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### 1. Exegetical Approach

It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that this passage is probably the most contested chapter in the Old Testament. The problems of interpretation are many and complex. Even to engage the textual problems is a formidable challenge in itself. The decisions in establishing a critically responsible reading of the Hebrew text can greatly influence the interpretation.

The history of exegesis of chapter 53 reveals clearly the nature and extent of the Christian church's enormous interest in the passage, which was seen to be closely related in some profound sense to the New Testament's proclamation of the gospel (Acts 8:26ff.). The initial responsibility of an Old Testament commentary is initially and above all to attempt to hear Israel's own voice in the plain sense of the text. The very format of a modern commentary restricts its author from exploring in detail this whole range of problems involved and requires an initial selection of issues to be explored. Only in conclusion will I attempt to offer some theological reflections of the chapter within the context of the whole Christian canon.

In the task of seeking to hear the text's plain sense, the interpreter of Isaiah 53 is faced with an initial hermeneutical issue of major importance. Although this methodological question has been addressed in earlier chapters, it bears repeating in respect to the handling of the text at hand. Beuken's discussion of the subject has much to commend it (*Jesaja* II/B, 185–86). To what extent does a proper exegesis derive from bringing a historical or literary perspective from outside the context of the book itself? Is the interpretation dependent on a correct assessment of the literary and theological function of the text within its present canonical context (chapters 40–55)?

The decision to choose the latter option does not in itself deny that several different authors can well be involved, or that redactional layering is often clearly present. In a word, a diachronic dimension is not ruled out, but its relation to the present, shaped text is subtle and indirect. Independently, it does not provide the key to interpretation, but functions within the literary context of the larger corpus. Especially is this true for chapter 53, which provides a continuation of a lengthy prophetic narrative extending from chapters 40–55 and climaxing in the sequence that follows in chapters 49ff. God intervenes to end the exile and to usher in his eschatological reign. This hermeneutical decision not

only separates the ensuing interpretation fundamentally from the radically atomistic interpretation of the heirs of Duhm, but equally from the utterly fanciful historical speculation of Watts (*Isaiah* 34–66, 222ff.) who, oddly enough, stands on the far right of the theological spectrum.

### 2. Scope, Structure, and Genre

There is wide agreement going back to the first century A.D. That the unit extends from 52:13 to 53:12, thus correcting the traditional chapter division (cf. de Leeuw, 181–182). Whybray's form-critical argument for contesting the consensus does not carry the weight that he attributes to it (163). The passage both begins and ends with reference to "my servant." The structure of the unit is also remarkably clear in dividing into three sections: 52:13–15, the first divine speech; 53:1–11a, the confession of the "we"; and 53:11b–12, the second divine speech. A major exegetical problem turns on assessing the coherence of the passage (cf. below). Especially difficult, but crucial to its interpretation, is the determining of the antecedents of the references in 52:15 and 53:12, as well as the understanding the voice of the confessing "we" in the middle section. Credit goes to D. J. A. Clines for having clearly pointed out the full complexity of the passage's opacity.

During the last half century much energy has been expended in analyzing the literary genres of the passage (e.g., Begrich, Westermann, Baltzer, Melugin, Whybray). A form akin to the individual psalm of thanksgiving or of lament has been suggested. Others see an analogy to the dirge or psalm of repentance. Whybray (127) makes the significant observation that in spite of psalmic parallels, there is the important difference from the common liturgical pattern in that the thanksgiving is not made by the suffering petitioner himself, but in the third person by another group. Recently a consensus is growing (Melugin, Beuken, etc.) that this passage is unique. Although traditional psalmic conventions lie in the background of the text, the structure is basically a new literary creation, differing in both form and content from the common oral patterns. Of course, this opinion has also contributed to the insistence (cf. above) that the unit be interpreted within its larger, narrative context.

During the 1940s, de Leeuw and North spent much time debating the theories of Engnell and other Scandinavians regarding an allegedly ancient Near Eastern mythological setting for the poem, largely on the basis of Ugaritic parallels. Since that time the theory has virtually collapsed from its own weight and from the highly tendentious translations of the extrabiblical material. Other less radical cultic contexts that have been suggested have also not been sustained. In sum, in spite of the ambiguities surrounding the passage, the present literary context provides the basic arena from which the passage must be analyzed and ultimately interpreted.

### 3. Exposition

[52:13–15] The oracle of God begins with an elevated presentation: “Behold, my servant . . .” The parallel is immediately evident with the servant song of 42:1 in which the servant is introduced with the mission to bring *mišpāt* (“justice”) to the nations. However, this intertextual reference to 42:1 has been decisively affected by the subsequent call in 49:1ff., which transferred the office of the servant from the nation Israel to the individual prophetic figure of 49:3: “And he said to me, ‘You are (now) my servant, you are Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” Then in 50:4ff., following the sequence of the prophetic narrative, the reception of his call as God’s servant is related as he is tortured and humiliated by his oppressors, who are not from outside, but from within the nation of Israel itself.

It is highly significant that the divine oracle in 52:13 begins, not with the servant’s humiliation, but with his exaltation, a theme that returns to climax the second divine speech concerning the servant in 53:1ff. His exaltation in 52:13, “[he] shall prosper, be exalted,” also forms the initial perspective from which the voice of the “we” speaks. This group confesses finally to have understood his true role in their salvation. To the sense of prospering there is also included in the Hebrew verb (*šqI*) the connotation of insight, wisdom, and true knowledge.

The divine word next describes the astonishment and confusion that the figure of the servant evokes. The broken style of the confession, which begins in the first colon of v. 14 and is completed in v. 15, has caused many commentators to reassign v. 14b to another position within the oracle (cf. *BHS*). Yet there is no textual evidence to support this reordering of the sentence, and the striking effect of the sudden shift to the servant’s humiliation—“so marred was his appearance, unlike that of man,” is lost by such an alteration. Such stylistic breaks are found elsewhere in the prophetic literature (e.g., Isa. 31:4; 55:10; Zech. 8:14, etc.). Verse 14b therefore anticipates the response of the confession “we,” but the note of disfigurement is first sounded in the divine oracle. The full force falls on the astonishment and shock of many of the nations, whose kings shut their mouths in confused silence.

The Hebrew verb in v. 15 (*yazzeh*) has as its primary meaning “to sprinkle,” but there are several reasons that have caused most commentators to prefer a broader, secondary sense of the root (cf. W. Gesenius, *Commentar über den Jesaja 2:174ff.*). First, the Greek reads “surprise,” which *BHS* conjectures—probably wrongly—to reflect a different Hebrew root from the MT. More likely, the issue is one of semantic range rather than a textual variant. Second, the verb *nzh* (hiphil) never designates the person or thing sprinkled, but the blood being applied. In English the sense is expressed in the archaic distinction between sprinkling a liquid, and besprinkling a person. Third, it is an exegeti-

cal misconstrual in seeking to heighten the cultic context of the passage that never actually surfaces to the foreground.

The difficult exegetical problem turns on determining the persons referred to in these verses. The “many” in v. 14 who were astonished join smoothly with the subject of v. 15a: “So will he startle many nations.” In the Psalter the reference to the “many” usually refers to the advisories or bystanders who observe the suffering petitioner (Ps. 3:1–2; 4:7; 31:14; etc; cf. Beuken, 202). Melugin (167) argues that the antecedent in v. 15b is a continuation of v. 15a, namely, the nations and kings: “what has not been told them [the nations] they will see and that which they have not heard they will understand.” Because v. 15 then joins closely to 53:1, the effect of this interpretation is naturally to assign the voice of the confessing “we” in chapter 53 to that of the nations. In my judgment, this interpretation carries with it major difficulty (cf. below).

Rather, as Beuken has convincingly shown (II/B, 203ff.), a different subject has been introduced in v. 15b. The issue at stake is not the astonishment evoked in the nations, but rather in their seeing and understanding. The key to this interpretation is found in the intertextual reference to 48:6ff. Israel is challenged to see and to hear the new things God is about to reveal. “Before today you have not heard of them” (v. 7). The people’s ear has been closed. Now suddenly in 52:15b, a group, different from the nations, is promised by God both to see and understand: “what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.” The reference is to a group within Israel to which has been revealed the “new things,” hitherto hidden. What then follows in 53:1ff. is the confession of that group, who suddenly is made to understand the will of God through their experience with his suffering servant.

[53:1–11a] The connection between the new unit and the preceding divine speech is skillfully made with a chiasmic device. The metaphor of seeing (52:15b and 53:1b) brackets that of hearing (v. 15b and 53:1a) and confirms the continuity between the group of Israel in v. 15b and the confessing voice of 53:1ff. In addition, from a form-critical perspective, the confessing “we” of the Old Testament is always Israel and not the nations (Hos. 6:1ff.; Jer. 3:21ff.; Dan. 9:4ff., etc.) Finally, reference to the nations and the “many” only returns in the second divine speech when they also are brought into the purpose of God for all his creation, which has been accomplished in the mission of the suffering servant (53:12).

[1] The confession of Israel begins in v. 1 with a question of which several interpretations are possible. Is its meaning: Who could possibly have believed what we have experienced? This rendering is unlikely because the issue at stake in the confession of Israel is not that of the astonishment reflected by the nations. Rather, from the outset, those within Israel who confess understand that their new knowledge came from divine revelation, that is, derived from the arm of Yahweh. The sense of the question is not simply rhetorical, but serves

to identify among them those who now also believe what they have seen and heard from God's disclosure. The note had already been sounded in 50:10-11 that the response to the servant would divide the people of Israel into two groups, those who believe and those who oppose.

[2-3] The actual narrative of the servant's humiliation begins in v. 2. The description is clearly retrospective in nature, and looks back on an experience in the past that continues to evoke painful reflection. The figure who is portrayed appears in every way to have been a historical personage. The language cannot be rendered metaphorically as the nation without straining the plain sense of the text in a tortuous fashion. The figure remains anonymous, and is identified throughout simply with the pronoun "he." However, the description is not merely biographical. Certainly it does contain some biographical elements. He grew up unobtrusively from nowhere, isolated, and without a known lineage. He possessed nothing in his physical appearance that would attract others or even evoke attention. Verse 3b speaks even of his being afflicted with sickness or disease. However, almost immediately one senses that the chief interest of the narrative is not biographical; rather, the concrete features that encompass the ensuing description focus largely on the response of others to him. He was despised and shunned by all and called forth such revulsion that people covered their faces to prevent seeing him. Increasingly the language takes on a flavor that transcends a simple historical description, and begins to resonate with the typical idiom of the innocent suffering one of the Psalter: "I am a worm, less than human, scorned and despised by the people. All who see me curl their lips and wag their heads" (22:6-7). "You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them" (Ps. 88:8).

In addition, there is another feature in the description that moves in a typifying direction. Especially in the trials of Jeremiah, one can see the prophetic office being described in a similar idiom as that of the Psalter, but also in a manner that does not abstract from given historical events in his own personal struggle to survive. "I sat alone, because your hand was upon me" (15:17). "I have become a laughingstock all day; everyone mocks me" (20:7). "Terror is on every side! Denounce him!" (20:10). Much like Jeremiah, the description of prophetic suffering depicts a calling, even an office, into which a servant of God has been summoned. However, the confession that then follows in chapter 53 begins to probe a new dimension of obedient suffering, unknown to Jeremiah or the other prophets.

[4-6] In v. 4 the narrative continues with a series of striking contrasts in which the Hebrew *'ākēn* ("surely") marks the beginning of a theme. "Surely it was our sickness he bore," yet "we regarded him as plagued." "He was wounded because of our sins," yet "we have all gone astray like sheep." Two additional notes are sounded in the sorrowful recital. First, the confessing community bears testimony to what it has seen and now understands (52:15). It was for "our sins" he was tortured; it was for "our iniquities" he was bruised. "The punishment that

brought us peace was on him" and "by his wounds we are healed." Second, it was God's will and purpose that the servant was dealt this affliction. Not only did God allow it (the passive voice softens the theological tension), but God is understood as the active agent of his suffering: He was "smitten by God and afflicted" (v. 4); "Yahweh laid on him the guilt of us all" (v. 6). What occurred was not some unfortunate tragedy of human history but actually formed the center of the divine plan for the redemption of his people and indeed of the world.

It is at this juncture in the interpretation of the chapter that the modern debate over the term "vicarious" suffering has set in. Some of the controversy turns on the various ways in which the term has been construed. Beuken (*Jesaja*, II/B, 214ff.) is rightly concerned that the term be used with great caution lest theological categories foreign to the witness of the Old Testament be uncritically applied. Clearly, Christian interpreters should be warned not to read in, say, Anselm's highly developed, scholastic theology of the atonement, but rather closely to follow the exact terminology of chapter 53.

However, once this caveat has been registered, it is equally as important to assess a variety of modern options that dispute the presence of vicariousness in the chapter altogether. For example, H. M. Orlinsky argues in a lengthy essay (51ff.) that the chapter only asserts that this person also suffered "on account of and along with the people at large, the latter because of their own sins, the former because of his unpopular mission." Orlinsky also contends that the concept of vicariousness conflicts fundamentally with the idea of covenant. This legal contract assured both the guiltless and the wicked their proper due, and was grounded completely in a basic concept of *quid pro quo*. I shall leave it to the reader to decide whether this interpretation does justice to chapter 53 and to the prophetic message in general.

Whybray (29ff.) addresses the question of the servant's allegedly vicarious suffering at great length. His study is philologically oriented and he attempts to show from parallel passages within the Old Testament how the concepts of sin, guilt, and punishment are treated. He picks up the argument of Orlinsky that the use of the preposition *min* in vv. 5 and 8 cannot be understood vicariously since this would have called for the preposition *bē* (*bet pretii*), meaning "in exchange for." Actually a *bet pretii* does occur in v. 5, as Zimmerli has pointed out (*Zur Vorgeschichte*, 215). However, Whybray is convinced of the "inherent improbability of such a notion in the Old Testament" (75). Accordingly, he summarizes his interpretation of chapter 53: "What the speakers in ch. 53 are saying is that the servant, who deserved no punishment, has, as a result of *their* sins, which had necessitated his dangerous and fateful prophetic ministry, received the largest share of it." In my judgment, this bland and even superficial understanding of the passage serves as a major indictment of his conclusions.

Finally, for P. Hanson the question around which the chapter turns is how the tragic pattern of sin and punishment can be broken within the context of a

higher morality. He recognizes the uniqueness of the message within the chapter in which “the mysterious ways of God in everyday human experience is recognized.” “God’s will is done where a human being finds the highest expression of human dignity in expressing solidarity with fellow human beings through a love that acknowledges no bounds because its source is God” (160). I leave it to the reader to assess whether this modern “politically correct” formulation does justice to the chapter’s understanding of the willing obedience of the suffering servant who bore “our sins” (cf. below).

[7–8] The narrative of the servant’s oppression continues, but the emphasis now falls on the willing submission of the innocent sufferer. The clause “he did not open his mouth” occurs twice in v. 7, and serves stylistically as a bracket around the similes “like a lamb being led to slaughter” and “like a sheep silent before her shearers.” Verse 8 next introduces an apparently forensic image that the NJPS translation effectively renders as a hendiadys, “by oppressive judgment he was taken away.” However, other commentators stress the element of restraint in the non *’ōšer* and interpret the phrase to mean “without hindrance or opposition” he was removed. The verb “taken away” (*lūqqāh*) is generally understood as a reference to his violent and sudden death, but the less likely idea of his being “released by death” has been occasionally suggested.

[8a] The sense of the next colon in v. 8a is even less clear and has evoked a variety of interpretations, as is evident from the different translations offered. The term *dōr* can express the time of a generation, or a circle of one’s contemporaries. On the basis of a Semitic cognate some commentators have suggested the meaning of “state” or “fate.” The other problem of the clause turns on its syntactical function. The more usual move is to regard the noun as the object: “Who thinks of his fate (or of his line)?” However, the noun can be rendered as the subject (GKC § 117, 1–m; cf. BDB, 85a, 3): “as for his generation, who considered” (RSV), or “regarding his contemporaries, who gave him a thought?” Westermann wisely concludes that the exact meaning is uncertain, but that “the general sense is perfectly clear—no one was concerned about him.”

[8b] Some commentators have argued that the description of the servant as “cut off from the land of the living” is to be taken metaphorically, and does not necessarily indicate his death. The point is made that in the Old Testament both life and death are seen as qualities of existence and that the line separating them is fluid. Consequently, it has been suggested that it is possible that the servant only risked death or was exiled, allegedly a fate worse than death. In my opinion, these are tortuous interpretations and run against the plain sense of the text. The implicit mention of his grave in v. 10 rules out these figurative options.

Unfortunately, the last colon in v. 8 is difficult to interpret because of textual problems. The MT appears to read “for the transgressions of my people the stroke for them” (or “due them”). The Greek reads, “he was stricken to death,” and this rendering provides the warrant for a critical emendation suggested by

BHS. Variations of the emendation are followed by many modern commentators. In addition, the form “my people” is often emended “for our transgressions” (cf. Westermann) in order to ease the problem of a first person singular pronoun. A less radical emendation has been suggested by the Qumran text (1QIs<sup>a</sup>), which reads, “his people” (*ammō*), and would be translated, “because of the transgressions of his people was there punishment for him.” In sum, it is unwise to be dogmatic on any one textual reading, but the general sense of the sentence is clear from the context as a whole.

[9] The main controversy regarding this verse turns on the interpretation of the “rich man.” (*’ašh*). The difficulty lies in the linking of the wicked with the rich in a burial site, which hardly offers a natural parallel within Israel. The usual emendation renders it, “with evil doers” (BHK), but BHS suggests “demons”; others seek to retain the MT and expand its semantic range to denote “rich through extortion.” The final line in v. 9, by means of a concessive clause, emphasizes that he was killed even though he had done nothing either violent or deceitful. This juxtaposition continues the typing of the servant as the righteous and innocent sufferer of the Psalter.

[10] The next verse returns to the theme that it was the will of God to crush or injure him (cf. vv. 4, 6). The verb that follows in the MT (*hlh*) conveys the sense of “make sick” or “render weak,” and forms with its parallels a continuing lament of the suffering innocent of the Psalter (Pss. 35:13; 41:4; 77:16). Nevertheless, it is a mistake to seek to specify the sickness too precisely, as if leprosy (Duhm) were intended. Much like the idiom of the Psalter, physical and spiritual suffering are combined without carefully defined boundaries and so probe into its multifaceted aspects.

The second colon in v. 10 is again difficult and controversial: “when/if his life serves as compensation for guilt.” (*’āšām*). The initial problem is textual and a variety of emendations have been suggested. Both Begg and BHS emend to read, “he healed him who made his life a guilt offering.” Undoubtedly this alteration presents a far clearer meaning, but one should be cautious in making such an intrusive move through emendation, which too easily resolves the hard exegetical problem. Actually there is not explicit mention of healing of the servant up to this point, and the difference between “afflict him with sickness” or “healed him” is hardly inconsequential.

However, the really difficult exegetical problem turns on the interpretation of the term *’āšām* (“guilt offering”). The first problem lies in determining the exegetical range of the term. It occurs most frequently in ritual prescriptions of the books of Leviticus and Numbers, in the so-called Priestly source within the Pentateuch (Lev. 5:6–25; 6:10; 7:1–2, 5–7, 37; 14:12ff.; 19:21–22; Num. 6:12; 18:9), but also is found in the book of Ezekiel (40:39; 42:13; 44:29; 46:20). Particularly in Leviticus 5 the nature of the misdeed is described and the procedure for atonement by means of a guilt offering is stipulated.

Traditionally some commentators (e.g., Alexander, Delitzsch) held that the same cultic concept of Numbers could be transferred directly to the Isaianic passage. It seemed to provide a further support for seeing the servant's sacrifice as both vicarious and priestly. However, right from the outset there were difficulties with this interpretation. The analogy between a slain animal and the suffering servant is far from obvious, and the ritual of sprinkling blood on the altar is without parallel. Moreover, there is no contextual preparation in chapter 53 to alert the reader to a cultic interpretation. Indeed, the lack of a cultic context in the chapter is apparent. For such reasons, commentators such as Duhm and Marti have eliminated the term as reflecting an incoherent textual error. But the problem cannot be so easily resolved in this manner.

Certainly the most learned of the modern discussions of the problem is represented in a recent article by B. Janowski. He first makes the important observation that the concept of *'āšām* did not originally stem from the cult (cf. Gen. 26:10; 1 Sam. 6:3–4, 8, 17), but rather from a secular situation in which compensation for a misdeed was demanded. Thus Israel, who is unable to make restitution, must in some way be freed from its debt. The forgiveness comes from the suffering, innocent servant who gave his life according to the plan of God to release the guilt of his people. The servant did not ritually obliterate the sin—there is no parallel to the scapegoat—rather the terminology is that he “bore” or “carried it” (*ns'*, *sbl*). This is the sense of the servant's vicarious role in carrying the sins of the nation (“our sins”). There is nothing automatic or intrinsic in the servant's act that would result in forgiveness. To this extent, Orlinsky is correct in asserting, “Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible did anyone preach a doctrine . . . which allowed the sacrifice of the innocent in the place of and as an acceptable substitution for the guilty” (55).

Yet the point of the Isaianic text is that God himself took the initiative in accepting the servant's life as the means of Israel's forgiveness. In the first divine speech (52:13), the “success” of the servant is promised because of what God had done. This promise was hidden, never before told (v. 15), but Israel finally understood it as a revelation from “the arm of the LORD.” The role of the servant resulted in Israel's forgiveness because of God's acceptance of the servant's obedient suffering. Israel not only recognized the freedom that the servant had won for it, but in the experience of encountering the hidden plan of God, was itself transformed into the new Israel, which shared in the coming redemptive age. Already the scene for Israel's restoration was set as God designated the servant as the embodiment of Israel (49:3), through whom God would be glorified and the nation would be gathered again to him. When seen in the light of the unfolding drama of God's plan to redeem Israel in chapters 40–55, the vicarious role of the servant lies at the very heart of the prophetic message and its removal can only result in losing the exegetical key that unlocks the awesome mystery of these chapters.

The confession of the redeemed community concludes with the recognition of the servant's exaltation, first announced in 52:13: “Behold, my servant will prosper, be exalted, lifted up, and raised to great heights.” The problem of determining just what is meant in the sharp turn from humiliation, suffering, and death to the servant's exaltation has continued to evoke much disagreement. Traditionally, it was a Christian reflex to see here an indication of the servant's resurrection. The historical critics of the nineteenth century were quick to point out that there is no explicit mention of resurrection in the text. In addition, it was judged highly unlikely that the concept of individual resurrection played any role in Israel until the late Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, the text clearly speaks of a reversal of fortune. The servant will see his offspring (this term will play a major role in chapters 56–66) and have long life.

[11–12] Verse 11 continues the promise: “From the agony of his soul he will see, and he shall be satisfied.” The LXX adds an object, “see *light*,” but this clarifying addition appears secondary within a difficult text. The next phrase presents further problems for which there is no clear consensus. *BHK* joins “his knowledge” (*da'tō*) to the following verb, “make righteous,” which syntactical division follows the Masoretic accentuation system. (The *zāqēp* is a stronger disjunctive than that *r'ēbā'*.) Conversely, *BHS* joins the noun to the preceding verb, which also makes excellent sense. Added to the problem is determining the exact sense of *da'tō*. Following the lead of D. W. Thomas, some have opted for positing a homonym for the root *yd'* and interpreting its meaning as “humiliation.” In my opinion, the option of *BHS* is preferable and the ordinary sense of the word as “knowledge” is to be retained. I do not find it an abrupt intrusion, but a summary of the servant's experience that has just been described.

In sum, nothing is gained by offering a figurative or allegorical interpretation to explain the servant's exaltation. The prophetic text is silent on how the transformation will be accomplished. Fortunately, the second divine speech (vv. 11b–12) returns to the subject of the servant's future exaltation, which had been sounded first in 52:13–15 and which offers a divine perspective on the mystery of the servant's “afterlife.”

The scope of the second divine oracle is established by the introduction of the first person form of address. The explicit reference to “my servant” provides a coherent closure to the entire passage. Again, in v. 11b the syntax of the sentence is unclear. The present position of the substantive prevents it from being rendered as a simple attributive, “my righteous servant,” but rather as “the righteous one, my servant.” Although the verb (*šdq*, hiphil) can be translated in several different ways, the two senses of declarative and causative seem to flow together from the force of the larger context: He shall “make many to be accounted righteous.”

The reference to the “many” thus returns to the theme of the first divine oracle. However, now the effect of the servant on the many is not just of astonishment or confusion. Rather, through him will the many be accounted righteous

because he also bears their sins through the mercy of God. Verse 12 summarizes the divine promise to the servant starting with his exaltation, which is then once again grounded in his suffering and death for the many. He will receive the divine blessing—“a position among the many”—with whom he now shares a future.

#### 4. Theological Reflections on Isaiah 53 within a Canonical Context

The format of a commentary does not lend itself to extended analysis either of the relation of an Old Testament text to the New Testament, or to questions involving larger biblical theological issues. The need to restrict one's focus is especially acute when attempting to interpret the entire Isaianic corpus lest the commentary grow to an inordinate size. Nevertheless, it seems necessary occasionally to make an exception when handling certain selected texts that have played an unusually important role in the history of interpretation. Such a treatment must be brief, and its goal simply to stimulate further thought, rather than to be in any sense exhaustive. I would like therefore to address two separate topics relating to the servant of Isaiah 53: first, the relation of Isaiah 53 to the New Testament; second, the role of the “suffering servant” in Christian theology.

##### a. The Relation of Isaiah 53 to the New Testament

In the modern critical study of this question, two very different interpretations have emerged, which have been locked in an impasse for well over half a century.

On the one hand, the position has been defended by conservative biblical scholars that Jesus himself consciously shaped his ministry according to the servant figure in Isaiah 53, with whose mission he identified. When the early church continued to expand this relationship theologically, it did so on the basis of Jesus' own self-understanding of himself as the suffering servant. This position has sought to demonstrate historically that the concept of the servant's vicarious sacrifice was already present in pre-Christian Judaism. The leading defense of this position is found in the writings of J. Jeremias, H. W. Wolff, P. Stuhlmacher, M. Hengel, among others.

On the other hand, liberal scholars have sharply disputed this traditional interpretation. They have pointed out how seldom are there explicit references to Isaiah 53 found in the Synoptics, and when possible allusions occur they are vague and related to a general Old Testament milieu rather than a specific text. Many argue that the concept of a suffering servant was, at best, late within Hellenistic Christianity and in no way related to the historical Jesus' own self-understanding. A defense of this position is found in the writings of R. Bultmann, E. Käsemann, and M. Hooker, among others.

At the outset, it is important to observe a word of caution that is crucial to the formulation of the question. The concept of an individual figure of a suf-

fering servant, distinct from the larger concept of servant in Second Isaiah, is a thoroughly modern concept, first clearly formulated by Duhm. It is highly misleading and anachronistic to project this reconstructed figure back into the New Testament period.

In addition, there are other basic hermeneutical issues at stake. Both sides in the debate have sought to establish that the concept of a suffering servant can or cannot be attributed to the self-understanding of Jesus. Both sides argue pro and con about the “mind of Jesus” on the issue. Moreover, both sides distinguish between Jesus' own self-understanding and that voiced by the various witnesses of scripture. Both therefore seek to ground their positions on a historical-critical reconstruction of the history of tradition. In the end, one side sees the historical force of Isaiah 53 moving in the direction from the Old Testament toward the New Testament. The other reverses the direction of influence, seeing the New Testament's understanding as primary and only secondarily being retrojected back into the Old Testament.

In my judgment, these antagonistic positions can be seriously faulted from a hermeneutical perspective. First, both have failed adequately to distinguish between the New Testament's kerygmatic witness to Jesus Christ as found in the Gospels and that of a historical-critical reconstruction, regardless of whether executed with conservative or liberal historical assumptions. Theologically speaking, it is a false dichotomy that plays “the mind of Jesus” over against scriptural witness. To confuse allegedly neutral historical reconstruction with kerygmatic witness results in a fundamental confusion of hermeneutical categories.

Second, to attempt to determine historically the direction from which Isaiah 53 exerted a shaping influence is to fail to understand the dynamic within the development of canonical literature. The Old Testament clearly exerted a decisive force in shaping the New Testament, but conversely, the latter appropriated the former by a radical reinterpretation of its meaning in the light of Jesus Christ.

Often it is virtually impossible in a given text to determine the initial force of coercion because of the continuing mutual impact in the search for theological understanding. Even a cursory analysis, say, of John 12:37ff. shows how much the New Testament's understanding of Jesus has been shaped by that of Isaiah, while, conversely, how much of the prophetic text of the Old Testament has been reinterpreted from the perspective of the gospel. In addition, the Old Testament functioned as a coherent whole in shaping the Christology of the New Testament, and its influence cannot be restricted to single verses or to exact linguistic parallels (*contra* Hooker).

This caveat against the use of historical-critical reconstruction as an avenue to the New Testament's kerygmatic witness is not to be misunderstood as a denial of any role for a diachronic dimension in biblical interpretation. The issue rather turns on the confusion of categories that misunderstands the

distinction between treating the text as an objective source of information or as a kerygmatic testimony to a divine reality. Within the New Testament's witness there are clear signs of growth and development. The use of Isaiah 53 appears in some early levels of New Testament tradition and therefore is not confined to a late Hellenistic elaboration. Yet there are periods when the servant theology plays very little, if any, role before once again emerging as a major theme within the early church (1 Peter 2:18ff.). The tracing of growth and development within the kerygmatic witness greatly aids in determining its theological function within the whole Christian Bible. Nevertheless, the major hermeneutical point to be made is that the authority of the biblical witness is not determined by its being anchored in "the mind of Jesus." Rather, the true exegetical task is to understand its theological role as the witness of scripture within the entire Christian canon.

### *b. The Suffering Servant and Christian Theology*

During most of the history of the Christian church's interpretation of Isaiah, it was assumed that the suffering servant theme of chapter 53 was a messianic prophecy predicting the future passion of Jesus Christ. This tradition is still represented in the Isaiah commentary of E. J. Young (1972): "we may say with assurance that there is only One of whom these words may be spoken, namely, Jesus the Christ" (3:348).

However, with the rise of the modern historical-critical approach to the Old Testament the position that gained the widest acceptance was that the description of the suffering servant, regardless of a continuing debate over details, was a figure closely tied to the historical experience of Israel in the Babylonian exile. My commentary has also defended the position that both the servant's response to his prophetic call (49:1-6) and the confession of a repentant community respecting the servant (53:1-11a) reflect actual events within the life of historical Israel. In sum, Isa. 53:2ff. cannot be interpreted either as simply a future prophecy or as a timeless metaphor of the suffering nation of Israel.

As a consequence of this historical mooring of the servant in the sixth century as an anonymous figure, many commentators have recently assigned very limited theological importance to chapter 53 (cf. Whybray). Its chief significance is seen to lie in its *Wirkungsgeschichte* (afterlife), when the Christian church chose to use the passage as a vehicle for developing its later christological theology by means of an imaginative construal without warrant from the Old Testament witness itself.

In contrast to this critical position, I have argued in my exegesis that the canonical shape of the book of Isaiah shows a suffering servant figure who was not simply viewed as a figure of the past, but assigned a central and continuing theological role in relation to the life of the redeemed community of Israel. Thus, there was a coercion exerted by the biblical text itself, as authoritative

scripture, that exercised pressure on the early church in its struggle to understand the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

The theological category used for its interpretation was not primarily that of prophecy and fulfillment. Rather, an analogy was drawn between the redemptive activity of the Isaianic servant and the passion and death of Jesus Christ. The relation was understood "ontologically," that is to say, in terms of its substance, its theological reality. To use classic Christian theological terminology, the distinction is between the "economic" Trinity, God's revelation in the continuum of Israel's history, and the "immanent" Trinity, the ontological manifestation of the triune deity in its eternity. Thus, for example, the epistles of Ephesians and Colossians argue that the creation of the universe cannot be understood apart from the active participation of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:15ff.). Or again, the book of Revelation speaks of "the lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (13:8). In a word, in the suffering and death of the servant of Second Isaiah, the self-same divine reality of Jesus Christ was made manifest. The meaning of the Old Testament servant was thus understood theologically in terms of the one divine reality disclosed in Jesus Christ. The morphological fit between Isaiah 53 and the passion of Jesus continues to bear testimony to the common subject matter within the one divine economy. Of course, in a broad sense, Isaiah 53 does continue to function as prophecy since the chapter is bracketed within the eschatological framework of an unfolding divine economy.

To summarize, the servant of Isaiah is linked dogmatically to Jesus Christ primarily in terms of its ontology, that is, its substance, and is not simply a future promise of the Old Testament awaiting its New Testament fulfillment. It is significant to observe that in Acts 8, when the eunuch asked about the identity of the Isaianic servant, Philip did not simply identify him with Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, beginning with the scriptures, "he preached to him the good news of Jesus." The suffering servant retains its theological significance within the Christian canon because it is inextricably linked in substance with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is and always has been the ground of God's salvation of Israel and the world.