

Servant Songs of Isaiah

Isaiah 42:1-4

In approaching this first Servant Song, one is faced with the question, who is the Servant of the Lord? Observe the “job description” and definition of the servant.

1. The servant of the Lord is one that the LORD (Yahweh) has chosen and one whom the LORD upholds.
2. The Servant is one upon whom the LORD has “put my spirit”.
3. The Servant is assigned task and at the same time the servant’s description is one who “will bring forth justice to the nations,” the (goi-im) otherwise known as the gentiles.
4. This task will be done quietly without any raised voices
5. The task will be done gently, “a bruised reed he will not break; and dimly burning wick he will not quench”
6. The Servant will be faithful in bringing about justice.
7. The Servant will not grow faint or be crushed “until he has established justice in the earth.”

This is a profoundly full description. In our New Testament thinking, we are directed toward the Messiah, Jesus Christ. His life fills the bill exactly.

1. At his baptism we see the spirit descending upon him and God’s voice comes from the clouds declaring that Jesus is God’s son in whom he is well pleased.
2. As we read the gospel accounts, especially the Gospel According to St. Luke we see Jesus proclaimed by Mary in her song, *Magnificat* to be the great equalizer. He will “bring down the mighty from the throne and lift up the lowly,;” “he will fill the hungry with good things and the rich he will send away empty.” Luke accounts in great detail how Jesus achieves closeness with all of the disenfranchised. (Calls Mary and Joseph to parent the messiah Lk 2:26-38; presents the first announcement of the savior’s birth to shepherds in the fields Lk 2: 1-20; enters a time of temptation along with all of humanity Lk 4:1-13; calls fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples Lk 5:1-11 & Lk 1:29-32; touches a leper Lk 1:12-16)
3. Some of those encountered who received healing and blessings were gentiles (a Roman centurion (Lk 7:1-10)
4. Jesus’ approach to the fulfilling of his mission as messiah and savior of the world was done quietly. Jesus enters Jerusalem humble and riding on the donkey not a great white stallion leading a brigade of soldiers to conquer Rome. In the garden of Gethsemane he prays for the possibility of relief but accepts the part with the words, “thy will be done.” Once again in the garden of Gethsemane, when Peter draws the sword to rescue him, he charges Peter to put the sword away and heals the man injured by Peter’s attack. Jesus said that he had to submit, it had to be

- this way. Before the Sanhedrin and his trial he did not speak up. Before Pilate, he did not speak up. Jesus did not fight the events that were unfolding.
5. Jesus did not give up or submit until his job was finished and the work of God was done. Then he rested in his grave until God established divine justice and raised Christ to life again.

Jesus declares himself the servant of the Lord repeatedly as he fits the description that God laid out in the prophetic song. In this way, the identity of the Servant of the Lord is prophetic. For Isaiah's day, the Servant was (in this sense) a future personage – the messiah promised by God.

But does it stop there? I'm glad you asked me that question. No! It does not stop there. As the Song is being sung in its present, the writer gives us a clue to the identity of the Servant of the Lord. As we continue to read contextually in the verses of Isaiah 42 that follow, we hear the words:

1. "Thus says God, the LORD (Yahweh), who gives breath (ruah) to the people . . . and spirit (ruah) to those who walk" in the earth" Note: (ruah pronounced ru'ach is the Hebrew words for wind, breath, spirit). God the creator of the heavens and the earth puts breath and spirit into his people.
2. "I am the LORD (Yahweh), I have called you in righteousness . . . taken you by the hand . . . given you 'as a covenant' to the people, a light to the nations (goi-im = gentiles) to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."
3. Isaiah 41:8-9 also names "Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off. . ."

In its context, Israel is called by God through the call of Abraham (Gen. 12). Abraham is commissioned by God. He is blessed by God "to be a blessing to all the families of the earth." Israel is to act as the servant. The promise to Abraham and his descendants was the designation to serve all the families of the earth. Yet, the plan went amiss. Israel throughout its history, especially from the time of the return from the Babylonian exile became exclusive rather than inclusive. They used the Torah to separate the clean from the unclean, the gentile from the Jew and the gentile was to be kept at a distance. It isn't until the ministry of Jesus that we see those distinctions defunct and the original plan of inclusion of the gentiles back into the plan of God. In a very real sense, Jesus become the Servant of the Lord that Israel failed to be

Where does that leave us? Another good question. It is no accident that we the church have been called the "body of Christ." Once again the role of Servant of the Lord has resumed a corporate role. The church is to act as the Servant of the Lord. Throughout the Book of Acts, the disciples mimic the actions of Jesus. Peter raises someone from the dead. Stephen when he is stoned to death, cries, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Disciples become Jesus in the world. Look at the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28, "Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations* (inclusion), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the

Son, and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” Once again, the nations have been included in God’s plan. The church is to reach into the world of both Jew and gentile to include all “who have ears to hear.” (Lk 8:8)

While many of the authors question the identity of the servant of the Lord,¹ naming Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel as individuals, Israel as a corporate identity of the Servant of the Lord, Jesus as the messiah Suffering Servant of the Lord. The Servant appears to be all of these options either at different times and places, or yet at the same time. Jesus remains the Servant of the Lord that fulfilled all that the prophets foretold, while yet the church remains the servant for this present age.

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¹ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 40ff. See also Carroll Stuhlmueller, C. P., *Deutero-Isaiah, The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, vol. I, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968), 366ff.