

## Essay 9

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### Hebrew language students: discuss an interesting feature of the text.

Some scholars have divided chapters 48-54 of Isaiah into three sections. In chapters 49-52, God insists that He has not cast Israel aside. God promises them deliverance from captivity. However, His words not only point to an earthly deliverance; it indicates a redemption from sin. Sin holds them in spiritual captivity (Oswalt 2003, 546). Chapter 54 is an invitation to participate in an accomplished deliverance. Chapter 53 deserves separate consideration. Some biblical scholars consider it the central chapter of the second part of Isaiah (40-66). Most of the 80 references to Isaiah in the New Testament relate to this chapter. Thus, Isaiah 53 is the heart of the Hebrew prophetic writings (Constable 2021). Isaiah used literary figures and terms to shape the message in these chapters, which required sounder study.

A literary figure widely used in the Bible is the metaphor. This figure uses the qualities of one object or person to represent the characteristics of another. In these chapters of Isaiah, the author used the concept of "woman" (אִשָּׁה) to reflect God's relationship with Israel. In Isaiah 49:14-23, God compares Himself to the love of a compassionate mother who has borne a child. It is not normal for a mother to abandon a child she has carried in the womb. God illustrates His love for Israel as a mother's love for their children (Constable 2021). Isaiah 50:1-3 compares Israel to a divorced woman God has divorced. God evidences that this divorce was not because of His will but because of Israel's wickedness. Isaiah 51:20 refers to Israel as a forsaken woman whose children could not help her. The reason for this helplessness was God's wrath because of Israel's rebellion. In Isaiah 54:6-10, God will restore the divorced woman's condition and gives her new hope in life (Oswalt 2003, 595). God eternally promises her His "unfailing love" and His "covenant of peace" (Isaiah 54:10).

The Hebrew text in Isaiah also uses the literary figure simile to establish a relationship between two distinct ideas. Isaiah 53:6 mentions that the Israelites are "like sheep" (כְּצֹאֵן). Hebrew uses the prefix "כִּי" to make similes. Constable points out that the sheep are short-sighted and go after the next clump of grass without measuring the consequences or danger (Constable 2021). It shows their self-centeredness as they only want to satisfy themselves. As a result, sheep often go astray. Israel (and all humankind) has the same behavior.

"Servant" (עֶבֶד) is a central term in Isaiah to refer to different people. The definition of this term is different from today. The Servant in Isaiah does not refer to a slave. On the contrary, this term refers to someone who performs an essential service for someone he recognizes as master and savior (Oswalt 2003, 549). This Servant is the agent in carrying out God's work in these chapters. "Servant" refers to Cyrus, the prophet, and Israel throughout the book of Isaiah. However, Isaiah 53 shows a distinct reference to the Servant, which cannot match with any of them. Some scholars have considered this Servant the "ideal Israel" (Constable 2021). That is, what Israel should have been, but never achieved. This Servant, under the description of Isaiah 53, fits the

Messiah. Constable points out that these chapters present the Messiah (God's Servant) in three relevant relationships: with the Gentile nations (49:1-50:2), with His Father (50:4-11), and with His people Israel (51:1-52:12) (Constable 2021). Isaiah 50:10 presents a synonymous parallel between God and the Servant. These expressions reinforce the idea that the Servant of God must carry the word of God to the nation (Oswalt 2003, 563). This Servant is in a different position, unequal to any man or nation.

The term "Sovereign Lord" has been the choice of some translations to translate יהוה אֱלֹהֵינוּ. This translation decision is not foreign to Isaiah's message. Isaiah 48:12-16 points out that God is sovereign over all. God is in control of eternity (48:12), creation (48:13), human affairs (48:14-15), prophecy, and the Trinity (48:16) (Constable 2021). God's sovereignty over all that exists is an implicit message throughout the book of Isaiah. God controls the nations and Israel. He can use them to fulfill His will and His eternal designs. In the face of this decision, Israel and the nations were to bow down before the almighty God.

The term "arm of the Lord" (זְרוּעַ יְהוָה) is a frequent expression in Isaiah. It is a literary figure of speech called synecdoche. Not only will God's arm bring deliverance. God will entirely bring redemption to Israel and the world (Oswalt 2003, 582). Some have referred to the "arm of the Lord" as the Servant mentioned in the other chapters (53:1). The "ideal Israel" would be the arm of God that would show His salvation on behalf of many (52:10). This arm of God had defeated the Egyptians and Pharaoh in the past. Reference to these characters is in Isaiah 51:9 with the mention of Rahab (רַהַב) and the dragon (תַּנִּין). Constable points out that by evoking this period of history with these mentions, Isaiah highlights God's ability to overcome any pagan god or earthly power that opposes His salvation (Constable 2021).

Some words appear several times in a chapter or several chapters to guide the reader in the author's purpose. In Isaiah 48, the word "listen" (שָׁמַע) appears ten times. The prophet reminds the people that their present situation is because they did not listen in the past and now exhorts them to listen to the promises (Oswalt 2003, 537). In addition, Oswalt also reflects on the meaning of the Hebrew word "hear." Hearing involves not just a passive response but an active reaction. If Israel listened, then it would obey and act upon God's advice. The word "awake" (עוֹרֵי) occurs seven times in Isaiah 51-52. The sense of this word is to call the attention of the Servant (51:9) and Israel (51:17 and 52:1). It functions similarly to "listen." God wanted Israel to be ready, out of any stupor, to put on glorious garments (Constable 2021). Furthermore, the use of the first person plural possessive pronoun (נוֹ-) in Isaiah 53:4-5 seeks to point out that the Servant's suffering is on behalf of humanity.

Some words in Isaiah have a dual meaning for specific purposes. In Isaiah 49:17, Isaiah saw the builders of Jerusalem's walls hastening to rebuild it after the departure of its destroyers (Constable 2021). This verse fits with the Nehemiah-Ezra account of the rebuilding of that citadel. The term to refer to "the builders" is בְּנֵיךְ. This word is similar to the word "sons" (בְּנֵיךְ). Constable notes that the intent is deliberately ambiguous to communicate both ideas since, initially, only the consonants appeared in the Hebrew text (Constable

2021). In Isaiah 52:15, the verb נָזַח can have two meanings (sprinkle or startle). If this verb means "to sprinkle," Isaiah implies that the Servant, although not representing God, would have a priestly function of cleansing the world of sins (Constable 2021). However, if this verb means "to startle," the prophet implies that this unlikely Servant representing God would scandalize the world. Constable points out that Isaiah's purpose could have been both meanings to make readers aware of both truths.

Another term that requires further study is "despised" (נִבְזָה). This verb in Hebrew means to be considered unworthy of attention (Constable 2021). Although the Servant would indeed be the object of contempt, as the gospels state, Isaiah's purpose is to highlight that people would rashly cast him aside. Although both meanings fit well with the Messiah, Isaiah intended to emphasize that the Servant would provoke abhorrence. This thought fits with the general idea of Isaiah 53:3.

### **Bibliography**

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Constable, Thomas L. *Notes on Isaiah, 2021 Edition*. Soniclight: 2021.