also definite רַבִּים does not mean "many" in v. 11b but refers to the royal council composed of magnates.⁹

What then is the message of Isaiah 53? Recall the preceding context. In 49:4 the slave complained about working for nothing, and in 52:3 the LORD promised to redeem the slave without paying the rulers. In 53:10 the ruler looked for ransom to release the slave, but the LORD turned the tables on the rulers in vv. 11b-12b:

He acquits/acquitted an innocent, my servant, to the magnates,
and their wrongs he endures/endured.

7. One can characterize the labor of a slave for his masters as vicarious without thereby implying that any such labor or suffering atoned for anything. The word יְהַחֲלֵי was vocalized as a definite noun by Christopher R. North (*The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Commentary to Chapters XL-LV* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1964] 232).

8. GKC (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910) §144h. Mark 8:37 asked, "What would someone ($\alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\omicron\varsigma$) give as the price ($\alpha\nu\tau\acute{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\alpha\gamma\mu\alpha$) of his life?"

9. The word צַדִּיק was used adverbially in 2 Sam 23:3, but it was probably not used adverbially in Isa 53:11b.

Therefore I will have him share with the magnates
 and he shall share profit (שָׁלַל) with potentates
 under whom (רַחֲמֵי אֲשֶׁר) he exhausted himself to death
 and was counted with transgressors.¹⁰

The slave exhausted himself under the great ones (magnates) who exercised power over him (compare "their great ones" in Mark 10:42), the masters of the slave. Not only will the rulers not receive any ransom, but also those masters must pay dividends to their slave for his labor!

The slave was declared innocent (Isa 53:11b above), but "many" (indefinite רַבִּים) were guilty (v. 12c):

And he the offense of many has borne,
 and for the perpetrators he suffers/suffered (וְלִפְשָׁעֵי יִפְגִּיעַ).

The LORD would hardly say that his servant "made intercession" for oppressors, but he might well say that he "suffered" for them. The Hebrew verb has this meaning in *Kohelet Rabbah* at 9:11 ("It is time that strikes man . . . and he suffers").¹¹ The despised "slave of rulers" in Isa 49:7 was unique, not because "he was oppressed" (53:7), but because he was the servant of the LORD (49:3).

10. Translating שָׁלַל as "spoil" prevents readers from fully understanding the similes of the slaughtered lamb and the sheared ewe in v. 7, which simulated the exploitation of Israel. "To death" in v. 12 was taken as hyperbole by Charles Cutler Torrey (*The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* [New York: Scribner's, 1928] 423).

11. Marcus Jastro *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Pardes, 1950) 1122a, 1135a.