

The Suffering Servant

The question of Jesus' identity is bound to the question of Jesus' mission. Neither question precludes the other, but rather are intricately linked. The question, "Who was Jesus?" cannot be adequately answered without simultaneously asking the question, "What was Jesus sent here to do?" If we say that Jesus was nothing more than a teacher, a Jewish sage or holy man, we must then conclude that Jesus' primary mission was to teach. One would wonder, then, why so gruesome a death as crucifixion was necessary for someone who sought only to dispense information and enlighten the mind. Socrates held the same purpose and, though sentenced to death, was offered a much nobler and more ceremonially dignified passing.¹

Shortly after Pentecost the early church began referring to Jesus as the "Servant of God" (or "Servant of the Lord," "Servant of Yahweh"; cf. Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30), a designation that brought with it the connotation of suffering. Their remembrance of Jesus centered around his willingness to become obedient to the Father in suffering and they firmly believed that he had risen from the dead and was then presently assisting them to spread the message of salvation to all men on account of his vicarious suffering.

The consistent message throughout the New Testament, as we shall see, is that Jesus' identity and mission centered around the Song of the Suffering Servant² found in Isaiah 40-55.³ The Song is a beautiful tapestry of salvation woven from threads of disobedience, rebellion, innocence, vicarious suffering, vindication of the righteous, and the offer of salvation for all peoples. Jesus believed that his own mission was to "give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). The Gospels seem to indicate 1) that he knew beforehand that this would involve suffering,⁴ and 2) that his suffering would be vindicated by his Father in resurrection.⁵ Knowing that Jesus was well-versed in the scroll of Isaiah⁶ it seems logical to assume that Jesus was cognizant of the Suffering Servant motif in Isaiah 40-55. After a brief discussion regarding the nature of suffering and pain in Jesus' world we shall move to a short exegetical outline of Isaiah 40-55, demonstrating the rebellion-punishment-vindication motif, followed by a discussion of the Suffering Servant motif in the writings of the apostles.

Expectation of Suffering in Jewish Thought: Why does a person suffer?

Most ancient Israelites believed that suffering was punishment for sin. If you were suffering, you were reaping the just fruit of sinful behavior. God was, in essence, meting out his

¹Socrates was allowed to drink poison at his own leisure surrounded by a company of his closest friends. Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), Phaedo 117-118.

²It is customary in modern biblical scholarship to speak of multiple "songs" of the Suffering Servant. I have chosen, because of my purpose and audience, to ignore the discussion of the individual strophes within the larger context of this section and treat the Servant section (Is. 40-55) as one complete unit.

³As equally frustrating as the bulk of literature involved in this topic is the lack of consensus on exactly where the song(s) begin and end. Our discussion will focus on this section of Isaiah as a whole (now referred to as "Deutero-Isaiah" by modern critics) and not on any discussion of the parameters of the Servant section itself.

⁴Mt. 9:51; 12:40; 16:21; 17:12, 22-23; 20:18-19; 21:38; 23:37; 26:2; Mk. 2:20; 8:31; 9:12, 31; 10:33-34; 12:7-8; Lk. 9:22, 44; 12:50; 13:33-35; 18:32-33; 20:14-15; 24:7, 26, 46; Jn. 2:19; 3:16; 8:28; 10:15, 17; 12:23-24, 27-28, 32; 13:33; 15:13-14; 16:16, 28.

⁵Mt. 12:40; 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Lk. 9:22; 16:31; 18:33; 24:7, 26, 46; Jn. 2:19, 10:17.

⁶Direct quotes from Isaiah appear on Jesus' lips in Mt. 13:14-15; 15:7-9; 21:12; Mk. 4:12; 7:6-7; 9:48; 11:17; 13:24-25; Lk. 4:17-19; 8:10; 19:46; 22:37; Jn. 6:45.

punishment here and now for some offense against his will and Law. Later Jewish writings suggest that “a sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven.”⁷ Notions of this kind of thinking can be seen in two statements hurled toward Jesus.

The first takes place in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus’ disciples, seeing the man known to the community as one who had been blind since his birth, assumed that he was being punished for sin. They questioned Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). In their view this man was either 1) punished in the womb for something God knew he would do later in life, something so offensive that it required lifetime punishment, or 2) punished on behalf of his parents, whose sin was so great that its effects were wrought against the mother during pregnancy and passed to the child at birth. Jesus challenged this kind of thinking, replying, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned” (John 9:3). Suffering was not automatically the result of sin. Sometimes unfortunate things happen.

The second account is very much like the first. Jesus was confronted about “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (Lk. 13:1). We know nothing concretely about the situation to which they refer, though there are a number of options.⁸ At the heart of their question is whether or not the Galileans deserved their fate. Typical Jewish thinking suggested that they got what they deserved. But they were executed while performing their acts of worship to Yahweh, and it seems like rubbing salt in the wound to suggest that God punished them at the precise moment of their worship and repentance.

Jesus doesn’t engage the premise of the question, but rather turns their comment toward the reality that death is imminent for all men and that the time of repentance is now, not later. Notice Jesus’ comment:

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. (Lk. 13:2-5)

None of the Galileans suffered as a result of God’s vengeance upon their sin any more than those who were crushed by the tower in Siloam deserved it. Suffering was not automatically the result of sin. Sometimes unfortunate things happen.

Directed toward Jesus in both of these cases is a belief that suffering was caused by sin. Suffering and pain came as a result of living outside the will of God. But Jesus seems to have understood, from a careful reading of the Isaiah scroll, that it was entirely possible for an *innocent* person to suffer and be in the *center* of the will of God. His understanding comes, in part, from the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 40-55.

The Song of the Suffering Servant

The exegesis of Isaiah 40-55 is not an easy task. Understanding this section of Isaiah involves determination of who exactly the Servant is (whether corporate Israel, Cyrus, or an individual), whether the servant dies or only suffers, and the relationship of Is. 53 to the other

⁷*b.Ned.* 41a.

⁸For a concise list and evaluation see I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 553.

Servant Songs.⁹ Entire volumes have been written on the last stanza alone (Is. 52:13-53:12), and the amount of articles, essays, and commentaries devoted to answering the questions is massive. I agree with Paul Hanson's assessment of this topic, that "the resulting literature that has accumulated generally offers dreary reading with little genuine insight."¹⁰

The flow of the entire song is most important here, and we will defer the discussion of the servant's identity in the individual strophes of the songs to those best equipped for the discussion.¹¹ A thoroughgoing exegesis of the entire song is not possible here either. What's most important for our discussion is the overarching pattern of sin, vicarious suffering, and vindication of the righteous.

1. Introduction of the Servant (42:1-4)

Yahweh introduces the Servant in the same manner in which a king or emperor might introduce a new ruler or vassal king to his subjects. The ruler's introduction was followed by a description of his mission and the equipment and means necessary to accomplish that mission.¹²

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him
and he will bring justice to the nations.
He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his law the islands will put their hope. (Is. 42:1-4)*

The responsibility of the Servant here is to establish *justice* (vv. 1, 3-4). In the Old Testament "justice" referred to much more than anything settled in a court of law. The concept of justice involved doing things fairly, setting wrong things right, and helping the downcast (the orphan, the widow, the alien, and the oppressed of society). Often those who were outcasts were the victims of a corrupt society and the establishment of justice meant putting things right in a society where power was necessary to do so. Yahweh announces that this servant will have the power to set things right and "bring forth justice" without faltering or becoming discouraged.

Yahweh also announces the manner in which the Servant will establish his justice, and it stands in stark contrast to the manner in which human beings normally seek to pronounce God's

⁹See J. Alan Groves, "Atonement in Isaiah 53," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, Eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 62, and the literature cited there.

¹⁰Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 41.

¹¹For a survey of the history of interpretations surrounding the Servant, both Jewish and Christian, see Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (Oxford: University Press, 1948). For a concise presentation of the Servant as an individual see Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), 81-101.

¹²Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 2:251.

glory.¹³ This Servant, rather than opting for an aggressive way of dealing with the powerful to establish justice for Yahweh, will not raise his voice as a wandering prophet pronouncing destruction. His manner will be gentle, as the images of care for a bruised reed and a smoldering wick indicate. He will shepherd the weak, seek the lost, and bind up the injured (Jer. 23:4-6; Ez. 34:11-16, 23-24).

2. *Israel Disobedient (48:1-11)*

Set against the description of the character of the Servant is disobedient Israel. The Servant's obedience will become explicitly clear in the later sections, but first the need for it is established by articulating just how rebellious Israel has become. Israel's rebellion is a major theme among the prophets and this section of Isaiah is an adequate snapshot of their message to Israel in this period.

*"Listen to this, O house of Jacob,
you who are called by the name of Israel
and come from the line of Judah,
you who take oaths in the name of the LORD
and invoke the God of Israel—
but not in truth or righteousness—
you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city
and rely on the God of Israel—
the LORD Almighty is his name:
I foretold the former things long ago,
my mouth announced them and I made them known;
then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.
For I knew how stubborn you were;
the sinews of your neck were iron,
your forehead was bronze. . . . (Is. 48:1-4)*

As the Servant establishes justice for Yahweh, corporate Israel forsakes it. In fact, Israel's worship of Yahweh *apart from* truth and righteousness is the very reason the Servant must be sent to re-establish it. This section begins with a call for Israel to "listen" or "hear" the oracle of the living God. The descriptions are piled up as Yahweh prepares his devastating criticism. Though they are called by the name "Israel," take oaths in the name of Yahweh, and invoke his name, their profession is not sincere. "It is neither reliable (*truth*) nor correct (*righteousness*). It is in fact a lie."¹⁴ Their stubborn and rebellious nature is compared to the iron neck of a horse or donkey, who digs in its heels and stiffens its neck, refusing to be led by its master. The reference to the "forehead of bronze" is less certain, but may be the modern equivalent of our modern "hard-headed" (consequently, "slow to get the message").¹⁵

*For my own name's sake I delay my wrath;
for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,
so as not to cut you off.*

¹³Hanson, 45.

¹⁴John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 261.

¹⁵For more on these illustrations see Oswalt, 262.

*See, I have refined you, though not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.
How can I let myself be defamed?
I will not yield my glory to another. (Is. 48:1-4, 9-11)*

Disobedience requires punishment, but for the sake of his praise Yahweh delays sending it. His wrath is not completely averted, at least not yet. Punishment for sin is still certain, but if Yahweh were to enact it now his people would be completely “cut off.” For their sake and His it has been delayed. His people will be refined, but not in the manner in which a person refines silver. Refining silver means heating it until the dross rises to be swept away. There is no more “silver” among the Israelites, for “your silver has become dross” (Is. 1:22). Something else will have to occur if their disobedience is to be properly dealt with. God’s love and zeal are in perfect balance here as he mercifully turns his wrath away from his people, but simultaneously declares that he will not let his glory be usurped by a disobedient and rebellious people.

3. The Servant of Yahweh (49:1-13)

The Servant is now given a fuller description of his purpose: to bring Israel back to her God. Israel has been God’s servant from the very beginning. But there is now need for the Servant to redeem Israel and establish justice between her and Yahweh, to make things right between them. The work the Servant performs is characterized as “salvation” (49:8), “covenant” (49:8), “freedom” (49:9-10), and “compassion” (49:13).

*Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my birth he has made mention of my name.
He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
But I said, "I have labored to no purpose;
I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength-
he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob*

*and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Is. 49:1-6)*

The immediate problem to be dealt with in this section is the dual reference to the “servant” in vss. 1-6. In vs. 1-4 the servant is explicitly identified: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor” (49:3).¹⁶ But shortly after that Yahweh is describing the work of the “servant” in terms of the restoration of Israel: “he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself” (49:5). This dual reference is intricately bound up with the identification of the Servant in the latter chapters of Isaiah.

Oswalt suggests that two kinds of servant are in view in Isaiah 40-55. The first, an individual who is completely humble and obedient before the Father, is God’s representative to re-establish justice in the world (42:1-4). Subsequent references in chapters 40-48 otherwise describe the servant as helpless, dumb, blind, deaf, stubborn and unbelieving (40:27; 42:18-25; 44:1-5, 21-22; 48:1-11), and seem to refer to corporate Israel. Chapter 49 again takes up the theme of the individual Servant securing redemption for Israel (and for the world) and references to the Servant in Chs. 49-53 will refer again to the anointed individual. The opening verses of Ch. 49 then make a connecting point between the servant (corporate Israel) and the Servant (the individual representative of Yahweh).¹⁷

One additional factor is introduced here into the text: the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan for redemption. As he describes the work of the Servant to bring Israel back into the loving relationship with her Creator, there is also a feeling that this by itself does not reflect the full power and glory of God. He is capable of much more. It is too small a thing for Yahweh to send the Servant to restore the tribes of Jacob alone. He will also make him “a light for the Gentiles” (49:6). This is not the first time we have seen the Gentiles included in God’s plan in the book of Isaiah. The “nations” will stream into the Temple once it has been firmly rebuilt (Is. 2:2-4) and the concept of the Great Messianic Banquet (Is. 25:6-9) is replete with the offer of goods to “all people.” The work of the Servant will not simply be to redeem Israel. It will become universal in scope. God’s salvation will go “to the ends of the earth” (49:6) and “kings and princes” (49:7) will give him honor as people come from the outer regions of the earth to give homage to Yahweh (49:12).

4. The Servant is Obedient to Yahweh (50:5-8)

The redemption of Israel (indeed the entire world) flows from the suffering and rejection of the Servant. Though prophets like Jonah and Jeremiah had “drawn back” before they ultimately accepted their prophetic call, this Servant has no hint of doubt or wavering in his resolute commitment to God’s will. Though he is beaten, he offers his back willingly (50:6). Though his beard is yanked (a mark of derision and intense pain in a culture where beards communicated wisdom and strength) and he is spit on, he endures these tortures willingly, not because he deserved them, but because he is wholeheartedly committed to doing the will of God.

¹⁶There is some debate about whether or not the term “Israel” appears in the original text of Is. 49:3. See the discussion in Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 208-210. For a simple, complementary view see J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 385-386.

¹⁷Oswalt, 287, n. 14. See also the corresponding discussion in Gerard Von Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 597-601.

*The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,
and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back.
I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting. (Is. 50:5-6)*

The Servant suffers at the will of God. The suffering he endures he bears on behalf of Israel, even if at this point the relationship between the suffering of the Servant and her redemption is not clear. If Israel had believed that God had abandoned her (Is. 49:14-16; 50:1-2), God's answer is to cause another to suffer his wrath in her place.

The major point, not to be missed in this section, is that the Servant completely trusts in Yahweh to vindicate him after (because of?) his complete obedience.

*Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me! (Is. 50:7-8)*

Though he is mocked, spit on, and tortured, he knows that after his suffering vindication will come quickly. In the midst of his obedience he can stand before his accusers (in imitation of a courtroom drama) and say, "Who is my accuser?" (50:8). None are to be found. The prophets of Israel (like Isaiah) were ready and willing to admit their inadequacy for their ministries as a result of their sinfulness (Is. 6:5; Jer. 12:1-4, 20:7-10; Dan. 9:4-19; Jon. 1:9-16, 2:2-9, 4:9). But this Servant declares his complete innocence before his accusers (cf. Jn. 8:46). And because of his obedience, he looks for Yahweh to vindicate him after his suffering.

5. Salvation is Coming (51:4-6)

Shortly after the description of the suffering of the Servant and Yahweh's vindication of him is a description of the salvation on the horizon. The close proximity of these two oracles suggests that the salvation God offers is granted in connection with (or on the basis of) the suffering of his Servant. Now the climax of the call to "pay attention" involves not just the salvation of Israel, but the salvation of the world.

*"Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
The law will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.*

*My righteousness draws near speedily,
 my salvation is on the way,
 and my arm will bring justice to the nations.
 The islands will look to me
 and wait in hope for my arm.
 Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
 look at the earth beneath;
 the heavens will vanish like smoke,
 the earth will wear out like a garment
 and its inhabitants die like flies.
 But my salvation will last forever,
 my righteousness will never fail. (Is. 51:4-6)*

The justice which the Servant was initially sent to inaugurate (42:1-4) will now go out to the nations. It will not be confined to the nation of Israel, but will find a home among the “islands.” To a land-faring people like the Israelites, the islands lay across the sea and represented the most remote parts of the earth. Though the Servant suffers on behalf of Israel at the request of her God, the salvation that arises will be available to all people. This salvation which God enacts, when he enacts it, will be offered universally and have an eternal quality, outlasting the heavens and the earth.

6. *No Wrath for God’s People (51:22-52:12)*

Disobedient and rebellious Israel is deserving of wrath. The wrath of God is first described as a cup (i.e., a cup of wine, the color of blood) which Israel has drunk empty. Israel suffered the wrath of God in the Exile and deportation to Babylon.

*Awake, awake!
 Rise up, O Jerusalem,
 you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD
 the cup of his wrath,
 you who have drained to its dregs
 the goblet that makes men stagger. (Is. 51:17)*

But the “cup of the Lord” will now pass from Israel in some way. Though she has born the brunt of God’s wrath in her Exile, the cup will now be removed from her.

*This is what your Sovereign LORD says,
 your God, who defends his people:
 "See, I have taken out of your hand
 the cup that made you stagger;
 from that cup, the goblet of my wrath,
 you will never drink again. (Is. 51:22)*

Israel’s return from Exile is the immediate context. But it is coupled with a lasting promise, for v. 22 reads literally “you will not drink from it ever again.”¹⁸ The sorrow that Israel had felt

¹⁸Motyer, 415.

from her discipline now turns to extreme joy as Yahweh prepares to return to his people. And once again there is the promise that this removal of wrath will be visible, even available, to the surrounding nations.

*How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"*
*Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the LORD returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.*
*Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*
*The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God. (Is. 52:7-10)*

As wrath turns to joy and the curse is lifted the proper response to this redemption is *holiness*. Isaiah concludes this section with the call, "Depart, depart, go out from there. Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure" (Is. 52:11). The proper response to God's saving act of redemption is to leave the life of bondage and captivity and return to the freedom God has provided in his will.

7. The Servant Suffers in Israel's Place (52:13-53:9)

Interwoven among the Suffering Servant Songs is the description of the removal of the cup of the Lord's wrath from Israel's burden. This cup is removed forever, and immediately after he describes the cup's passing from Israel, Isaiah finally describes the real work of the Servant. Originally sent to establish justice (42:1-4), we now get a greater picture of the Servant's character and the work that Yahweh had set out for him.

*See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.*
*Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
so will he sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.*
*For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.*

*Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Is. 52:13-53:3)*

“See, my servant” or “Behold! My Servant” (52:13) is the same phrase that originally introduced the Servant (42:1), indicating for us a clear link between the one who was introduced as having the mission to make things right in the world and the one mentioned here. That he will “act wisely” is better translated “he will accomplish his purpose” or “will achieve what he proposes.”¹⁹ He is not a teacher of wisdom,²⁰ but rather the one who effectively accomplishes the task that Yahweh originally set out for him. Once he does so he will be “lifted up and highly exalted” (52:13). This combination of verbs is unique, and only appears four times in the OT, all in Isaiah (6:1; 33:10; 57:15) and all in reference to God.²¹ (Is there a clue to the Servant’s identity here?)

The Servant’s work causes him scorn and derision. Rather than make too much of the individual phrases we would do better to understand the poetic flow of the entire song and grasp the images as part of the ebb and flow of Hebrew poetry. He is scorned and many are “appalled at him” (52:14). The shock of the suffering and humiliation of Yahweh’s anointed one even grabs the attention of the kings of the earth, who stand in silence of the Servant’s ironic manner of establishing justice (52:15).²² His humble beginnings are couched, not in terms of a mighty oak or a cedar of Lebanon, but in the image of a tender shoot on the side of a tree struggling to nourish life. Such shoots were typically removed.²³ Isaiah had previously described the Messiah as a “shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Is. 11:1) and the verbal parallels between the “shoot” and “branch” in this section and verbs used to describe the Messiah elsewhere (Is. 4:2; Jer. 23:5) help us make a preliminary identification of the Servant’s identity.

The Servant is despised and rejected and the following section show why. Rather than establish God’s justice by kingly and authoritative means, the Servant bears the full effect of the punishment and shame, both physical and social. God is now dispensing his wrath, but this time not on Israel – true to his promise (Is. 51:22). Instead, God dispenses his wrath upon the Servant.

¹⁹Oswalt, 378; Westermann, 258.

²⁰So Michael L. Barré, “Textual and Rhetorical-critical Observations on the Last Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (Ja. 2000): 1-27, who believes that, though the servant never speaks, God’s wisdom flows through him as a result of his vicarious suffering.

²¹Oswalt, 378.

²²That he will “sprinkle many nations” is probably better translated “he will shock/startle many nations.” For a simple discussion of the verb here see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 179. For a more detailed discussion see Von Groningen, 622-626.

²³Von Groningen, 628.

*Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But 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 all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Is. 53:4-6)*

Notice the way the pronouns are juxtaposed: “we/us” stands in contrast to “him.” “Surely *he* took up *our* infirmities, and carried *our* sorrows,” etc. What the Servant suffers, he suffers not for himself, but for others. Isaiah is identifying himself with the entire nation here as he joins them in understanding that the Servant’s suffering is vicarious. What he suffers he did not deserve, but bears it in place of those who do. Von Groningen puts it well: “God is dealing with him on behalf of the people.”²⁴

Now the Servant’s obedience and humility are brought into the open. Though he is oppressed and afflicted, he remains obedient to the Father.

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth. (Is. 53:7-9)*

That he “did not open his mouth” is not a way of saying that he will not utter screams of pain and agony during his suffering. It is the equivalent of saying, “he did not talk back in protest.” He was completely resigned to do the will of God, no matter how much shame and suffering it involved. The Servant was completely innocent in his suffering, as is indicated by the structure of 53:8: “by a perversion of justice he was taken away.”²⁵ His physical torment is exacerbated by his social shame, for being cut off from the living ones, he has no descendants to carry on his name (53:8). There was no deceit in his mouth, nor had he done any wrong. Yet, in the will of God, he suffered like a criminal for the guilty.

²⁴Von Groningen, 631.

²⁵Hanson, 161.

8. *The Servant is Vindicated (53:10-12)*

The Servant is vindicated in the final strophes of the Song. Vindication of the innocent sufferer is a major theme in the OT (to be noted in fuller detail below). Because it was Yahweh's will to cause the suffering of the Servant, and because he was obedient to the point of death, Yahweh vindicates him.

*Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.
After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors. (Is. 53:10-12)*

The phrase "the will of the LORD" appears twice in the first four lines (53:10). Though it was the will of God to cause this, the Servant did not resist or refuse, but rather "let himself be numbered with the transgressors" (53:12).²⁶ Because of his obedience the Lord will "prolong his days" and provide him with offspring (53:10). He will see light again (53:11) and will be assigned a portion with the great (53:12), echoing the "lifted up and highly exalted" language of 52:13.

The last two lines of this section describe the work of the Servant in establishing the justice of Yahweh: "he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors" (53:12). Just as "he made his life a guilt offering" (53:10), so Yahweh will grant life back to him in honor and vindication.

9. *Conclusion*

The Song of the Suffering Servant is complex and full of difficult questions. Our purpose here has not been to outline the exegetical questions in detail, but simply to paint an overall picture of what Isaiah has to say about the Servant's character, mission, and role in God's plan of redemption for his people. Having announced the Servant's mission to establish justice in the world, God then demonstrates conclusively how rebellious and disobedient Israel has been toward him. She deserved his discipline, and to some extent had drunk, in the Exile and Babylonian captivity, the cup of his wrath. But his promise that she would never again have to drink from that cup is realized as the Servant comes and bears the suffering of God's wrath in her place. God then doesn't leave the Servant to suffer alone, but vindicates him for his obedience and innocent suffering. Having demonstrated this overall pattern from the Suffering Servant Song in Isaiah 40-55 (esp. chs. 42-53), we are now able to proceed with a discussion of exactly

²⁶This is the import of the passive verbs here. See Westermann, 268-269.

how an understanding of this story shaped Jesus' understanding of his own identity and mission and how the early church promoted this idea.

Jesus' Mission to Suffer for Israel

It seems apparent from a reading of the Gospels that Jesus saw his own mission and identity, at least partly, if not substantially, against the backdrop of the Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah. Much of the attention in this area is given to the role that Is. 52:13-53:12 played in Jesus' thinking. Our survey below is not limited to that specific section, but rather focuses on the overarching pattern of Israel's disobedience and the Servant's role to suffer on her behalf, thereby granting salvation, not only to Israel, but to the nations as a result of his suffering.

1. Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:11; John 1:29)

Jesus appears in Jerusalem and presents himself to John the Baptist for the inauguration of his ministry. Upon his baptism the voice of God proclaims, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mk. 1:11). The form of the quotation is very near to that of Is. 42:1: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight." As Is. 42:1 culminates with God granting his Spirit to his Servant, so the Gospels' account of Jesus' baptism also includes a description of the Spirit descending as a dove and resting on Jesus (Mk. 1:10). The Father's affirmation is repeated at the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:5; Mk. 9:7; Lk. 9:35), as Jesus speaks with Moses (and Elijah) about his "exodus" (NIV "departure," Lk. 9:31).

As Jesus approaches John, the Baptist says of him, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). The language of communication here was most likely Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew). The Aramaic phrase behind the Greek expression "Lamb of God" is very near to (and may legitimately be translated) "the Servant of God."²⁷ If so, there is clear indication by John that Jesus is to be identified with the Servant of Is. 42. If the preferred expression "Lamb of God" is accurate, there is also clear comparison of the Servant to a slaughtered lamb in Is. 53:7. From the inauguration of his ministry Jesus is set apart by the Father and his forerunner, John the Baptist, in language that suggests he will be the Servant of Yahweh.

2. Predictions of Jesus' Suffering

Three times during his ministry Jesus predicted that he would die at the hands of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and rise again.²⁸ The first prediction is explicit about the necessity of the Messiah's death.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. (Mk. 8:31)

A literal rendering of the text reveals that Jesus wasn't merely suggesting this as a course of action, but that it had somehow been pre-ordained. The infinitive rendered "must" here brings the force of "it is necessary" or "it must happen." "If we ask why it is necessary, the answer is

²⁷See Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley Guthrie and Charles Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 71.

²⁸First Prediction: Mt. 16:21-26; Mk. 8:31-37; Lk. 9:22-25. Second Prediction: Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 9:30-32; Lk. 9:43-45. Third Prediction: Mt. 20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34.

frequently forthcoming: ‘it is written.’”²⁹ The necessity of Jesus’ death as fulfillment of his messianic mission is only “necessary” if he saw himself as fulfilling the role of Isaiah’s Servant of Yahweh. The Servant’s ministry of establishing justice and securing redemption for Israel and for the nations ended with suffering and vindication. Jesus’ prediction of his own death here also ends with a belief that he would be vindicated after his suffering, hinting strongly at the vindication of the Servant in Is. 53.

Jesus’ second prediction builds on the first when he simply says, *“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise”* (Mk. 9:31). The third prediction finds Jesus describing in a bit more detail exactly what will happen to him, including his crucifixion at the hands of the Gentiles (Mt. 17:18-19; Mk. 10:33). Only Luke records Jesus’ statement about the fulfillment of prophecy:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” (Lk. 18:31-33)

Jesus doesn’t clarify which prophecies he has in mind to fulfill. He is clear that they involve a shameful death, a vindication on the third day, and that they relate to him somehow. These ideas may find their origin in other OT prophecies,³⁰ but it is hard to imagine that the Song of the Suffering Servant plays no part here.

3. Two Explicit Identifications (Matt. 8:17, 12:15-21)

Twice in Matthew’s gospel a passage from the Suffering Servant song is cited to identify Jesus as the fulfillment of that Song. The first occurs as Jesus is healing the sick and demon-possessed in Galilee. Jesus’ healings and exorcisms reminded Matthew of Is. 53:4:

*When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
“He took up our infirmities
and carried our diseases.”* (Mt. 8:16-17)

The second, more lengthy recitation of Isaiah is included immediately after Jesus’ confrontation with the Jewish leadership over a couple of Sabbath controversies. Jesus and his disciples were picking grain on the Sabbath (presumably because they were hungry, but in suspicion of violating the law against “reaping” on the Sabbath) while Jesus was healing on the

²⁹R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 125-126.

³⁰Morna Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 103-147, suggests that Jesus’ predictions of rejection, suffering, and vindication stem from the “Son of Man” concept in Dan. 7. There the “one like a son of man” is enthroned beside Yahweh, but suffers rejection as the beasts usurp his authority. Hooker sees this rejection and simultaneous enthronement behind Jesus’ statements here. While her objections are noted, Jesus’ ideas about the rejection of Yahweh’s emissary and his subsequent vindication are themes which are not confined to either Dan. 7 or Is. 40-55, but find expression in other biblical texts such as Ps. 2, Ps. 22, and Ps. 34. It is hard to agree with her assessment that the Servant of Yahweh concept outlined in Isaiah plays no role in Jesus’ predictions of his suffering and vindication.

Sabbath (which, in their view, must have required some work or unlawful activity). Jesus' chastisement of their limited view of God's power sets them on edge to the point of plotting his execution. Matthew sees where all of this is headed and writes:

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

*"Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.
He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.
In his name the nations will put their hope." (Mt. 12:15-21)*

The citation of Is. 42:1-4 tells the reader what to expect. Matthew seizes upon the rejection that Jesus faces at the hands of the Jewish leaders and points the reader forward to the ultimate rejection that he will experience at their hands during the Final Week. Readers well-versed in the overall structure of the Suffering Servant Song recognize that the Servant, after being introduced as the one who will restore God's justice to the world, will suffer on behalf of Israel. Matthew helps us along as we read toward an understanding of what Jesus is really doing. He is not simply healing and casting out demons. His work of miracles was the "establishment of justice" predicted for the Servant. Matthew is leading his readers to anticipate Jesus' coming rejection (and vindication) as part of the established ministry of the Servant.

4. "As a Hen Gathers Her Chicks" (Matt. 23:37-39)

Just before his crucifixion Jesus sits on the Mount of Olives just across the valley from the Temple Mount and describes the calamities that are about to come upon Jerusalem in the years following his death. The trouble Jerusalem will face is set alongside the torment Jesus is about to undergo. Before he launches into the parables of readiness he makes this statement.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. (Mt. 23:37-38)

The imagery is that of a mother hen safeguarding her chicks during a barnyard fire. As the fire sweeps over the yard the mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings, hunkers down over them, and protects them from certain destruction. She dies in the process, but underneath her chicks live.³¹ Jesus knows that judgment is coming upon Israel, and he will be the one to bear it. Like the mother hen, he will wind up losing his life to protect the "chicks," in this case "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (Mt. 23:37). The vicarious suffering of the innocent on behalf of God's

³¹N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 570-571.

people has its roots in the Suffering Servant Song, and as noted above, Jesus knew that his mission was to suffer in Israel's place, thereby fulfilling the role of the Servant of Yahweh.

5. *"Numbered with the Transgressors" (Luke 22:37)*

As Jesus nears the time of his death he leaves instructions to the disciples regarding what they must do once he is gone. He reminds them that on previous missions he instructed them to take no purse, bag, or sandals (Lk. 22:35; cf. Mt. 10:9-10; Mk. 6:8-9; Lk. 9:3; 10:4). God provided for them and they lacked nothing. But now they must prepare and remain alert, because his death is imminent. Jesus then explicitly tells them that the Suffering Servant song is written with him in mind.

It is written: "And he was numbered with the transgressors"; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment. (Lk. 22:37)

The citation, "he was numbered with the transgressors" is a direct quote from Is. 53:12. This statement in the Isaiah text is prefaced with the statement, "he poured out his life unto death" and followed by "for he bore the sin of many." Jesus saw his impending death as a fulfillment of the vicarious suffering the Servant of Yahweh would undergo on Israel's behalf.

6. *The Cup (Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42)*

Shortly after this Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and prepare for his arrest and trial. Jesus had previously told James and John that he was about to "drink the cup" and that they were ill-equipped to join him in it (Mt. 20:22-23; Mk. 10:38-39). Now that his time approaches he prays in the Garden:

"Abba, Father" he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mk. 14:36)

The cup he refers to is likely the cup of God's wrath mentioned in Is. 51:17-23. When Israel was condemned to drink to the bottom the cup of the Lord's wrath, in his compassion he promised them that the cup would be taken out of their hands. Is. 52:13-53:12 infers that the Servant drinks the cup for Israel. Jesus is again identifying himself with the Servant knowing that what lies ahead is the drinking of the cup of God's wrath to atone for Israel's sins.

7. *The Emmaus Dinner (Luke 24:26)*

Jesus meets two disciples on the road to Emmaus shortly after his resurrection. Not recognizing him, they invite him home for dinner. As he breaks the bread and hands it to them their eyes are opened to see that it really is the risen Jesus. Their discussion thus far had centered around their belief that Jesus might restore the kingdom to Israel. In their view his ministry had been tragically cut short by his crucifixion (Lk. 24:19-22). Over dinner Jesus explains to them that their understanding of the Messiah's role was inadequate and misunderstood.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then

enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk. 24:25-26)

Once again Jesus explains to them that "it was *necessary*" for the Messiah to suffer and *then* enter his glory. According to Jesus the suffering of the Messiah was a necessary prelude to his exaltation. The themes of exaltation and suffering are prominent in the Suffering Servant song as Yahweh exalts the Servant to the highest place because of his humble obedience (Is. 52:13-15).

8. Explanation to the Disciples (Lk. 24:44-47)

Not very long after Jesus explained the necessity of the Messiah's death to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus we find him having the same conversation with his disciples. He appears to them, proves to them that he's not an apparition, but in fact a flesh-and-blood, resurrected Jesus (Lk. 24:36-42). His conversation then turns to the *necessity* of Messiah's suffering and vindication.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Lk. 24:44-47)

The angel had reminded them of his earlier statements when they first got news of his resurrection (Lk. 24:6-7). Somehow they still weren't making the connection. Jesus leaves them with a reminder of his earlier statements, that the Scriptures point to his impending death, his vindication, and that as a result salvation will be preached to both Israel and the surrounding nations. These themes are prominent throughout the Old Testament, but nowhere more explicit than in the overall story of the Suffering Servant.

9. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:32-35)

After Jesus' resurrection the Twelve find themselves bearing witness to the fact that Jesus believed himself to be Isaiah's Suffering Servant. On one occasion Philip finds himself hitching a ride with a Jewish sympathizer from Ethiopia. The man in the chariot happened to be reading the scroll of Isaiah at ch. 53. Luke quotes for us the section he was reading (Is. 53:7-8; Acts 8:32-33) and records the question the Ethiopian posed to Philip: "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" (Acts 8:34). His question raises only two possibilities, that Isaiah was referring to himself or to another individual. There seems to be no indication on the part of the Ethiopian that he believed the Servant to represent corporate Israel. Philip's explanation from that point forward demonstrated his belief that Jesus was the Servant of Yahweh spoken of in Isaiah 53.

10. *The Necessity of Messiah's Suffering (Acts 17:3)*

After Jesus' death the disciples and the early church continued to preserve the memory of his suffering by identifying him as Isaiah's Suffering Servant.³² Paul's identification with the suffering Jesus will be discussed below in fuller detail, but now is the time to point out Paul's strategy in preaching the suffering Jesus in the Jewish synagogue. As he approaches Thessalonica Paul spent three Sabbath days in the local synagogue reasoning with the Jews (Acts 17:2). Paul tried to convince them that the Scriptures all point to the *necessity* of a suffering Messiah (in contrast to a royal king or a teacher of wisdom). Luke's record of Paul's argument, "proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (17:3) is nearly identical to Jesus' description of the message of Moses and the prophets at the Emmaus dinner (Lk. 24:26-27). The same infinitive rendered "must" (here as "had") indicates the necessity of the statement: "It was necessary that the Messiah suffer and rise on the third day." Again, the overall pattern of the Suffering Servant seems to be in view.

11. *"Sin for Us" (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

Paul's preaching about Jesus reflected the suffering he endured as part of the fulfillment of the Servant's mission. As Paul writes to the Corinthian congregation about Jesus' role in God's ministry of reconciling them to himself he makes this statement:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

"Him who had no sin" calls to mind Isaiah's description of the Servant, that "he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth" (Is. 53:9). That God "made him to be sin for us" is a strange expression, found nowhere else in Paul's writings. It is best explained by a reference to Is. 53:10, where Yahweh crushes the Servant, causes him to suffer, and "makes his life a guilt offering."³³ Paul's description of Jesus' ministry, even to the Gentile congregation in Corinth, reflects a Jewish understanding of the Servant's role in bringing salvation to the Gentiles. Though Paul never seems to quote the texts of the Suffering Servant Song directly,³⁴ his presentation of the righteous Jesus suffering to attain salvation for the guilty, both Jew and Gentile, certainly has its origins in the Suffering Servant Song.

12. *Conclusion*

There are doubtless other allusions to Jesus' identity as the Suffering Servant in the New Testament. Jesus' statement that he will "suffer much and be rejected" (Mk. 9:12) is reminiscent of the Servant's mission, and Jesus' offer of the "blood of the covenant" at the Last Supper (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20) may reflect the Servant who is twice described as a covenant to the people of Israel (Is. 42:6; 49:8).³⁵ We have sketched here only the most obvious and pertinent highlights. If Jesus did in fact see himself as Isaiah's Servant of Yahweh, then it is natural to assume that his rhetoric would have been inundated with quotes and allusions from Isaiah.

³²For a fuller description of the early church's understanding of Jesus as the "servant of Yahweh" see Cullmann, 69-79.

³³Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 157.

³⁴The exception is Paul's citation of Is. 52:7 (Rom. 10:15) and Is. 53:1 (Rom. 10:16), but both are in the context of preaching the message of salvation, not establishing the suffering of the Servant. See Cullmann, 76.

³⁵France, 121-124. For a list of direct quotations and allusions to the Servant Song in Isaiah see pp. 110-135.

Suffering as Identification with the Messiah

Jesus seems to have believed that he was the Suffering Servant. The evidence from the rest of the New Testament suggests that allegiance to a suffering Messiah meant the possibility of suffering for his people. Paul's initial call to apostleship points forward to the suffering he would undergo to bring the message of the Servant's salvation to the Gentiles. Toward the end of his life Paul tells Timothy that he suffers alongside the Messiah. Peter corrects notions prevalent in his readers about the real nature of suffering and suggests that, rather than suffering for doing something wrong or sinful, it is possible, even a blessing, to suffer for doing what is right. Their rhetoric, like that of Jesus, is replete with images of suffering based on their newfound allegiance with Jesus, whom they believed to be the Suffering Servant.

1. Saul's Conversion (Acts 9:15-16)

Saul of Tarsus had been a well-trained Pharisee and student of the Scriptures (Acts 22:3; 26:4-5; Phil. 3:5-6). As the newfound church began its evangelistic mission, it quickly found itself the subject of Saul's wrath. Saul thought he was protecting God's honor by securing letters from the authorities to arrest and kill Jewish men and women who had placed their faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (Acts 9:1-2). On his way to Damascus he was confronted by Jesus about his actions and experienced firsthand that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah (Acts 9:4-9). He was led into Damascus where he awaited further instruction from the Lord.

The Lord sent a man named Ananias to minister to Saul. Ananias initially objects, for Saul's reputation for harm had spread throughout the Christian community (Acts 9:10-14). The Lord's response is that Saul's identification with the Messiah will now lead to his own suffering, in order that he might become God's chosen instrument to proclaim the offer of salvation to the Gentiles.

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

Saul's suffering was not the result of divine retribution. God did not punish Saul with suffering because he persecuted the early Christians. No matter what Saul's expectations were for the coming Messiah, he was forced to reckon with the Messiah's mission of suffering, and if he is to be found in Christ, he must suffer alongside him. Saul (later called Paul) never shirked from this, but rather embraced it (even boasted about it) as part of what it means to be in Christ (2 Cor. 11:16-12:10).³⁶ The offer of salvation to the Gentiles was also one of the significant teachings about the Servant (Is. 42:4; 45:20-25; 49:5-7; 56:1-8), and the dual mention of Gentiles and suffering reflects significant teaching from Isaiah's Servant Song. If Paul's ideas about the Suffering Messiah Jesus stem from the Servant Song, then his allegiance with Messiah also brings suffering. For Paul, "to live is Messiah" (i.e., suffering). Only then is death gain (Php. 1:21).

2. "Destined for Suffering" (1 Thess. 3:3-4)

³⁶It may also be that Paul is reflecting upon his initial conversion experience and the pronouncement that he would suffer as he recounts his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:1-10). If so, then his "thorn in the flesh" may be the knowledge that he had put Christians to death before he joined them in believing Jesus to be the Messiah.

One of Paul's earliest letters was written to a church in Thessalonica experiencing intense suffering because of their allegiance to Christ. Thessalonica was a free city, not governed by the might of Roman rule. In order to keep the Romans from revoking their independent status the city officials adopted the imperial cult, promoting worship of the Roman emperor. Paul's message stirred up the local officials when he preached that Jesus was Lord, not Caesar (Acts 17:5-9). Paul was run out of town and the believers in Thessalonica continued to bear the shame and stigma of allegiance to their newfound Lord.³⁷

Once Paul leaves he writes them two letters. The first is a letter encouraging them to remain faithful to Christ in the face of suffering. Their suffering is no abnormality, but rather an inevitable part of being in Christ. He sent Timothy to them

so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. (1 Thess. 3:3-4)

Paul says that, not only is their suffering unfortunate, but that they were "destined" or "appointed" for it. He later tells Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 4:12). Why? Allegiance to a suffering Messiah naturally means participation in his suffering. This is only understandable if Paul's ideas about Jesus and the salvation he brings are set against the backdrop of the Servant who suffers in fulfillment of God's will.

3. "Like a Drink Offering" (2 Timothy 4:6)

Near the end of his life Paul writes a second letter to Timothy. Paul is most likely in prison for the second time³⁸ anticipating his death in the very near future. Knowing that his death is not far causes Paul to speak of it as presently taking place.

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. (2 Tim. 4:6)

Paul speaks of his death as a "drink offering," the offering of wine that was poured out twice daily on the altar beside the sacrificial lamb and offering of bread (Ex. 29:40-41; Num. 28:7). Paul is careful not to identify himself with the lamb, a role that Jesus clearly fills (Heb. 9:12-14; 10:4-10; Jn. 1:29). But he sees himself as suffering *alongside* the lamb, a mindset established in his original call to apostleship and his continuing ministry (Acts 9:16; 2 Cor. 11:16-29).

4. Suffering for Doing What is Right (1 Peter 1:6-9; 3:8-22)

Against the persecution the early church experienced Peter wrote to his audience a word of encouragement to stand firm in their suffering. The description of the Servant in Is. 53:4-10

³⁷For a discussion on the exact nature of the political background behind their persecution see Charles A. Wannamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 112-114.

³⁸George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 15-20.

indicates that it is possible to suffer while doing the will of God. Peter develops that idea to encourage them as they suffer for Christ.

It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Pet. 3:17-18)

The justification for enduring suffering is drawn from Christ's example: "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous" (3:18). Peter may have the righteous suffering of the Servant in mind here as Isaiah describes him as one who bears sin on behalf of others though he himself commits none (Is. 53:4-10), "the righteous for the unrighteous."

5. Conclusion

The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that the apostles believed Jesus to have been the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Not only is their preaching and teaching about his mission and identity bound up with images and quotes from Isaiah's song, but they understood the serious possibility that, as people of the Messiah, they could (and should) suffer alongside him. Paul felt this poignantly as his call to apostleship was intricately bound up with suffering in connection with the offer of salvation to the Gentiles. Even at the end Paul knew that he would be spent in loving sacrifice alongside the Lamb. Peter's description of the suffering of the scattered believers stems from a knowledge of Jesus' sacrifice, and James (though not mentioned above) also finds it edifying for those identified with Christ to suffer as part of their Christian experience (Ja. 1:2-8). Though God desires for his people to live quiet and peaceful lives in godliness and holiness (1 Tim. 2:1-2), every believer must be prepared to graciously endure suffering as part of their identification with Jesus, the Suffering Servant.

The Vindication of the Suffering Innocent

We have been speaking about the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh in connection with Jesus and making the point, adequately demonstrated from the New Testament, that being "in Christ" may very well lead to suffering and hardship. But that should not be the end of the story. It wasn't for Jesus, it wasn't in the Suffering Servant Song, and it wasn't for the early church. Though they believed that Jesus had suffered on their behalf, they also believed that God vindicated him. And though they suffered on his behalf, they believed that God would, in turn, vindicate them in their suffering. The vindication of the Servant has been outlined above so we will not revisit the description here. But it does behoove us to spend some time examining texts that point toward the vindication of the innocent who suffer on God's behalf.

1. "My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22)

The most recognizable text from the life of Christ pointing toward the vindication of the righteous sufferer is a citation from Psalm 22:1 made from the cross. Nearing the end of his physical limitations Jesus shouts from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1)

There are generally two schools of thought regarding Jesus citation of this Psalm. The first suggests that Jesus felt utterly abandoned at the cross. God, whose eyes are too pure to look on sin (Hab. 1:13) turned his back on Jesus as Jesus "became sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus, now feeling betrayed and abandoned by his Father, cries out in agony to Him wondering why he

has been abandoned.³⁹ This view pieces texts together that are seemingly unrelated and fails to account for the fact that the Psalm quickly moves from David's feelings of abandonment to the promise of his vindication.

The second takes the context of the entire Psalm and applies it to Jesus' statement. Jesus, dying of asphyxiation and likely struggling for breath, probably lacked the capacity to cite the entire Psalm. But those in his hearing (and those in Matthew and Mark's readership) who knew Psalm 22 would have known toward what end the Psalm was pointing.

Psalm 22 seems, at first glance, a Psalm about David being forsaken by Yahweh. For the first two verses David cries out that he has been abandoned by God in spite of his constant appeal to Him.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent. (Ps. 22:1-2)*

The Psalm then takes a quick turn toward the hope that David has in remembering Yahweh's faithfulness to his fathers. If God was faithful to David's ancestors, then he is faithful to David still. Though Psalm 22 begins with two verses of despair, the tone quickly turns to hope.

*Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed. (Ps. 22:3-5)*

David spends the next several verses describing his plight. The Psalm climaxes in vss. 23-24 as David proclaims his certainty that Yahweh will not allow him to be afflicted without honoring him for his faithfulness.

*You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help. (Ps. 22:23-24)*

³⁹D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 578-579; Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 419; Joel Green, "Death of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 151-152.

David is certain that, though he be hard-pressed and afflicted for no righteous reason, the Lord will vindicate him for his faithfulness. He will not allow his innocent suffering to go unnoticed, but would reward him in some way for his faithful obedience to Yahweh's commands.

Jesus' citation of Ps. 22:1 from the cross probably has the context of the Psalm's vindication of the innocent suffering in view. Knowing the entire corpus of Ps. 22, Jesus cited the first line to bring to mind for all those in his hearing this particular Psalm. Anyone knowing the Psalm would have naturally thought, "This Psalm ends with David's vindication!" Rather than proclaiming his feelings of abandonment to the world, Jesus was hinting, in the hour of his death, of his certainty that Yahweh would vindicate him for his suffering.⁴⁰

Luke doesn't record Jesus' quote from Ps. 22:1. Instead he records Jesus' citation of another Psalm. Jesus' last words were, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk. 23:46; Ps. 31:5). Psalm 31, like Psalm 22, includes descriptions of David's torment followed by statements of his expectation of Yahweh's coming vindication. Like Psalm 22, David suffers for Yahweh and expects with great certainty that his faithfulness will not go unrewarded. Jesus' citation of Ps. 31:5 probably has less to do with Jesus finally resigning himself to his death and more to do with the pattern of expectation of vindication in David's psalms,⁴¹ a theme also prominent in the Suffering Servant Song.

2. "Exalted to the Highest Place" (Philippians 2:5-11)

Modern scholars treat Philippians 2:5-11 as a hymn sung by the early church.⁴² We have already noted that Paul's understanding of Jesus' sacrifice owes much to Isaiah's presentation of the Suffering Servant. This passage is no different, and whether Paul composed it or simply recorded a hymn that was prominent in the Christian community during his day,⁴³ the hymn bears the theology of vindication for deadly obedience.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

⁴⁰Wright, 600-601 is representative of this view, suggesting that Jesus meditated on this Psalm and others which hinted at God's intervention on behalf of the afflicted.

⁴¹Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 1862.

⁴²For a brief discussion see Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 110-114.

⁴³Martin, *Philippians*, 111-112.

*and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Php. 2:5-11)*

The hymn's subject is Jesus. He had every right to claim equality with the Father, but abandoned it, or "did not latch onto it." He willingly let it go and became obedient unto death. The hymn is clear that it was because of his "obedience unto death, even death on a cross" (reminiscent of the Servant, who "poured out his life unto death," Is. 53:12) that God "exalted him to the highest place" (reminiscent of the Servant being "lifted up and highly exalted," Is. 52:13). The "highest place" is Jesus' exalted status as "Lord." Because of his humble obedience as the Servant the Father has ordained him Lord of the universe.

3. Revelation 6:9-17

The vindication of the righteous sufferer has its primary fulfillment in Jesus as the Suffering Servant, but is not limited to him alone. As David expected to be vindicated for his righteous, obedient suffering, so the promise of vindication is available to all who suffer in Christ's name. If identification with the Suffering Messiah brings the possibility of suffering in his name, so also it brings the promise that, as he was vindicated, so will those who suffer for him.

One clear example of this promise appears in John's Apocalypse. Set in the context of persecution John writes to his readers (primarily in Asia Minor) to remain faithful to Christ, "even to the point of death and you will receive the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). Their persecution comes from multiple fronts, some Jewish (Rev. 2:9-10, 20-25; 3:9-10), some political (Rev. 2:13; 6:9; 11:7-9; 13:7-10, 14-15; 17:6;). John himself is being persecuted for his faith (1:9) and paints for his readers a picture of the unseen reality of their situation.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:9-17)

As the seal is opened John describes the faithful, standing under the altar (the place in the OT where blood was shed), suffering because of their testimony. Their cry, "How long, O

Lord?” (Rev. 6:10) is a theme not unfamiliar to those well-read in the OT.⁴⁴ Their plea for vengeance is met with an appeal to patience. God will have his say, but they must be patient to give adequate time for men to repent (2 Pet. 3:9; Rev. 8:1; 10:4-6, 9-11; 13:9-10; 22:10-11). Once that time has elapsed, God will involve himself on behalf of his people and their suffering, shake the heavens and the earth, and bring judgment on their tormentors (here identified as the “kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty,” Rev. 6:12-17). The scene plays itself out numerous times in Revelation, not least in the presentation of the two witnesses (11:1-13), who are persecuted for preaching (11:7-10), but who are in turn vindicated by God through resurrection and the shaking of the cosmos (11:11-13). The righteous suffering of the innocent, here suffering on behalf of Christ, will themselves be vindicated as the Servant Jesus was vindicated for his obedience. Until that time, whether now or in eternity, God’s people must allow their trials to produce perseverance (Ja. 1:1-2) and to refine their faith as precious gold (1 Pet. 1:7).

Conclusion:

The Song of the Suffering Servant found in Isaiah 40-55 forms, in part, Jesus’ understanding of his own mission and identity. Our approach has been to see the overall pattern in the Song of the innocent Servant suffering the cup of God’s wrath vicariously for Israel, only to be vindicated by God for his obedience. Jesus seems to have understood his identity this way and effectively communicated that identification to his disciples. The Gospels are replete with citations and allusions to the Song as the Gospel writers seek to communicate their belief that Jesus fulfilled the role of the Servant of Yahweh. They also understood that allegiance with a suffering messiah brought the real possibility of suffering alongside him. They were not afraid of this, but carefully demonstrated that suffering for the earliest believers was not God’s retribution on them for their apostasy from Judaism, but rather a natural byproduct of fulfilling corporately the Servant’s ongoing mission to bring salvation to the world. The promise of vindication was real among them and the Epistles and Revelation strongly suggest that those who suffer alongside the Servant will also be vindicated with him.

I said above that the Song of the Suffering Servant forms the background of Jesus’ identity *in part*. There is another concept found in the prophets that helps us understand his identity and provides the language of Jesus’ favored self-reference. Scholarship is divided regarding its exact nature and meaning, but it fundamentally involved the suffering and enthronement (i.e., vindication) of God’s chosen servant: the ever-elusive “Son of man.”

⁴⁴Num. 20:5; Ps. 22:1; Lam. 1:20; Hab. 1:2.