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THE ISAIAH SERVANT SONGS

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Introductory Remarks

As further demonstration of the revelations given by Melchizedek through the prophets of Israel I shall now go on to consider another important segment of prophecy. This illustration will use a series of prophecies in the Book of Isaiah called the SERVANT SONGS. Those prophecies have seen a multitude of interpretations since ancient times; again, Jesus' apostles understood them as predictions of Jesus. Christianity took this lead and continued to recognize them as Messiah prophecies. Many Bibles are still published with boldface stars after individual verses showing them as predictions of Jesus. An example is found in Matthew 12:17-21 quoting Isaiah 42:1-4.

Bernhard Duhm, a German scholar, was the first person to propose that these prophecies formed a separate but inclusive group from the rest of the Isaiah text (1892). He isolated four segments found in 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13 - 53:12. John McKenzie, at the University of Notre Dame, wrote the volume for the Doubleday Anchor Bible series called Second Isaiah, Volume 20, 1968. He has a chapter in his Introduction he calls The Servant Songs. He remarks:

It is accepted by almost all modern critics that the Servant Songs form a literary unit by themselves; but apart from this, there is no consensus about their origin and interpretation, and scarcely any passage of the Old Testament is so widely and so divergently discussed as the Servant Songs. The major problems can be thus listed: Are the Songs the work of Second Isaiah? What is their relation to the context and to each other? Who is the Servant? What is the relation of the Servant in the Songs to other "servants" mentioned in Second Isaiah? What is the mission of the Servant? In each of the Songs a figure called the Servant of Yahweh appears, although the word is not used in the third Song. . . . As a title which designates a peculiar relationship and not merely a polite form of self-deprecation, it designates one who has a peculiar commission from Yahweh. . . . It would be extremely difficult to find another four scattered passages which, when put together, would exhibit such a close community of topic and tone as the Servant Songs. . . . The question of the mission of the Servant cannot be discussed apart from the question of his identity.

McKenzie goes on to discuss various interpretations. He lists The Servant as a Historical Person of the Past, The Servant as a Historical Figure of the Future, and The Servant as an Ideal Figure. Another proposal is a group interpretation, such as the body of Israel. This idea was used by the translators of the Septuagint, but the idea raises serious difficulties. As McKenzie stated, while this notion might be applied to the first Song, ". . . the second Song, in spite of textual problems rather clearly makes the Servant an agent of the restoration of Israel. The third Song, which presents the Servant as a prophet and a teacher, becomes forced if Israel is the Servant." McKenzie continues that neither can an interpretation see the Servant as the writer of the text. "The mission of the Servant is not the mission of Second Isaiah as we can formulate it from his discussions. . . . He is the least autobiographical of the prophets. . . . It seems unlikely that a prophet who elsewhere hides himself so completely behind his message should in these Songs have become so intensely personal."

I briefly mention these remarks to show how academic debate has centered on the Servant Songs, and the strong theological interest they generate. It is not my purpose to enter into the academic controversy over them. I shall discuss each in turn from their practical usefulness, and consider how they affect our decisions today. My previous discussion of the Servant in the Dead Sea Scrolls casts important light on the identity of the Servant in the Isaiah Songs.

THE FIRST SERVANT SONG

Isaiah 42:1-4

Behold my Servant, whom I hold fast; my chosen, in whom my heart delights.

I set my spirit upon him, he will declare the judgment to the nations.

He will not cry out nor raise his voice; he will not shout in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

Faithfully he will declare the judgment.

He will not faint and he will not be crushed, until he has set the judgment on the earth.

And the coastlands wait for his instruction.

The translations offer notorious difficulties. All translators of historical times, including Jesus' personal apostles, were influenced by their notions of the supposed meaning of the Song. From differences in phrasing, such as "in whom my soul delights" compared against "with whom I am well pleased" to "the isles wait for his law" compared with "the coastlands wait for his instruction" we find major differences in perception.

I examined all Hebrew words and compared them against the translations to arrive at a clear view of the passage in destiny context. I tried to remain as faithful as possible to the original Hebrew. My version is not a formulation fixed by secular views, nor evolutionary traditions. The interested reader may consult RSV, KJV, the Septuagint, McKenzie, The Interpreters Bible, and other sources.

- 1. The word Behold! is used by God to draw attention to the Servant. We should carefully consider him and his message.
2. He is God's Servant. God has decided upon him. He is not in service to any human institution, nor to religious traditions, nor to theological views. His loyalty is exclusively with God. He has a unique commission from God which he will prosecute. God has chosen him specially for this task.
3. God held this Servant fast. He secured him in the face of mankind, and in life vicissitudes. The Hebrew word means to sustain and support. The Servant was under dedicated watchcare. We might even see the word as designating a special relationship of life to achieve God's ends. This does not mean a violation of the free will of the Servant but rather watchcare guided by the desires and loyalties of the Servant toward God. It is a reciprocal relationship.

Note the parallel with the Dead Sea Scroll Psalms of Thanksgiving. "Thou hast sheltered me, Oh my God, in the face of all mankind. . . ."

4. God is delighted with this Servant because he so faithfully recognizes the nature of the task that must be accomplished. His temperament and mind are well attuned to God's purpose. I have rejected use of the word "soul"; we cannot expect God to have a soul born of evolutionary spiritual growth in the manner of men. "Heart," although reflecting human attributes, may accurately describe a God who once lived as a man and who retains the feelings and sensibilities of mortal kind. Certainly, we should not deny that God has a merciful heart.

5. God placed his spirit upon this Servant. The Hebrew word denotes imposition, a purposeful placement. The temperament and mind of the Servant responded to that spirit influence; this response cements a bond between God and the Servant. The placement of God's spirit upon historic persons is well illustrated in the Old Testament. Moses was thus brought into a special relationship with God. The early Israelite "judges" received this spirit. The prophets did also. Examples may be found in Num. 11:25, Judg. 3:10, and 1 Sam. 19:23. This Servant is one in a long line of human mortals upon whom God places his spirit.

6. This Servant will declare the judgment to the nations. I have chosen this word because it more accurately captures the task of the Servant. The Hebrew word means "to spread abroad," "to draw out." Most versions use the phrase "bring forth" but this is a false view of the mission of the Servant. As a human mortal he has no power to bring forth the judgment; such power is exclusively in the hands of God. He can merely announce it, or publish it but, again, announcement does not capture the full implications of the word. A measure of explanation is implied. An element of God's pleasure with the Servant is his ability to explain the judgment.

7. Judgment is an accurate description of the actions brought by God. The word means a decision, a sentence, as pronounced by a Judge. Many versions use the word "justice," but such translation is not faithful to the meaning of the Hebrew word. A task of justice is not the mission of the Servant. The Servant merely teaches the judgment; he is not an instrument of prosecution. McKenzie notes that "The context of this poem and the other Servant poems does not suggest that the Servant will exercise a judicial function toward the nations."

8. The scene is planetary. The Hebrew word "goim" means all people, the nations. Older translations use "Gentiles" but this implies a sectarian discrimination between Jews and the rest of the world. The judgment is upon the entire world, upon the nations, including Jews, and not merely the Gentiles. The scene dates the appearance of the Servant. He will appear at a time when the judgment must be declared to the nations.
9. The Servant does not cry out in the streets, nor raise his voice. This does not mean he will engage solely in quiet personal conversations. His declaration of the judgment can be accomplished through modern communication techniques.

11. The bruised reed and the dimly burning wick denote all those troubled and meek souls who search for God in the midst of a turbulent planetary era. The Servant will not conduct himself so forcefully that he would turn those people away from God. He does not impose his words upon his listeners, nor use psychological coercion, nor threats. Rather he may offer encouragement to them in these great epochal decisions.
12. Nevertheless, he will be faithful to the pronouncement of the judgment. The word means truth, fidelity to the assignment, and faithfulness to the task. This caused the KJV translators to render the phrase as ". . . he shall bring forth judgment unto truth." Again this is an illustration of how former translators attempted to assign the prophecy to Jesus.

The word judgment is identical in all three uses in these four verses.

13. The Servant will not faint and he will not be crushed until he has accomplished his task. God secures the Servant in the face of all mankind, and in the face of attempts to destroy the Servant, until his purpose is complete. The message will not be accepted kindly by those who place their hope in secular solutions, nor by the spiritists who engage in bloodbath sacrifice of God's people.
14. The word "set" carries more than the simple idea conveyed by a single word. It means to put straight, to place upright, to set firmly and correctly. The pronouncements of the Servant will not water down the judgment to please the useless hopes of his fellow man. He will be loyal to the purpose of the judgment.

Again, translations use the word "establish" as though the Servant carried celestial power. Again, this is an attempt to see power in the Servant that creates a new world era, an assignment that would fit Jesus. But the Servant cannot establish anything; he can only carry a message. Without decision-action from his fellow mortals his work would be without avail.
15. "Coastlands" comes from a word that means places far away from the land of Israel. It is usually understood as the rest of the world, the continents, the geographical location of the nations.

The implication is that the Servant will not be in the land of Israel when he makes his pronouncements; he will live and function in the coastlands. He speaks to all the nations from there.
16. The Hebrew word rendered "law" by many translations is "torah." It means teaching and was applied to the divine instructions given to Moses and the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus. Those instructions then became the law of the Hebrew people, and the Laws of Moses. From that traditional view the word came to denote the general sense of law. But that is not its original meaning, nor is it used here as law. Again, the Servant does not have the power to pronounce God's laws. He has an assignment to provide instruction and teaching on God's judgments.

17. On the other hand judgment denotes a function of divine law. Judgment, law, and teaching together convey revelation. The activities of the Servant bring great revelation. As stated by McKenzie, "If the mission of the Servant in this poem is to be summed up in one word, the word would be prophecy." The activities of the Servant bring prophetic revelation.

We can recognize how the mission of the Servant is the same as that of the Teacher in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both function at a time of planetary judgment. Both serve in a role of teacher. Both are held secure in the face of all mankind. And both have a special relationship with God. These identities cause us to believe they refer to the same personality. It does not seem reasonable that two different individuals would appear with such similar attributes and functions. The material of the Dead Sea Scroll offers a personal communication to the Teacher. The prophecies of Isaiah serve as communication to all mankind.

Again, it is useful to note how the Isaiah Servant Songs serve as vehicles of communication between God and the Servant. Again, this is a form of communication that could not be achieved through other techniques. This parallel further reinforces the proposition that the Servant is the same in both cases. He unfolds the revelation in logical presentations that appeal to the heart of God's people. His message is through appeal, not through charismatic power. Once again we see a parallel between the Scrolls and the Servant Songs. A dimly burning wick he will not extinguish and a bruised reed he will not break.

A response to the poem follows in verses 5 through 9.

Isa 42:5-9

Thus says God, Yahweh, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am Yahweh, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am Yahweh, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."

Yahweh will call the Servant in righteousness. He speaks directly to the Servant. He will take the Servant by the hand and hold him close. He will form and mold the Servant to his needs and to his purpose. He will make the Servant a symbol and a tool for a new covenant between man and God. He will make the Servant a light to the nations. He will open the eyes of the many that were closed to God's greater truth. The Servant will bring release from millennia of blind tradition and servitude to human theologies. His work will bring release from those dungeons of darkness.

These verses make more explicit the universal scope of the mission of the Servant. Now God's people will come to understand the name Yahweh, not in blind superstition, but in creative power. He is a personal God to all the inhabitants of this planet. Prophecy was fulfilled; predictions came to pass. Now Yahweh is announcing new things; before they come he shows them to the Servant that the Servant may declare them to the world. A new, and beautiful world is opening to us--if we have the faith, courage, and devotion to help God accomplish his goals.

(Such application of this prophecy to Jesus is founded to a major extent on the fact that this Servant will bring his brothers and sisters out of their dungeons of darkness; he will be a light to the nations. Such supreme enterprise is usually thought to be of such cosmic magnitude that only God could perform such feat. This phrase is found in I Enoch 48:4, where it is used to describe an attribute of the Son of Man, definitely Jesus. However, the use of a human Servant to accomplish such feat is within the power of God, according to his wishes. Our God need not personally execute such great service.)

THE SECOND SERVANT SONG

Isaiah 49:1-6

Listen to me, O coastlands; and hearken, you people from afar.

Yahweh has called me from birth; from the womb of my mother he named my name.

He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me.

He made me a polished arrow; he concealed me in his quiver.

And he said to me, "You are my Servant, Israel, through you I will win glory."

But I said, "I have toiled to no purpose; I have spent my strength for nothing, all in vain.

Yet surely my right is with Yahweh, and my recompense is with my God.

"And now," says Yahweh, who formed me from the womb to be his Servant,

To bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel should be gathered to him,

"It is too light a thing for you to be my Servant, to rouse up the tribes of Jacob,

"And to restore the preserved of Israel.

"I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

This Song serves as a companion piece to the first Song. The phrase, "a light to the nations," is used in both Songs. The Servant here is addressing himself to the coastlands. In the first Song the coastlands were waiting for his teaching; now he is asking them to listen. He brings their attention to several facts.

- 1. Yahweh called him from birth; when he was born Yahweh knew that he would be a servant. God had a hand in naming his name.
The concept of a human mortal who serves as a voice for God is here more explicitly portrayed. As McKenzie stated, "my servant" is
. . . a common phrase to indicate a vocation to a mission. The mission of the Servant is to be accomplished by speech, but his word is the prophetic word; it is the word of Yahweh, accomplishing what it utters. The prophet piles up phrases to indicate that the relation of Yahweh to his Servant is altogether unlike any other relationship of Yahweh to men, even unlike the relation of Yahweh to Israel.

2. The idea of the mouth of the Servant being a sharp sword does not mean a lashing tongue. Such characterization would violate the quiet tone and reasoned approach taken by the Servant, someone who is concerned about the weak and the faint of the earth. Rather, it means an incisiveness in presentation, a turning of an argument toward truth. The Servant has been trained to sharp reasoning. The Servant draws the attention of his audience to this fact.
3. The Servant declares how God hid him in the shadow of his hand. Again, there is a clear parallel with the Dead Sea Scrolls. He kept him, lo, those many years in the face of all mankind.
4. God kept the Servant in his quiver; he held him fast until a time of delivery. Now God releases him like a polished arrow, in one swift flight across the stage of world destiny.

5. The Servant then muses on his condition. He recognizes how God called him. God asked him to be of service. God even indicated how he would win glory through the Servant. The Servant believed this and toiled many years, spending his strength, but seemingly in vain.
6. The Servant knows that God recognizes his struggles. He admits that his vindication is with God, and that his reward for the toil is with his Creator.
7. The Servant further knows that in spite of the long period of quiet he shall be honored in the eyes of his God; God is his strength.

8. Next comes a statement from God, directed to the Servant. He should not be discouraged. Being a Servant is too light a thing. Even the restoration of Jacob and the people of Israel is not equal to the grandeur God will display. He will make this Servant a light to the nations, that God's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

These statements provide an example of how a human mortal may serve as a "material complement" to a divine being. God accomplishes his salvation of the earth through the labor of the Servant. Note the elements of this salvation:

- a. It is predicated on a work that is implemented through human effort, not through miraculous demonstration. Angels or other celestial beings do not visibly interfere. Divine intervention in the affairs of earth is not open to human sight.
b. Thus it is a work of faith, of belief by brothers and sisters in the soundness of the revelation.
c. It is further dependent upon crises decisions, upon actions that achieve a supreme goal. Without those decisions and consequent actions by human mortals, based on faith, the salvation of the earth would not be achieved.

d. This is not salvation in the Christian sense of the term, merely of soul rescue. It is a salvation that accomplishes the goal of cleansing the earth, and of fostering and conserving higher spiritual types for the future regeneration of the planet.

The Urantia Papers, pages 1207 -- For many thousands of years, so the records of Jerusalem show, in each generation there have lived fewer and fewer beings who could function safely with self-acting Adjusters. This is an alarming picture, and the supervising personalities of Satania look with favor upon the proposals of some of your more immediate planetary supervisors who advocate the inauguration of measures designed to foster and conserve the higher spiritual types of the Urantia races.

e. Through this mechanism of teaching, of exhortation to decision, and of imploration to action, the Servant achieves this goal for God. Thus, the generations will recognize his role in the salvation of the earth. Through the physical salvation of God's people, and through removal of the blindness that afflicted the generations, this servant becomes a light to the nations.

f. This supreme accomplishment then becomes a demonstration to a universe, and all the nations of creation. Never, in all the history of the universe, has a work unfolded upon a planet that depended so completely on consummate faith, strictly by human mortals, in the face of world unbelief, and out of heart-felt conviction of the truth of revelation.

From this review we begin to recognize the true depth of revelation. Now we can begin to understand how human mortals may be entrusted with "cosmic undertakings where unquestioned faith and sublime confidence are essential to achievement." We can also achieve insight into how a human mortal may become a "material complement" to a high spirit being. This decision process for the salvation of our world, brought about through the faith and action of the human Servant, is truly a cosmic undertaking.

The statements in this second Servant Song again find parallels with the Dead Sea Psalms. There the Servant says that God sheltered him, in the face of all mankind. God hid his teaching within the Servant until it was shown to him that the hour of God's triumph has come. Here he states that God hid him in the shadow of his hand; God concealed him in his quiver. There was a timeliness to revelation; had it been shown prematurely it could have upset the delicate balance of destiny.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls "the fount of understanding was hidden and the secret of truth . . ." Here the Servant complains that he toiled for nothing, all in vain.

In the Scrolls the Servant says, "Or ever my father begat me, Thou didst know me . . ." Here Yahweh called him from birth, from the womb of his mother.

(The word "Israel" is a seeming gloss in the text that upsets the rhythm of the poem. All ancient manuscripts attest to this, including the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll. It may imply the Servant as a symbol of the people of Israel, but this supposition does not seem sufficient to justify the word. Very likely, it is an imposition upon the text by a later Jewish editor.)

A response to the second poem then follows:

Yahweh is the Redeemer of Israel, the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the Holy One of Israel. He is the one who has chosen the Servant. Yahweh says to him:

Isaiah 49:8-13

At the time of my favor I will answer you; in a day of my salvation I will help you. I have kept you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, to rouse up the earth, to cause to inherit the forgotten heritages. Saying to the prisoners, 'Come forth,' and to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.' They shall feed along the way; on all the bare heights shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them. For he that has pity on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far: and lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinai. Sing, for joy, O heavens; and exalt, O earth! Break forth O mountains into singing. For Yahweh has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.

Now kings will understand. Now Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, the despised of the nations, will demonstrate his power and his glory. Now the Servant will come to understand why God has chosen him. The statements are a reassurance to the Servant. When the proper time has come God will answer the Servant. In the day of God's victory he will bring the Servant forth from his quiver. He has kept the Servant against a time of revelation. God has given the Servant as a tool of accomplishment for a new covenant with his people.

In the last phrases of verse eight the translations are especially difficult. Again, holding to a view that the Servant serves in a judicial sense, the versions say the Servant will "establish the land." The Hebrew phrase is more properly captured if it is translated as "rouse up the earth." The Servant will stir up decisions and actions.

The same judicial sense is attempted in the phrase "distribute ravaged properties" (McKenzie), or "apportion the desolate heritages" (RSV), or "inherit the desolate heritages" (KJV). All these are based on the view that the "ravaged properties" or "desolate heritages" are material dominion in land or country. None of the translations capture the concept of spiritual heritage. The phrase can just as easily be translated as "to inherit the ruined heritage."

The heritage is the ancient covenant between God and man, the covenant created by Melchizedek at the time of Abraham. The Servant is forging a new commitment to God, a human reaffirmation of that ancient covenant. In this manner God is giving the Servant as a covenant to his people. He will use the Servant to restore Israel, not as a geographical nation, but as a body of people who return to proper knowledge of their God, and to more devout dedication to the will of God, to reaffirmation of the ancient covenant--the forgotten heritage.

A major component to that forgotten heritage is a program of biological rehabilitation and uplift. This was the significance of the covenant with Abraham. But his descendants forgot their descent. This is the physical meaning of the restoration of Israel accomplished through the Servant.

God will bring forth his people. He will rescue them in a time of great affliction. He will lead them along the heights of the mountains. They shall neither hunger nor thirst. Violent windstorms and scorching sun will no longer afflict them. God will lead them by the springs of water. And they shall return, singing for joy, at the greatness of their God.

THE THIRD SERVANT SONG

Isaiah 50:4-9

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to answer the weary. Morning by morning he wakens me, he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear; I was not rebellious, I did not turn back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who plucked the beard. I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore I will not be dishonored. I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near; who will contend with me? Let us stand together. Who has a charge against me? Let him approach me. Behold, the Lord GOD helps me. Who will declare me guilty? Lo, they shall all wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Note the reversion in this Song to the first person, as in the Dead Sea Psalms of Thanksgiving. Again God speaks for the Servant, thus reinforcing an intimacy between himself and the Servant. The Servant here states the conditions under which he labors. It is obvious that his mission is accomplished through words and through speech. The tongue of one who is taught is the tongue of a disciple. He repeats faithfully that which God taught him. He does not invent messages out of his own mind; it is not an illusion from human imagination. He takes the message from the revelations God has given to all mankind. He interprets for his brothers and sisters. Since God does not communicate directly with the Servant he must take his instructions from those materials available to him. He understands prophecy and revelation; God gave him this understanding when God placed his spirit upon the Servant. Thus the Servant can now open the prophecies to the understanding of his fellow mortals.

Even more, the Servant recognizes how God speaks to him in the quiet hours of the morning. This is not through audible voices but through inner leadings which bring him insights and understanding. The Servant recognizes how God opened his eyes to listen. In the Dead Sea Psalms the Servant remarks "Though mine eyes sleep not at night . . . He labors through the quiet hours, in expectation of the salvation of God's people, "Though mine eyes fall and I have no rest . . ." The purpose is to help his brothers and sisters. He can help them understand, and can offer support for the momentous decisions which will bring an unfolding of planetary destiny.

The Servant is reassured by these statements. Obviously, he does not have the reassurance of direct contact with divine beings. He must rely on his personal faith. He has deep trust in God and does not rebel against the conditions of his servitude. He knows that many will express disbelief and will accuse him of presumption in the face of God. But he will not hide himself from those accusations. He steels himself against the day of revelation. He has firmly resolved to carry on with the task. He sets his face like flint. As stated in the Dead Sea Scrolls, "Thou hast braced my spirit to withstand affliction . . . "I shall have against the day to reply to him that would confound me . . ." He knows that God is near him, to support, and to carry him. "Through thee I have prospered in my way . . ." All those others who will pass away in one brief moment. Their arguments and their disbelief will fade from the memory of the survivors of the nations.

Although the Servant has suffered, his suffering is not great.

The response to the Song in verses 10 and 11 sets the scene for the activity of this Servant.

Behold, all you who kindle a fire, you who set brands alight! Walk by the light of your fire, and by the brands you have kindled! This shall you have from my hand. You shall lie down in torment! This is the time of planetary judgment. Godless men set the fires of their own destruction.

Home