

“Any group or individual who does the work of the Lord can be a servant”. To what extent is this a correct statement about the servant in Isaiah 40-55

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The section of Isaiah from Chapter 40-55, commonly thought to have been written during the exile in Babylon, is distinguished by the numerous references to God's servant, including four extended sections often referred to as the "servant songs". The identity of the servant is a subject of debate among both Jews and Christians. In this essay we shall seek evidence from the various songs and the rest of the Bible as to the identity of the servant, and hence the degree to which the statement given above is correct. We draw partly on Goldingay (1994) as well as the supplementary text in providing an answer.

As background, we start by noting the separate occasions when the servant is mentioned and the characteristics revealed. In 41:8-9 Yahweh talks reassuringly to a servant who is chosen and not rejected, and whom God will support. In 42:1-7 the servant is again chosen and upheld but is called to bring justice to the nations, be gentle to the weak but steadfast in his mission. In 42:19-22 the servant is said to be blind and deaf, and imprisoned. In 43:10 the servant is called as a witness to Yahweh before the nations. In 44:1 again Yahweh is reassuring the servant as his creator that he will take care of him and his offspring, pouring out his Spirit and giving a blessing. In 44:21-2 this message is repeated with an additional message that sins of the servant are forgiven.

In 44:26 we are reminded that God fulfils the word of his servant/messengers. 49:1-6 mention God's creation of the servant and his special preparation as a messenger – with a mission to bring Jews back to God and also as a light to the Gentiles. In 50:4-11 the servant is said to be given an instructed tongue, but has experienced mockery and physical attacks, albeit with reassurance of God's vindication. He urges others to obey and trust in the Lord despite the darkness of the times and not rely on their own strength (light).

Finally in Chapter 53 there is the most comprehensive description of the servant. He will act wisely and be lifted up and instruct the nations, although his disfigurement appals "many". He is unremarkable and despised, suffering sorrows and ultimately punished for "our" sins. He does not complain of his harsh treatment although he is innocent and his punishment leads to a degrading death. The punishment is God's own will but will lead to his resurrection, justification and exaltation.

A direct reading of the text would suggest there are three different "servants". In the first section it is Israel that is addressed – as is made explicit by the references to "Israel my servant" (41:8), "my chosen one" (42:1) and "Jacob my servant" (44:1). Then the emphasis switches to the prophet Isaiah himself, hence the reference to "words of his servants" (44:26), "before I was born the Lord called me" akin to the calls of the other prophets (49:1), and "the Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue" (50:4). The more enigmatic section is the final "song" where the servant is referred to in the third person but not explicitly as Israel or the prophet. His relations to "us", "them" and God himself are traced (Cline (1976)).

In line with the suggestion that the primary level of meaning of the prophets is found in relating messages to the people and situation of the time, we can examine meaning via the historical background to the text. This supports this view of the first two "servants" and gives some clues about the third. The Israelites had been in exile in Babylon for 50 years. They were comfortable materially but felt that God had forsaken them, and that return to Jerusalem would be impossible. They were fearful of the Babylonians and of the international unrest following the rise of Persia. It is in this situation that the message of reassurance is addressed directly to them, as well as the commission to bring justice, relationship with God and understanding to the nations. They are reminded that Yahweh is the "Holy One of Israel" (41:14) and keeps his promises to his chosen people.

But Israelites would not listen to the message (owing to blindness and imprisonment – literally and in sin). Despite this, rather than rejecting them, God repeats his call for them to be witnesses to the nations about his justice. He promises them resources both natural (streams, Cyrus) and spiritual (my Spirit, redemption, forgiveness of sins) to perform the task.

The focus of servanthood shifts to the prophet as it is realised that Israel itself needs to be taught before it will accept God's mission. Hence the prophet is to "restore the tribes of Jacob" and also be himself "a light to the Gentiles". It is the prophet who will obediently speak God's words to sustain the weary, despite opposition, and who warns Israel to put their faith in God (walk in the dark) and not their own strength (light fires).

The final servant in Chapter 53 is often thought to be the Messiah, who in suffering will fulfil God's will – and succeed where Israel failed and Isaiah recognised a task beyond him. There are close parallels with the Messianic passage Isaiah 11:1-10. As a Christian I consider this to be Jesus, who acted wisely in his teaching; was lifted up on the cross; was disfigured by being lashed and tortured; sprinkles the world with the Christian faith, was despised and rejected at his trial (and in his home town), who did not protest at his unjustified harsh treatment, died and rose again following God's plan to redeem the world, and is exalted to God's right hand.

Nevertheless, other interpretations are feasible. The suffering in 53 could remain that of the nation Israel, including that in the Holocaust. The suffering could be that of the prophets, many of whom died for their message (including Isaiah of Jerusalem). It could also be later figures in Jewish history such as Zerubbabel and Zechariah (the latter, as noted in Matthew 23:36 was killed in front of the altar). Equally, some Christians would see prophecies about Jesus in the earlier references to the servant. As in Chapter 42, Jesus was gentle with the suffering, and he himself claimed to be the servant who will open the blind's eyes and free the captives (Luke 4:18), while in Matthew 12:18 the first part of Isaiah 42 is quoted with reference to him. Equally, Jesus was mocked and spat upon as was the servant in Chapter 50.

Despite the above, it is feasible to consider the suggestion that anyone doing the work of the Lord could be a servant as set out in Isaiah. Prophecy such as Isaiah's, being the word of God, need by no means be limited to one level of understanding. Hence, although the above sets out some of the most obvious candidates for the servant, they need not exclude an interpretation covering all workers for God.

As a most basic level, we can agree that the concept of servant as the Lord's friend is common in the Old Testament as in Genesis 26:24 to Isaac "I will bless you and will increase the number of your descendants for the sake of my servant Abraham" or Exodus 14:31 "the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant." Similarly from a Christian point of view Jesus urges his disciples to be servants in Matthew 23:11-12 "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

But the parallels between the servant in Isaiah and those doing God's work can go further. We set out above the characteristics of the servant and can apply many of them to those doing God's work in a broad sense. We now go on to do so both from a Jewish (Old Testament) and Christian (New Testament) point of view. For example, it is clear that those doing God's work in both the Jewish and Christian tradition need to be chosen – as for example were the prophets as in Jeremiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."; or as Jesus chose his apostles in John 15:15 "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last."

God's choice leads on to his Spirit being put into his servants; we can cite Moses in Numbers 11:25 "Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him." In the New Testament there is of course Pentecost in Acts 2:4 "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." Again, his servants go out in God's strength and not their own as stated in 42:5.

The call to lead mankind to recognise the true God and be witnesses to him is of course the central feature of the great commission from Luke 23:47 "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Also in John 20:21 "Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." It can be argued that thereby Jesus returns the servant calling to God's people. But there is also a strong element of this in the Old Testament where Zechariah 8:22 states "many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord Almighty and to entreat him". People will come to God through the attraction of Israel rather than via missionary work, owing to the perception of God within the nation. This is similar to Christ's suggestion that his followers be the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

As for the bruised reed and smouldering wick, this is interpreted in Matthew 12:15 as Jesus healing the sick. But his followers were all called to this in John 14:12 "anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father". An Old Testament parallel could be pity for the blindness of the Gentiles following their idols in Isaiah (such as 44:9).

Any human doing God's work must operate in a fallen world and hence will at times be "blind and deaf" and a prisoner of sin. God calls David his servant (1 Kings 11:32) despite his tremendous sins of murder and adultery. Even the prophets such as Elijah despaired at times. The servant will also be afraid and need reassurance, as were the prophets and the disciples at the time of the crucifixion, or Paul in Acts 18:19 "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent"".

God's servants are all redeemed by him and their sins forgiven. This is the central message of the Christian faith as set out by Jesus himself in Luke 5:20 and 1 John 2:12 "I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name." – or in the Old Testament atonement in Numbers 15:28 "The priest is to make atonement before the LORD for the one who erred by sinning unintentionally, and when atonement has been made for him, he will be forgiven.", or in Psalm 32. The servant of God may also forgive others' sins as in Acts 13:47; "For this is what the Lord has commanded us: " 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' ""

Isaiah's call can be seen as a job description of what it means to be God's servant generally – they are themselves "to be Israel", God's Holy Nation and his possession.. This again can apply to the people of God generally. For example, God's servants are chosen to act as prophets speaking God's words; linking the servant image to this, 1 Peter 4:11 states "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ." Joel 2:28 promises "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy." Again, those doing the will of God have to turn the other cheek as does the servant. As in Matthew 5:39 "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." This is less common in the Old Testament where Jeremiah 15:15 is more typical "You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors."

A final issue is whether those doing God's will are called on to willing to undergo suffering like the servant in Chapter 53, to fulfil God's plan. Moses was willing to suffer death as a guilt offering for the Israelites in Exodus 32:30, although it is less clear that this is a general call to Israel. Jesus is explicit on this point in Matthew 16:24 "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." We also have the example of the martyrs in Acts such as Stephen and James. Paul had his thorn in the flesh to remind him that , "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:9).¹ Peter 2:21 states "if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps". This is the greatest challenge of doing God's work.

To conclude, we have suggested that the servant in Isaiah can be identified with Israel in part, Isaiah in part and the Messiah finally. But even these interpretations are open to question; notably, a case can be made for the suffering nation of Israel to have fulfilled much of the prophecy during its history. Furthermore, an analysis of the servant's characteristics suggests that many of them are indeed features of a life doing God's will. This can be illustrated both from the Old Testament and the New, suggesting considerable ground for Jews and Christians to agree. There still remain some aspects where the teaching of Jesus and the apostles is more directly in line with Isaiah than the Old Testament is – notably forbearance and willingness to undergo suffering. This should not be surprising as God promises in the Old Testament "I am doing a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19, Jeremiah 31:22). The New Testament of course foreshadows the blessing to the world when the Jews accept Jesus in Romans 11:12 "But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!" May the day come soon.

References:

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