

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Old Testament Exegetical Commentary of Isaiah 52:13–53:12

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OT 651/751 Isaiah

by

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Introduction

For many years, the book of Isaiah has been a favorite for both Old Testament and New Testament scholars alike. The book has been studied for decades because of its elegance, masterful and jaw-dropping revelations of God, and remarkable prophecies. It is a story of God in pursuit of a people who have not always been faithful to Him. As a result, the book is a masterful revelation of the mercy, grace, and ultimately, love of God towards His people. Of the many chapters in the book, Isaiah 52:13–53:12 seems to stand out for the unique nature of its prophecy and what that continues to reveal about the nature of God.

As for Kalisher in his 2022 journal article, this set of verses represented the final servant song of Isaiah and it was the most argued chapter in the Old Testament with respects to the identity of the Messiah. He further noted that for most evangelicals there was no question that the verses were referring to Jesus the Messiah, but on the side of the Rabbinical Judaism, there is much criticism to that interpretation.¹ Given the weightiness and relevance of the ongoing discussions, this paper is an exegesis of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Various excellent commentaries and other scholarly materials are also employed in this exegesis, culminating in potential theological implications that are of current relevance.

Historical and Literary Context of Isaiah

It is generally accepted that the whole book of Isaiah was written by the prophet bearing that name-Isaiah and biblical scholars have postulated that Isaiah 53 was written during his later years. This is also coming from the idea that most of the events referred to in chapters 1-39 occurred during Isaiah's ministry, and as a result these chapters were completed not long after

¹ Kalisher, Menachem I. "Isaiah 52: The Identity and Ministry of the Servant of the Lord." *The Master's Seminary Journal* 33, no. 2 (2022)

the year the Assyrian army was destroyed-which was not long after 701 BC. So, the prophet Isaiah may have lived until 681 which might have constituted the time in which Isaiah 52:13–53:12 was written. This would also imply that the chapter could have also been speaking to the Jews suffering in Babylonian captivity. The historical context of Isaiah 53 is therefore one that is intricately tied to the life and ministry of the prophet Isaiah, as well as the events that took place during his lifetime.²

Moreover, the spiritual and political climate during the time of Isaiah was everything far from stable. It has been observed that this was a time of political and religious storms. It was a period that marked the expansion of the Assyrian Empire and the decline of Israel. By around 733 the kings of Aram and Israel thought to coerce Ahaz, king of Judah into joining a coalition against Assyria. But Ahaz preferred to seek help from Tiglath-Pileser, which became a political maneuver condemned by Isaiah. After Assyria assisted Judah by conquering the northern kingdom in 722-721, this made Judah more vulnerable, and in 701 King Sennacherib of Assyria threatened to attack Jerusalem, forcing the godly King Hezekiah to earnestly pray and seek a miraculous intervention by God. In accordance with the prophesying of Isaiah, God overthrew the Assyrian army, forcing their king from the city.³

However, Judah would not hold on to God, and following the blunder of Hezekiah in showing off himself and the kingdom, the prophet warned that Judah would go into captivity for her persistent rebellion from God. This captivity came to pass through the Babylonian invasion. Still, God spoke of redeeming a remnant from captivity and the restoration of the Jews to their land. Hence, Isaiah predicted the rise of Cyrus the Persian, who would be the catalyst for the

² The Holy Bible. New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1112.

³ The Holy Bible. New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1112.

fulfillment of this prophecy. In a nutshell, the book of Isaiah is a tell of God's persistent and redeeming love.⁴

Literary wise, Oswalt describes 52:13–53:12 as a poem of five stanzas with three verses in each stanza. This begins with an Introduction captured in Isaiah 52:13-15 to the servant's rejection captured in Isaiah 53:1-3. In Isaiah 53:4-6, the servant is portrayed as the one carrying the sins and transgressions of others, and the consequences for such an undertaking is captured in Isaiah 53:7-9. But there is a revelation to the atoning nature of the carrying of sins, and this is reflected in Isaiah 53:10-12. The prophet's delicate care to approaching the prophecy and the importance he attaches to it is shown in the way this poem was carefully structured.⁵

Analysis of the Text

Many scholars are of the interpretation that Isaiah 52 and 53 are tightly knit together and are referring to the same servant and share the same themes. But for the purpose of this work, there would only be a focus on Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and slight reference to the other verses in chapter 52 if necessary. According to Friesen, Isaiah 52:13–53:12 marks the final of the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. The passage commences with the Lord describing his servant in a way that conveys a sense of nobility, reminiscent of a crown prince (52:13-15). The demeanor and physical appearance of this servant astonishes nations and rulers, leaving them bewildered and shocked.⁶

It is the nature, calling and suffering of this servant that characterizes the rest of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. This paper would be a verse-by-verse exegetical analysis of Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

⁴ The Holy Bible. New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 1112.

⁵ John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018)

⁶ Ivan D. Friesen. 2009. *Isaiah: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, Pa: Herald Press

Through the careful examination and interpretation of the verse in the light of various authorities in biblical exegesis, this paper seeks to shed lights on the profound truths and implications of the text. These are universal truths that hold significance to the unique contexts of all peoples, regardless of their backgrounds or origins.

In view of verse 13 of the 52nd chapter, Oswalt noted that the text in view begins and closes with a note of triumph, and that is why the servant is to “...divide the spoils with the strong” (Isaiah 53:12). This triumphant servant was to act wisely not to be a failure but to be triumphant. The outcome of this servant’s work is a settled matter, and it is a successful campaign. Grogan in his commentary, drew attention to the wisdom of this servant. The servant of God is wise and therefore has what it takes for determining desirable ends and devising practical means to achieve them. However, for this servant, wisdom is to be self-denying and accepting the ends determined by God. Gregory further noted that this kind of wisdom is radically different from the kind possessed by the world.⁷ The idea is clear that the servant would be exalted because he humbles himself through the wisdom of God, to deny himself and suffer.

However, from verses 14 begins a sharp contrast in the description of this exalted servant in the previous verse. It is this that prompted Wegner to assert that verse 13 must have been referring to a different aspect or time of the servant’s life.⁸ The servant is depicted to be in a severe state of suffering captured by the fact that he is marred more than any man. Oswalt noted that in verse 15 there is an unusual picture of the servant having to sprinkle the nations with something not clearly specified, and this is possibly why the kings of these nations would be startled or have their mouths shut. It is a wonder that the servant is bringing justice by means of

⁷ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah: Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 702.

⁸ Paul D. Wegner, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 480.

his own injury and abuse - a thing unheard of.⁹ Wegner however was very certain that the sprinkling of the nations was for their cleansing, and this is a form of cleansing that they have never seen before or observed before, is what startles them.¹⁰

In the first verse of the 53rd chapter, there is the continuation of this mission of the servant, and this is introduced by a change in speaker as the prophet asks the rhetorical question, “Who has believed our message?” Wegner defined “the arm of the Lord” in the text as an expression of God’s strength and ability to deliver, and thus it is those who have believed God’s message that would receive God’s deliverance.¹¹ Goldingay asserted that this verse showed the servant as embodying the power of Yahweh and therefore could not be ignored.¹² For Oswalt, this servant was the very arm of the Lord, and that even though the people were astonished at him, they would outright reject him.¹³

Verses 2 and 3 continued to expand on the nature of this servant, and began touch on what his upbringing would be like. Oswalt noted that the servant comes on the scene in a quite an unassuming way, has no special beauty and attractiveness, and is rejected because he takes on himself the pain and suffering of the world. For Oswalt, this contributed to why the servant’s report was rejected.¹⁴ With regards to the servant being described as vine/root out of the ground, Watts noted that the concept of “a vine out of the ground” was a figurative language for someone whose parentage was not in line for succession to the throne, but however attributed the identity of the servant to Darius who grew up in the court of Cambyses as an insignificant and uncompromising person.¹⁵ On the contrary, Krueger identified the suffering servant as Jesus the

⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah*.

¹⁰ Wegner, *Isaiah*, 481.

¹¹ Wegner, *Isaiah*, 481.

¹² John Goldingay, *Isaiah: Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 348.

¹³ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 885.

¹⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 855.

¹⁵ John D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary* Vol. 25, *Isaiah 34-66* (Thomas Nelson, 2005), 686.

Christ while also asserting that the great lowliness of Christ in the flesh displayed mostly in his humiliation and suffering, was one of the major reasons people have difficulty in accepting him. To the natural human, full of pride, they cannot understand the mysterious ways of God, and this becomes an occasion of stumbling for them.¹⁶

From verse 4-6, the prophet Isaiah began to show some of the reasons behind the servant's suffering. Oswalt noted that it was very clearly highlighted why the servant was suffering, and that though the initial thought could have been that he was suffering simply because God was punishing him for his own sins or rebellion, it was now made clear that the suffering was because he was carrying the iniquities and transgressions of others. The suffering that was meant for the people, he bore upon himself. Oswalt also noted that there has been endless debate as to who were the people the servant was suffering for, but for Oswalt the suffering was clearly for the prophet and the people he was addressing. Consequently, the people were not this servant that should bring justice and deliverance to the earth, but were servants of God to bear witness of the Lord's saving power.¹⁷

Goldingay noted that though infirmities and sorrows as used in the text could be a language suggesting to be stricken with the kind of sickness discussed in Leviticus 13-14, the evidence leans towards the idea of the servant's suffering coming from the attacks of other human beings. The servant is to be maltreated, injured, wounded and crushed, attacked and violated, and all these was not because of his own sins but rather because of the wrongdoing of others.¹⁸

¹⁶ Krueger, Ottomar. "Outlines on Isaiah 53." *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20, no. 1 (January 1949): 30–36.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 865

¹⁸ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 349

Wegner highlighted the debate on whether the suffering of the servant represented vicarious atonement. If this was indeed a form of atonement, it would mirror the ultimate manifestation of it in the person of Jesus Christ. Wegner concluded that, nonetheless, the servant's suffering was not in vain, but rather his wounds brought about healing and peace. Interestingly, Wegner further pointed out that the healing was not merely natural but indicated spiritual healing from sin. This is evidenced from the natural reading of the text where it is said that the servant was pierced for *our transgression*...and crushed for *our iniquities*.¹⁹

Krueger is very certain that verse 5 mounted more evidence that the servant spoken of by the prophet can only be Jesus Christ. He went on to highlight that the text demonstrated the substitutionary atonement of Jesus. God was punishing the sins of the world on his Son. In other words, the world would be spared on the account of the Son of God taking the place of the world under the judgement of God. The work of healing the Son had done was not ongoing but rather completed. Christ left nothing undone and so there is no need for another work of atonement.²⁰Grogan affirmed that, "Most commentators-even those who deny the presence of penal substitution elsewhere in the OT-agree that it is the meaning of this passage, though some argue against this."²¹ The people like sheep had gone astray and instead of being punished, the servant took their place so that they could walk free.

But what is the disposition of this servant in the face of all this suffering? What is the servant's demeanor...what is the posture of his heart as he faces such grave humiliation? This is described in verse 7. Oswalt highlighted the servant's innocence and submission to the treatment he receives. The servant like a sheep is defenseless and does nothing to resist or protest the

¹⁹ Wegner, *Isaiah*.

²⁰ Krueger, *Outlines on Isaiah 53*

²¹ Grogan, *Isaiah*, 714.

injustice that is perpetrated against him. Oswalt further noted that the use of the metaphor of a sheep in Isaiah's poem was rather interesting because this was an animal of sacrifice.²²

Erlandsson went deeper into understanding the imagery of a sheep as used by the prophet in this poem. According to him, when it was said that the servant was "led like a lamb to the slaughter." There was an allusion here to the one-year old male lamb without defect, taken from the sheep or the goats (see Ex 12:5-7), the Passover lamb whose blood delivered the people from death and captivity in the land of Egypt. Erlandsson also showed how Peter touched on the connection between the Christ and the Passover lamb: "You were redeemed. . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pe 1:18f). Consequently, to illustrate the Messiah's patient suffering, Isaiah uses the picture of a grown ewe who quietly and patiently allows herself to be shorn.²³ Also, Watts viewed this scenario as a one who though under torture does neither plead for mercy nor give any information.²⁴

Verses 8,9 continued to depict the suffering of this servant of God. According to Oswalt, the injustice of what the servant suffered is further underlined when he is not only deprived of justice but also of descendants, evidently "cut off" when he was still a very young person. To make matters worse and to add salt to injury, he is buried with the rich. He further noted that though riches by itself is not necessarily treated as evil in the Old Testament, in this case it was in connection with those who had accumulated unjust riches. In other words, the innocent servant was brought under the same condemnation as for the likes of unjust rich people.²⁵

²² Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 856.

²³ Erlandsson, Seth. "Isaiah 52:13-53:12: The Messiah's Suffering and His Vicarious Atonement." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (Spr 2016): 83-95.

²⁴ Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 688.

²⁵ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 857.

Wegner emphasized the text about the generation of the servant by stating that it could have meant that no one from his generation cared that he was suffering unjustly and being killed on behalf of God's people even though they were the ones who deserved to be killed for their own sins. Also, when Wegner examined the idea of the servant being "cut off," he stated that the phrases occurred 177 times in the Old Testament and of which most of these occurrences meant "to die" or "to kill someone" So it was the death of the servant that was being talked about and consequently why his grave is mentioned in verse 9.

For Krueger, the proper exegesis of this part of scripture no doubt pointed to Jesus Christ. He stated that Isaiah was showing how Jesus, the Servant of God, being led out after His being condemned before Caiaphas and Pilate. Isaiah was almost given a word for word picture of the trial and execution of Jesus. Thus, being cut off as used by Isaiah was pointing to the crucifixion of Jesus. He was being made to sacrifice his life for the atonement of the sins of humanity.²⁶ Various bible students and scholars have tried to explain from a more Jewish tradition that there is no mention of the word "Messiah" in the text and that the use of "cut off" may not necessarily mean death but are metaphors or illustrations of terrible suffering. But the natural reading of the text and overwhelming evidence seems to be on the part that favors the Messiah being killed for the sins of people.

Verses 10-12 constitutes the final stanza of the poem. Oswalt observed that Isaiah aimed at showing that what was happening to the servant was not an accident or simple miscarriage of justice, but that the sovereign hand of God was behind it all. It seems strange that a loving God would allow his servant to be so crushed as is strange of even human fathers to allow their children to be crushed, but the reality was that the good from this suffering would far surpass the

²⁶ Krueger, "Outlines on Isaiah 53," 34.

evil and pain of the suffering. For the servant, he would find great satisfaction, and for the people they would be made righteous²⁷

Oswalt further observed that there is a vivid hint at resurrection in these texts, as this would be the only way the servant though being killed would still see and receive the rewards for his suffering. This reward includes seeing many people righteous just like the servant is righteous. The servant is righteous and shares an intimate relationship with God, and it is consequent upon this that he is able to invite people to partake in his righteousness. Oswalt seemed to favor the exegesis that this servant is Jesus Christ by stating that, “The congruence with Jesus’ life is remarkable-so remarkable that those who deny the possibility of predictive prophecy have had to say that Jesus consciously modeled himself on Isaiah’s Servant to make it appear that he was the fulfillment of that prophecy. This from a man on whose lips was no deceit!”²⁸

Goldingay examined the question about why this servant had to suffer and God not simply forgive. The answer was first that the servant was not forced or coerced into the suffering but something that he willingly took upon himself. Second, that there was no such thing as free forgiveness. Sin had to be paid for, and therefore it was necessary for the servant to suffer for the people, and thus becomes the revelation of God’s arm. The servant’s role was similar to that of the priest who had to minister for the people by bearing their sins.²⁹

Theological Significance

The analysis of the verses reveals great truths about the nature of God and the ways of His operations. One thing is for sure: God is sovereign even over evil and knows how to bring

²⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 859.

²⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 859.

²⁹ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, 352

good from it. Even though the servant of God suffers terribly, it is from this suffering that God does something very good - so good that it surpasses the suffering involved. This is a reminder of the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Rome, telling them that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. The servant was called according to the purpose of God, so even in suffering, salvation is brought forth.

Oswalt in his commentary, emphasized the theological application by drawing a parallel between the servant in Isaiah and the life of Jesus Christ. The first application is the call to receive Christ. This invitation is extended to everyone, everyone needs the salvation of Jesus because all have sinned and have become worthy of the wrath of God. Jesus Christ suffered injustice and had his life poured forth as the atonement for the sins of the world. To reject this great offer of salvation is to chose to bear responsibility for the sins one has committed against God.³⁰

Second, there is a call to live the life of Jesus Christ. The challenge is for everyone who has known the saving grace of Jesus Christ to walk in the same steps he walked. This means having to take up the cross and deny oneself. This is a call to surrendering to the will of God even if it does not seem pleasant. Just like Jesus emptied himself, left heaven and came here to suffer, so the Christian must be ready to surrender everything in order to do the will of God.³¹

Conclusion

Isaiah's prophecy takes the form of a poem, and its profound words have garnered the interest of scholars, people of faith from various religious backgrounds, and others. A few have

³⁰ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 859.

³¹ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 859.

argued that Isaiah was not referring to Jesus and that the similarities between the life of Jesus and Isaiah's prophecy may be coincidental, or that Jesus was simply aligning his life with the servant. However, the overwhelming evidence suggests that God revealed the future to Isaiah, which may have had multiple layers of fulfillment, but the ultimate alignment and fulfillment were with Jesus Christ. Jesus is the servant of God who willingly suffered injustice so that his life could be given for the sins of others. Through him, sinners can obtain forgiveness for their sins. All who follow Jesus are also called to emulate his life of surrender to the will of God, even when it may not seem pleasant in the present moment. In the end, the fruit of suffering according to God's will far surpasses the suffering.

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