

Finally we come to the summit of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah. I must confess I have delayed arriving to it. It's been over a year since I contributed a study on this webpage and, although there have been incidental reasons, some of the reason certainly comes from the text itself. The sequence is so profound that I have felt almost overawed, even paralyzed. It's as if, after all the reflection on 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah to this point, it's time to be silent, to stand simply in honor or wonder at such an enormous caesura in human culture. But, of course, apart from sounding a little pretentious, this is just silly in view of all the work we have done to get here. Those who have pressured me to finish the job, they are entirely in the right. However, just as there was silence in heaven for half an hour after the seventh trumpet, I do not regret this long moment of dumbness before Isaiah 52-53.

The passage renews themes that we have seen before, that of Zion, the holy city, and then the Servant. On both counts the writing reaches new heights of expression, but it of course with the second that the pivotal interest lies. We will return to each separate theme when we examine the text in detail, but a prologue to "the fourth song of the Servant," establishing some of its fundamental meaning and relevance, seems immediately called for. A passage that has had such a profound effect on the whole Christian movement and whose critical meaning is endlessly discussed cannot be treated as if the interpretation was somehow neutral. Entering the world of the text is at once to enter a world which we have constructed around it but which it has also served to construct, and in ways that may well exceed or subvert the thematic level we are used to. We must, therefore, first clearly and honestly recognize a dynamic relationship between our world of understanding and the fourth song of the Servant. What follows are sketches in that direction, without pretending to be exhaustive or definitive.

According to Paul Hanson the Servant songs are a redefinition of power (*Isaiah 40-66. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*). Right there something enormous is suggested. We could argue that so much that has gone before in the bible is about redefinition of power. But the great national epic contained in the Pentateuch, Joshua and Judges can be interpreted as the violent revolution of an underclass (Norman Gottwald). Going on from there, the story of the monarchy in Samuel through Kings can be read as a religious nationalism, with insistence on obedience and fidelity to a single God. For sure, the prophets pleaded for social justice and cried out passionately against oppression and violence. And on the way they came to a notion of relationship between God and God's people that went deeper than any formal legal or national-religious understanding. But at what point did the tradition achieve the constitutive break with the universal form of human culture toward which it was always yearning? To have a single god, over against the gods of the nations, and to hold that this god was committed to justice, can those things in themselves claim to be a truly radical break with given human culture? The general monotheism of western nations and their many revolutions for the sake of liberty and justice, these things do not significantly mark us off from the empires of Assyria, Greece or Rome, or, for that matter, from that of Solomon. Any schoolboy would tell us that.

I take Hanson's words, therefore, with a sense of something truly new. Only here, with the Servant, do we have the valuation of something truly other in a story of humankind formed simultaneously by epic brutality and its epic forgetting. The nation of Israel had been decimated by a ruthless conqueror, its leading elements, political, military and technical, cut off at the legs and carried to a far land where the assumption was "assimilate or die." Israel, however, did neither; through the remarkable activity of its prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and probably the teaching of its priests and scribes, it survived as a kind of fantasy of itself. It remembered what it had been and that memory became what it was and what it would yet be. But this did not alter the abject change of fortune it had experienced. It had lost its existence as a state. It had lost its sacred place which guaranteed it before God. In face of the rise to power of the Persian Cyrus and of his enlightened administration in letting captives return to their homelands, the prophet of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah urged the people to leave Babylon, to "depart, go out from there!" But evidently the agency which brought about this possibility was not their own, and when some of them responded it was entirely without any security derived from traditional forces or institutions. They had to rely on the security offered by the Persian empire, and through and in that means alone, the power of their God. They had been reduced to wretched national weakness. They had become in the prophet's hard-truth words "you worm Jacob, you insect Israel!" (41.14)

If the identity of statehood and temple were removed and yet God still related to them, and did so with an intensity and tenderness not seen before, it meant they were—anthropologically speaking—denuded before him and at the same time there was something about this actual situation God valued. It was a horribly unwelcome human situation, but one rich in astonishing theological possibility. The prophet began to understand that this very weakness was important, willed by God, and productive itself of God's purpose. This is the developing thesis of the Servant songs, running in order from "not grow(ing) faint or be(ing) crushed," through "spend(ing) my strength for nothing and vanity," and "giv(ing) my back to those who struck me," to the full-blown alienation and destruction of the fourth song.

And here we pivot on the edge of an almost intolerable human breakthrough. Who, in what century, in what land, in what culture, could possibly value a human identity in abjection? Thus with this prophecy there at once begins a struggle of interpretation, and one evident even in the text itself. What do the very words mean? And what in fact is the agency of God in the suffering of the Servant? It is well known that the Aramaic translation of Isaiah (Isaiah Targum) completely re-writes the suffering of the Servant, overturning the text so that the suffering now applies to the nations not to the Servant. Then the Christian interpretation of the text has restored the honor of the Christian God (and so, of course, of Christian men and women) by reading the suffering as precisely that—willed by God to restore his honor and justice in and through the crushing the Servant. So the mechanisms of power and violence remain intact, and indeed are horribly reinforced. (Hence the emergence of culturally specific "Christian violence.") But these brutal renderings cannot be the meaning of the prophet, if only because our contemporary thought-world allows us to see this brutality for what it is, and so at once allows other possible readings to surface, running counter to it. It is possible to understand that the text itself has disclosed the brutality before we ever saw it clearly for what it was.

Could the author really propose a single individual afflicted by God to compensate for his punitive wrath against the many? Morna Hooker sees the exclusive mechanism of such an idea as anomalous, “without parallel in Old Testament thought” (*Jesus And The Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, 97). Certainly, it’s hard to deny that the language of 52-53 is sacrificial, seeming to imply a single victim. But then if the prophet intends sacrificial metaphors does he use them in a truly sacrificial sense, i.e. with a compensatory mechanism. This is highly improbable. We know a prophet could well be asked to take on a life-style of suffering and even of punishment. Ezekiel was told “lie on your left side, and place the punishment of the house of Israel upon it; you shall bear their punishment for the number of days, three hundred ninety days...” But this is enacted meaning and not the famous “vicarious suffering” attributed to the Servant, a suffering in place of the suffering of others. Ezekiel, and others like him, while undoubtedly suffering, do so within a structure of declarative meaning. They are not suffering *instead of* the people, they are suffering *in order to manifest to* the people what is about to happen to them, and why.

Generally, this declarative, teaching purpose should be the presumed interpretative frame of the Isaiah text, rather than one of compensation or transaction. This becomes even more compelling when we think of the Servant in the collective sense. If we take the Servant in the collective sense as Israel then that pulls the meaning in a direction of visual demonstration of a truth rather than substitution. It is much more intelligible that the one who silences kings does so because of a transformed human meaning, rather than some kind of transaction made with God. Destroying a nation in order to appease a god would not startle nations or shut the mouth of kings, unless indeed there was some inspired knowledge of the innocence of that nation before God and their inflicted punishment being a substitute for everyone else’s. All of which sounds incredible, really only a projection backward on Israel of medieval Christian doctrine about Christ. Much more humanly likely is a first-hand response to the endless nonviolence of the “Servant” turning the heart of an observer to peace and forgiveness. And then this direct experience becomes universalized by the writer as a destiny for all in response to Israel’s suffering. And even if we see the prophet talking first and foremost about Israel in some visionary scene of suffering before the nations, then it would still amount to the same thing. The prophetic mind is still extrapolating from a deep sense of the transformative teaching power of a totally nonviolent response accompanied by an infinite trust in God.

The strong possibility of the pedagogical function of the Servant is given textual backing if we turn to one of the verses of the fourth song (the only time I’ll do this in this introductory sketch). It seems the most explicitly “penal” verse of the whole poem: “Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (53.5b). The word for punishment in the LXX text is *paideia* and the whole phrase in the first part is *paideia eirenes emin ep’ auton*. The word *paideia* can be translated as “teaching, education, discipline, correction.” (The Hebrew behind it, *musar*, has the same semantic range: out of its seven occurrences in Jeremiah the NRSV translates it three times as correction, and, one time each, as discipline, punishment, instruction, lesson.) The whole phrase may be rendered then as “the teaching for our peace is on him and by his bruising we are brought to health.” The word *paideia* is also used by the LXX in the

third song, in the dynamic sense of the Servant as the one who may be both the object and subject of the teaching: literally “the Lord gives me a tongue of instruction” (*glossan paideias*, 50.4a). Thus we have in the NRSV: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher.” There can be little doubt that the Septuagint translators understood the Servant’s role as divinely instructional toward others, in and through his intense learning.

Where then does this lead? Or, rather, where has the text already led us by its own power? For even as I make this argument—about the pedagogy of the Servant—there can be no doubt that the fourth song again and again insists on the Servant’s suffering for or on behalf of others. So, even as I dismiss a transactional interpretation there still remains a strong other-directed sense, and this in turn is so powerful that it becomes somehow objective, something in its own right. This is why the sacrificial language is employed, or is understood as employed. It would seem to be the only cultural resource able to speak about what is occurring. Something new has emerged and it is framed according to the language of sacrifice even as it is pedagogical and disclosive, rather than sacral and compensatory. The prophetic community gathered round the theme of the Servant understood the amazing figure entering the role of the sacrificial lamb but without pursuing it to its final sacred closure. Rather it is displayed for all to see in its terrible and subversive pathos. Here is the animal scapegoat, the lamb for the slaughter, and yet it is a human being and one who is suffering terribly. So even if there is no transaction, no penal exchange, there is someone doing something absolute for others. And that absolute act, while opening up brutal human reality to view, is itself something, something in itself. In the past that was called sacrifice. But, now, we don’t have a word for this new thing, unless it is an impossible love, so impossible it has to be named with the name of God itself.

Understanding the text in this way we are assisting in a tectonic upheaval. We’re moving from a standard system to something else than cannot truly be called a system. The standard system works by excluding one—so the system in fact is the system-minus-one. But the one has to be added to again and again, so the system actually ends with a vast pile of extruded items, a trash heap of history bigger than history itself. The choice then is between the standard system accompanied by a colossal human trash heap and something wholly new emerging in the fourth song of the Servant. The Servant takes on the role of the excluded one and pursues its track, to the outside, to the “ex” beyond the closure. The opening to the outside and the movement there produces what might be called (with some hesitation) a “new ontology.” For the track opened by the Servant toward the outside produces an empathy with that track, and this is the Servant’s pedagogy. His endless non-retaliation or nonviolence teaches and invites imitation and this imitation then creates an entirely “other” sense of being. The Servant’s patient pedagogy is rooted in fact in an original ontology beyond being, beyond “things” constituted as they are in the fatal exchanges of desire and killing. By creating and tracing the path of absolute giving-self-away he leads us into a pre-primordial world of utter love. And thus we are made “right” or “righteous.”

You could even imagine that this “other” sense is packed away in traditional sacrifice itself, but under the fatal misrepresentation of violence, a counterfeit-because-forced version of the movement to the outside. Because we cast the other out, for that reason we

think the world exists, and in a sense we are right because the movement to the outside does create the world. But really we produce a shallow world, a foreshortened, brittle and dangerous world. Instead of the depth of love we have created an arena where our violence is “satisfied” but only for a time. Sacrifice is a terrible palimpsest, achieved by a few savage brushstrokes, overlaying the original self-giving of God. It both replays that self-giving and closes it off and denies it by filling that space with the victim. This is why the world continues to turn on the basis of sacrifice, and all its blind philosophy and violent metaphysic appear plausibly true. There *is* something to it. But it is still only a grotesque distortion of the original movement of love. It takes the Servant in his fearful abjection to break through to the original “non-being” of self-giving. Thus he demonstrates the falsehood of sacrifice, because he not only retraces the violence in his body, but re-traces it, or traces it for the first time, as endless love. It is only because of the appearance of truth that something else can be shown as false.

There emerges then a vitally important critique of Girardian methodology, from a theological standpoint. The revelation of the scapegoat depends on the movement of love, its “beyond being.” Girard masks this movement in his work because he wishes to remain within the disciplines of the social sciences and textual interpretation. He wishes in effect to “de-theologize” the movement. But of course it spills over into theology at virtually every paragraph, and more or less blows up in one’s face at the end of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard’s greatest work. Nevertheless, the refusal of the priority of theology, of the absolute movement of love, prevents the release of its full dynamic in the depth of the contemporary crisis. “Mimetic theory” then becomes a continuous negative disclosure rather than the positive disclosure of the gospel. In which case mimetic anthropology is reduced to little more than a talking shop, an academic alibi or apologetics for Christianity that really exists somewhere else (“within the church”?). But the revelation of the scapegoat is not restricted to mimetic anthropology, as Girard would be the first to admit. It’s something brimming out of contemporary history and that is so because the restless God of love will not let it be. And only theology is able to give full and free expression to that. To put it another way, mimetic anthropology has to be recognized for what it is, the offshoot of theology, not the other way round. For theology, therefore, truly to fulfill its destiny in our contemporary situation it must begin with the astonishing challenge to being and its violent system which the Servant of the Lord has taught.

52.1-2. These verses continue the Zion oracle 51.17 which is one of several appearing from 49 onwards (49.14-26, 50.1-3, 51.1-8, 51.9-11, 51.17-52.2, 52.7-12, 54.1-17). Up to chapter 49 the most prominent addressee was Jacob or Israel; after that point it becomes Zion. I have not highlighted these oracles perhaps as much as I should. As we can see, there is an impressive parade, and they fill almost all the space around the second, third and fourth servant songs. They act as an unmistakable counterpoint, and the question arises of how does this female role fit with the Servant, if at all?

The oracles are part of what is known as “Zion theology.” What this means in short is a powerful theological accent on the city of Jerusalem as the place of God’s blessing and

promise. In 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah it is in connection to the figure of the Davidic king or messiah, but in 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah the Davidic figure drops out and the city of Zion stands forward as the sole protagonist, without the need for a monarchy. Right from the beginning she is addressed for her own sake, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (40.1). Very likely the origins of Zion theology is in standard civic prophecy, claiming divine protection for any city which achieved regional dominance. However, in the case of Jerusalem this has to be read in the context of Yahwism, from the initial conquest of the city by the Yahwist king, David, and the progressive integration of the covenant and law into the city’s imagination and identity. Thus at Isaiah 2.2-3 we read that all the nations shall come to Jerusalem to learn there the Lord’s ways, “for out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” When the city’s destruction and exile occurred this religious identity received a severe blow, which in any other case it would have been fatal. But that is precisely where the prophet of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah stepped in, telling Jerusalem that her suffering had reached its term, and that, instead of suffering, Jerusalem was to be now the “herald of glad tidings” (40.9).

The Zion oracles then continue in this spirit, constantly reassuring the city of divine comfort, relationship and destiny. She is addressed as mother (50.1, 51.18) and also as bride (49.18, 52.1, 54.5-6). The Lord declares, “I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me” (49.16), and he assures her that even if she has lost so many of her children, many, many more will return to her (49.20-22). Probably these oracles were produced independently in the immediate years before and just after the return in 537BCE. Their clear and urgent purpose was to encourage people in face of a devastated city, without walls, temple, palace or populace, to see these things and yet still imagine a triumphant purpose. Their poetry soars in almost inverse proportion to the depressing reality. There is a continual affirmation of God’s positive intention right there in midst of destruction and failure.

The suffering of the city obviously puts it in a parallel situation to the Servant, but unlike Israel the city is never addressed as Servant. At the same time, some of the things said to her are also said to the Servant: “Kings...with their faces to the ground shall bow down to you” (49.23b; cf. 49.7c); “You offered your back like the ground, like the street for them to walk on’ (51.23c; cf. 50.6a). And, perhaps most important, in respect of both, “The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (52.10; cf. 49.6c, 53.1). There is clearly a degree of cross-over between Zion and the Servant. But Zion also has a history and character that is independent from that of the Servant. She was punished for her sins (40.2c) whereas the Servant is never seen as guilty. And her offering of her back can be read as unwilling and resentful. Moreover, because she is never named Servant (as Israel is) there is no textual ambivalence between them. Thus, despite a sympathy of features, the two represent different identities, with a dramatic tension between them. They are both the work of YHWH and for the sake of the nations, but Zion is generally the object of a passionate future hope, while the Servant is passionately active in the present.

The oracles were very probably not composed as a counterpoint to the Servant songs, but the final collation of the two themes produces a rich emotional field for the reader. There is the continual sense of loving relationship toward Jerusalem in its crisis, and in the

meantime a mysterious redemptive figure emerging from exactly the setting of its crisis. Thus Zion is the scene of the Servant, and the Servant is the strange shadow companion of Zion. In previous studies I have described him as a “new physics,” or, as above, a “new ontology,” and if this is the case then Zion is the human setting where this newness will be lived. The last oracle in chapter 54 approaches a sense of human transformation, and the writings of the third division of Isaiah, from 56 onwards continue to develop this vision. Then finally in the Christian testament, in the book of Revelation, very many of the Isaianic images are picked up and asserted of “the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God...as a bride adorned for her husband,” a place where God will dwell with humankind. Thus the pathway of transformation is completed. But it is begun here, in the mysterious and beautiful twining of themes. The marriage between a God of infinite self giving and a humanity which has finally surrendered to a love beyond being will be nothing less than the collapse of heaven into earth.

The actual verses, 1 & 2, call on Jerusalem to awaken, from a kind of coma or depression. Her catatonic state has been caused both by being taken captive and by the presence of “unclean” aliens within her. But now there will be a return of purity, for the impure shall enter her no more. What is purity? At this point it is a distinction from the nations, from the conquerors who bring a sense of physical contamination. But the Servant will break through this: he more than anyone is marked with impurity—he is covered with iniquity and is given a grave with the wicked—and yet he transcends its grasp. Underlying the phenomenon of uncleanness which afflicts Zion is the violence of the nations which removes the sense of her God from Jerusalem. Circumcision is simply the externalizing of the harsh distinction that keeps the nations at bay. But of course it is itself achieved by a form of violence. Thus the Servant is the most radical possible reply to the purity demand, because he overcomes the uncleanness of violence from within, replacing it with a completely fresh principle of existence.

3-6. A different type of oracle addressed not to Zion but to the people. It asserts that the exile was unjustified—“my people are taken away without cause” (5). It is a statement that parallels the Servant song at 53.8—“by a perversion of justice he was taken away.” The claim is a contrast with 42.24-5 and 43.26-8 etc. which says the exile was just punishment for the people’s sins, and suggests a different voice here, one less influenced by the Deuteronomic mindset. Is it possible that the proximity of the Servant who “makes many righteous” has allowed this other viewpoint access to the text? In other words we are already under the influence of this new way of reckoning and un-reckoning human guilt? On the other hand, the contextual insistence on external purity, at verse 1 and again at 11, suggests that this is not yet the nonviolent solution of the Servant. We could well be witnessing a priestly-style assertion of the people’s purity, perhaps under the effect of a more sacrificial reading of the Servant.

7-10. Part of another Zion oracle, these words are some of the most famous in the Old Testament, providing a key locus for the term “gospel” or “good news,” mined almost certainly by Jesus, as well as by Paul (Romans 10,15). The good news is about the return of the Lord to Zion which is proof that “God reigns,” and thus an announcement of “the kingdom of God.” It forms a doublet with the similar passage at the outset of the book at 40.9-11. There the messenger or herald is Zion herself, but here it seems to be one who

returns to Zion. The displacement of “beauty” from the face or mouth of the messenger to his “feet” poetically catches the immense joy of this double return, of God and his people. Jesus rehearses the same joy, in a similar but expanded frame, in the “gospels.” The poet expresses an uncontainable exuberance that commands the very ruins—symbols of death and horror—to break into singing. It is this enormous felt reversal which constitutes then the “bared arm” of the Lord, a figure which normally refers to a warrior’s might in battle. But in this case it speaks to the effect of human experience astonishingly transformed and overturned in its very root. The doublet with chapter 40, the beginning of the prophecy, already tells us that we are reaching a climax in the overall composition, and then the trope of the Lord’s arm before the eyes of the nations (10) is almost immediately repeated in relation to the Servant, at 52,13a and 53.1b. The oracle then stands at the threshold of the fourth song and announces it internally and with striking emphasis. It is also, therefore, the place where the themes of Zion and the Servant are most fully sutured. In effect the joy of the return to Zion is used to preface the shocking appearance of the Servant. The sequence also suggests then that both are different phases of the same reign of God, hinting as well that the Servant is the means of the glorious return at a deeper mysterious level.

11-12. A reiteration of the theme of purity but in the context of the departure from Babylon—the returnees are to “touch no unclean thing” as they go, purifying themselves as they carry the sacred vessels that had been removed by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple. It is noteworthy the temple is not itself mentioned. All the emphasis is on those who return; they will not depart in haste as in the Exodus from Egypt but with a much greater security in this new exodus. These verses seem to be a clumsy addition to the theme of joyful return to Zion, backtracking in imagination to Babylon. Is their effect to draw a clear line under the oracle, marking a difference—despite the earlier suture—with the truly startling figure of the Servant. Or is a further connection to the Servant in fact intended, a hint that the work of the temple is now fulfilled and made redundant by the “sacrificial” role he will undertake?

13-15. And so at last we arrive at the fourth song. The Lord is speaking and declares the exaltation and triumph of the Servant, anticipating the end of the poem when the Servant receives “a portion with the great.” But it is fascinating that the exaltation seems to derive directly from his abasement, so that the latter is somehow productive of the former. “*Just as* there many who were astonished at him [because he did not look like a human]...*so* he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him” (14). At the least there is no clear move from abasement to exaltation as visibly different conditions.

What is then is the marring of appearance, so that the person no longer has the form of a human? The picture is a contradiction of Genesis where man and woman are made in the image of God; it is both a human and theological reversal, an absolute dehumanization. If we take the scene before the nations and kings in the collective sense, of another nation, Israel, that stands before them, then perhaps the form that is lost is statehood, including a ruling monarch, an intact temple and a graceful city. The word translated “marred” means ruined, wasted, trashed, smashed, which could certainly apply to a city. But reading it purely that way loses much of the shock of the disfigurement of human form and in fact reduces the impact of the metaphor applied to Israel. Its vigor as metaphor seems to

demand that we “see” an actual human deprived of human form. So what then is the marring of a human? Illness, poverty, brutalization, humiliation? We cannot say, but in any case the Servant is described outside the society of men. And it is seemingly in exactly that condition he will shut the mouths of the powerful. From the perspective I have developed, the logic which makes this work is that of the Servant *as* excluded being the one returned to view. It is his loss of appearance, his going beyond the human, which places him outside the system. But it is precisely as the one driven out that he now returns to view. So a total novelty is disclosed to the nations and kings. What else could possibly provide the shock to silence kings but this revelatory non-humanity? The hidden victim upon whom the whole edifice and power of nations and kings depend is now plainly on view. No wonder they are struck dumb!

This reading would in turn make sense of: “that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.” It is structurally the thing which has not a name, does not even belong to language, this is the thing that they will look upon, that they will contemplate in the sense of a spiritual awareness. What a profound, earth-shaking contemplation!

53.1-3 Beginning at this point is what is known as the “We” material, running to 11b. It features a first person plural speaker, in contrast to the Lord *as* before and after. The difference has led some to conclude that the unit is detachable and probably earlier than the framing verses built round it. In contrast others read the material of chapter 53 dramatically and seamlessly, so that it is the kings introduced at 52.15 who are then the first person speakers. But in this case the introduction is very poor: you have to go from the Lord’s address to that of the kings without any signal of change, in addition to the fact that the kings have only just “shut their mouths.” It seems better to see the thing critically, envisioning an original unit which is then framed by an address from the Lord, and the change to plural speakers is open in reference rather than dramatically closed. In other words, “we” can mean anyone, including of course the kings and the nations. This, I would submit, is the poetic feeling of the text, with its blunt and striking announcement seeming to speak for everyone: “Who has believed what we have heard?”

If this is the case it then becomes possible to speculate about the existential “we” behind the unit. Were they members of the Isaianic community who had witnessed at first hand the maltreatment of an individual? The shift to an individual “servant” that this brings goes along with the autobiographical second and third songs, demanding a single person, as well as the pronounced prophetic and teaching role of this figure. It would be much easier to go from a single individual like this to a representative metaphor, rather than the other way. (The figure of “Son of Man” in Daniel 7 is clearly already a representative metaphor, and nowhere before or after does he then speak in the first person, i.e. become existentially single.) We can then add, as already mentioned, the impact of the intensity of suffering. It is very hard, hearing these words, not to think of a single persecuted man.

We have the description of one who is young and grows up in arid ground, without human consolation or refreshment. We then hear “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” The reference to form and appearance invokes 52.14 and could well be one of the bases on which the

frame is elaborated. But here the poverty in appearance is not the passive result of “marring;” it appears personal and proper. This individual was possibly crippled, or at the least unimpressive, unattractive, deprived. The note “majesty” suggests a king, the kind of bearing that a king should have, and this hint turns our thoughts to the actual exiled king of Jerusalem, Jehoiachin. He was the son of Jehoiachim whose rebellion brought down the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar on the city. When his father died Jehoiachin was only eighteen years old. He lasted just three months on the throne and then surrendered the city and was carried off in the first deportation to Babylon (597 BCE). The Book of Kings never explains why his leadership crumbled so rapidly, especially given the resistance of the nobles subsequently under Zedekiah, something vividly portrayed in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah in fact has very dismissive words for the young king.

“Is this man Coniah [another name for Jehoiachin] a despised broken pot,  
a vessel no one wants?

Why are he and his offspring hurled out  
and cast away in a land they do not know?

O land, land, land,  
Hear the word of the Lord!

Thus says the Lord:

Record this man as childless,  
a man who shall not succeed in his days;

For none of his offspring shall succeed  
in sitting on the throne of David,  
and ruling again in Judah.” (Jeremiah 22.28-30)

The “broken pot” recalls Jeremiah’s prophetic action, smashing an earthenware pot at the entrance to the valley of Hinnom, in symbolism of the disaster coming on the city (19.1-15). Thus Jeremiah’s assessment, just like the Deuteronomist’s (2 Kings 24.19), holds Jehoiachin accountable for the sins of the city and the Davidic dynasty that ruled it. The word “despised” in the first line is *nivzeh*, (niph'al masculine participle of *bazah*), the same Hebrew word used twice in Isaiah 53.3: “He was despised and rejected by others...he was despised, and we held him of no account.” It’s also noteworthy that in the final reversal of the Servant’s condition “he shall see his offspring” (53.10c), something that may also be seen as referencing Jeremiah’s prophecy.

The exiled king’s situation could hardly be more worthy of contempt. Whatever the reason, he gave up without a fight. And before and aside from whether he was prepared to fight, he was judged and rejected by the greatest prophet of the time and then by the scribes who wrote the history. As an imprisoned trophy of war his situation was one of constant humiliation before the mighty of Babylon, and with the words of Jeremiah ringing in their ears his fellow exiles could easily have held a parallel, if not greater disdain. He was “one from whom others hide their faces.” And yet Jehoiachin survived and, according to 2 Kings 25.27-9, after 37 years he was released from prison and given an honored seat at the king’s table, “above the other seats of the kings.”

His story is manifestly one of humiliation and reversal. I recount it not because I wish to make a case for his being “the servant of the fourth song,” but because it shows how

reasonable it can be to believe in an actual historical individual behind the text and how that individual can give life to the anthropology emerging in the text. It is entirely possible that Jehoiachin bore his fate with dignity and patience and it was for that reason that he finally rose to be an ornament at the king's table. At the same time, before the eyes of his fellow exiles—busying themselves building houses, planting gardens and eating their produce (Jeremiah 29.5)—his constant and isolated presence of suffering may eventually have given rise to an opposite emotion from rejection. It is an entirely new existential situation where one king does not succeed another but the defeated one stays alive in captivity as an object lesson in disgrace; and if we add to that the prophetic and scribal denunciation of this individual the result could be nothing but collective revulsion. But then in an amazing response, he sustains his condition with silence and integrity, and it is precisely this that could give rise to something unprecedented.

A transformation of emotion must be conceivable, wherein the object of contempt by virtue of his own lack of resentment, hatred or despair, pulls people round to himself. Contempt is a mimetic transfer, discharging a steady collective violence on another; but then if that mimesis meets a free space filled with peace, trust and non-retaliation then inevitably—by almost a law of mechanics—that transfer will begin to mutate into those very opposite emotions. All that is necessary then to complete the trajectory is that a prophetic mind understood—in a flash of revelation—that it was precisely this individual who filled the role of the temple victim, of the lamb for the slaughter, but without the temple. Here was the afflicted one who was not afflicted for his own sins but those of others, yet by means other than temple ritual. And then all the language of striking, wounding, crushing and, in and with that, of exchange, all of that falls into place as an amazing and amazed litany on the part of the prophet. The prophet appears to use the language of sacrifice because that is what he is indeed seeing on the surface, even as he senses, at a deeper level, something very different happening. He cannot help but recount the process, blow by blow—because that is what actually happened— even as he registers a seismic shift from sacrifice to mimetic human peace and true repentance.

4-7.            Surely he has borne our infirmities  
                    And carried our diseases  
Yet we accounted him stricken,  
                    struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
                    crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment [education] that made us whole,  
                    and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep had gone astray;  
                    We have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him  
                    the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and he was afflicted,  
                    yet he did not open his mouth;  
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
                    and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
                    so he did not open his mouth.

The experience recounted is very dense. It cannot be read simplistically as the Christian tradition has done, if only because the tradition is not itself simple: to arrive at it took a number of convolutions of thought that were not (and are not) consistent with the bible in general and the gospel in particular. For God to carry out punitive intent and damage against an innocent individual because of the sins of others is deeply antithetical to biblical grace. At the same time, such is the volatility of mimetic transfer in a world of violence it is easy to imagine that along with an original mimesis of peace a sense of the scapegoat can quickly be imported to Isaiah 53. Thus the text seems fatally easy to misread—as the simple substitution of “punishment” for “teaching” or “education” shows. In many ways the prophecy has to be read with the purity of the Servant in order to understand the Servant.

8-9. What can help steady our reading is to bear constantly in mind that it is not the death of the Servant but his prolonged suffering that carries the weight of the text. It is the Servant’s suffering nonviolence that provides the mimetic pathway of transformation, and his death is simply its final, abyssal moment. Unlike in sacrifice (or successful scapegoating) where everything pivots on the death and the violence leading up to it is forgotten, here everything turns on the suffering, and death is simply its ultimate moment. Pursuing our exemplary interpretation of Jehoiachin can again reinforce this. We have already seen how his apparent guilt at the root of his abyssal suffering, little by little is replaced by a sense of innocence, and with this of course there would be a feeling of a perversion of justice. Then finally he did die in Babylon. He was “cut off from the land of the living,” and “they made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich,” a fate likely for a captive but honored king. And certainly Jehoiachin had “done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth:” he surrendered his city and throne to Nebuchadnezzar after only three months where there was not time for maneuvering or duplicity.

10-12. Having the concrete figure of Jehoiachin in mind has helped us imagine the event of mimetic transformation, and avoid abstract atonement metaphysics. He has provided a springboard to the concrete anthropology whereby nonviolent suffering is somehow a lesson of healing that can be learned. However, as I have also pointed out, it has needed the prophet to see and record all this, and probably more than one prophet. Earlier in the study I suggested the “original” 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah was the author of the autobiographical second and third songs of the Servant, and then a disciple wrote the fourth song reflecting on the violent fate of this figure. Something like this is still possible, even if I have now made a hypothetical case for Jehoiachin being the “servant” of the fourth song. Jehoiachin-as-servant still leaves the self-reporting figure of the second and third songs, and for the reasons I gave earlier—that this figure would have had to be central to the prophetic community, indeed the “original” prophet—I believe that he does act as the core interpreting agent of the Servant songs. It was from deep inside his own personal inspiration and experience of suffering that he was able to articulate this new thing and for the first time. It was through him that the Deuteronomic judgment on the king and on Israel began to be reversed from the inside, from the very abyss in which it had thrust them; “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid...” Perhaps then this original voice penned the “We” section, and then a disciple’s hand added the frame. Or, possibly another disciple under the influence of the original

prophet wrote it. These details do not really matter; what is important is the prophetic insight that recognized the transformation taking place.

The prophet sees that everything that had happened to the Servant had been the will of the Lord: "... it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain" (10a). Read instrumentally, with a violent mimesis, this sounds like the Lord was cruel and sadistic. But, on the contrary, we may now understand the will of the Lord was the whole process of mimetic transformation, including all its pain, and with an amazing newness as its outcome. Looked at from this end point we can more easily accept it was the Lord's will; but the prophet starts with the brutal reality of crushing because that is exactly the phenomenon before his eyes, in all its astonishing immediacy and fullness. The prophet's angle of reading which sees pain and transformation holistically as the Lord's will is extremely important, because it means ultimately that the Lord is "crushed" by his own will. For in this case the Lord is identified with what he wills. Because the Servant's crushing is not instrumental—a means to an end—but is itself the scene of transformation (a *paideia*), then when the Lord *wills* this thing he wills his own absolute loss of violence. The vintner who crushes the grape wills the amazing novelty of wine and will surely claim identity with the vintage. Even more so does the Lord when he produces the wine of a new creation. Up to now the Lord's will is identified with the generative principle of culture which is violence. But now he wills this new generative humanity into history and so is immediately identified with its nonviolent principle. But he wills this "new thing" because it is his very self from eternity.

Logically then, on the basis of the witnessed phenomenon, the prophet makes the key ontological claim of the poem. "When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days" (10b&c). The word translated "sin offering," *asham*, is made to sound like a temple sacrifice and it has carried that resonance throughout the Christian era. However it is regarded as "enigmatic" by the commentators and is basically a variant for the much more common and technically appropriate term *hattath*. This is the word used for sin-offering throughout the whole of Leviticus. *Asham* is used in Leviticus for another kind of offering, sometime called a "guilt offering," but it seems to belong to late sections and the original sense of the word seems to have been broader, a "guilt-payment" or "restitution" Thus it seems plain that the prophet deliberately avoided the more regular cultic word and used something vaguer which both echoed the cult and yet was wider than it. I would suggest that the phrase is much better translated as "when you make his life a setting-right." The fact that it has been confidently translated as "sin-offering" masks its anthropological openness.

However, it still seems that some kind of compensation or exchange is being named. And because of that it appears as an ontological claim, a setting right in the overall order of things. But at a deeper level we understand this is a barely-understood change to the order itself—everything in the past was set right by temple sacrifice, and thus preserved the principle of violence itself; but now the Servant has side-stepped that principle into something new, a "new ontology." The phrase could rightly be paraphrased as: "when you make his life a new setting up of everything." This new setting up/setting right exceeds every compensation and exchange absolutely even while the language seems almost inevitably to fall back into the old way of thinking—until finally we grasp the fact that

something *really* new has happened! Naturally, then, because everything is new the Servant shall “see his offspring,” he shall see the birth of the new in people and the birth of new people. In the same spirit the Servant himself shall “prolong his days...” It is precisely because a new order is at work the Servant shall continue in life. If it were the old order then the Servant would be dead and the temple would prolong its days.

11-12. How this happens is then made plain in the final frame section, a reflection which strikingly endorses everything I have been arguing. In the Qumran mss. and Masoretic texts the word “light” in verse 11 is missing, and if we add to this a very possible alternative parsing of the latter half of 11b plus 11c the result is: “Out of his anguish he shall see and shall find satisfaction. Through his knowledge the righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall carry their iniquities.” As Paul Hanson points out the verbs “bear” and “carry” refer back to chapter 46.1-4 where YHWH is contrasted with the gods of Bablyon who have to be carried by their devotees (*Jesus And The Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*). Instead the God of Israel carries his people, and now the Lord provides another means of bearing, in this case of the people’s sins (cf. 6b: “the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.”) But again it is the actual means of this carrying and bearing that are at issue. According to the Lord, now speaking, in his anguish the Servant shall see and be satisfied. In effect he shall *see* the profound meaning of what is happening to him and come thereby to a new theological-anthropological truth. This interpretation is proven by the immediate mention of the Servant’s “knowledge,” and simultaneously we see this transformative knowledge as something he communicates to others. By his knowledge he makes others righteous; i.e. the meaning the Servant sees becomes also his teaching, his revolutionary *paideia*. Thus it is by means of a profound re-education that the Servant relieves the burden of the people’s sins. Indeed what better way of relieving sin than bringing someone to an entirely new existential condition where sin’s violent power and power of violence are undone? The simple displacement of “through his knowledge” to “satisfaction” neutralizes the message of human transformation through anthropological awareness and returns us to a standard sacrificial sense. But connecting this knowledge with the making righteous fits conclusively with the theme of *paideia* and the mimetic peace underpinning the whole song.

Because of this the Servant is given “a portion with the great” and “divide(s) the spoil with the strong.” We could perhaps be back here at Jehoiachin’s kings’ table in Babylon, but the deeper and wider prophetic meaning now achieved expands the reference enormously. I am reminded of Jesus’ binding of the strong man, by which he liberates others from the control of the strong, of the violent. The Servant shall set many free from the world system of generative violence. And the reason for this is given one more time, and in perhaps the most resonant anthropological phrase of the whole song: “because he poured himself out to death and was numbered among the transgressors.” The Hebrew can be rendered as: “he laid bare/he poured out his soul to death” and it captures in one line the abyssal surrender of the Servant’s life as the means by which he overcomes the violent. The Hebrew soul is the self-identical life of the person in its fragile and mortal reality; and it is also the natural appetite and desire that goes with such life. It is the experience we all have of wrapping this tenuous existence around with all the protections we can assemble, including the objects of mimetic desire. Pouring all this out willingly to

death while being counted as one of the wicked is the antithesis of this “natural” life, and it is not stated here in any passive sense of a sacrificial object, but in an absolute personal sense. It is not the object *asham* that works, but the subject’s pouring out! Then, in the final couplet of the song, the Servant’s bearing the sin of many and making intercession for evildoers are placed in parallel to this personal movement. It is no longer a matter of the Lord laying a burden on the Servant, but of the human movement by the Servant. Here is a picture of an unconditional entering of an individual to a space furthest from God, and endlessly so (a “pouring out”). It is because the Servant does this without reciprocal violence—i.e. without despair or the promise of retaliation—that he makes this non-place of nonbeing the absolute opening to the new, the beyond-being of love for all those who find themselves separated from both being and love.

And so we reach the end of the Servant songs. We have discovered that the figure of the Servant has multiple references, and that the prophetic voices and hands that shaped the figure are also certainly plural. The Servant may be conceived as Israel, as the collective reality of the people, because the prophet saw them as such. At the same time a cast of significant individuals, Cyrus, Jehoiachin, the original prophet, and others perhaps we do not know of, emerge as essential protagonists in delineating the revolutionary humanity of the Servant. This is no abstract corporate figure. It is a human being who has drunk the dregs of existence, has plumbed its depths, and in that condition has discovered something wonderfully, eternally new. A collective could never have done this. Could a collective write Mozart? But, even as this individual discovers the music at the bottom of our existence, he begins to play it for all to hear. And then of course it can become a collective reality, because everyone can and does resonate to its unheard-of harmonics. So the circle is completed. Israel is the Servant, and will yet be the Servant. And all the nations can learn from servant Israel, and can themselves also become the Servant. Why not, if his meaning is not a grim transaction, benefiting only those in the account of the “saved,” but a transformative education, a *paideia*, open to all?

In the history of the tradition sacrificial transaction took over as the meaning of the Servant because what the Servant does is in the area previously occupied by sacrifice. It has been extremely difficult for violent humanity to take of its old lens of sacrifice and see the new thing beneath it. Forgiveness pre-empts sacrifice, but from the point of view of the violent forgiveness can only be understood in terms of sacrifice. It is a massive testimony to the power of Isaiah’s Servant, and of Jesus, its first historical interpreter, that slowly forgiveness has shone through the misrecognition and misconstruction of violent anthropology.