
Isaiah's Songs of the Servant
Part 1:

The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9

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Isaiah's "servant songs"¹ (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12) have been among the most controversial passages debated by Old Testament scholars. The theological significance of the servant songs is reflected in the traditional conservative view of Christian scholars that the servant of whom they speak is none other than Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 8:26-39). For example, Pieper has asserted, "For all Christian exegetes the Messianic interpretation is *a priori* the correct one because of the precedent set by the New Testament writers."² Critical scholarship of varying theological persuasions has proposed other solutions to the identity of the servant of the songs. Tracing the history of these diverse views is outside the scope of this article.³ Suffice it to say that the views fall into two major categories — the individualist (those which identify the servant with an individual, e.g., Isaiah, Cyrus, or the Messiah) and the collectivist (those which identify the servant with a group, e.g., national Israel, spiritual or ideal Israel, or the prophets).

This series of articles assumes the basic messianic view and will focus on more specific issues such as the exact position and role of the servant, the relationship of the servant in the songs to the prophecies of the Davidic Messiah, and the time of the fulfillment of the servant's task. An attempt will be made to set forth an interpretation of the servant poems from the viewpoint of a premillennial interpretation of prophecy.

The four servant songs appear in Isaiah 40–55. (Critical scholars call this portion of the book “Deutero-Isaiah.”⁴) These chapters contain prophecies of comfort for Israel written by Isaiah from the perspective of the Exile and the return. Isaiah 40–66 emphasizes the deliverance (chaps. 40–48), the Deliverer (chaps. 49–55 [or 57]), and the delivered (chaps. 56 [or 58]–66), dealing respectively with the purpose of peace (the comfort), the Prince of Peace (the Cross), and the program of peace (the crown).

The first servant song (42:1-9) is preceded by two major sections. In the first section Yahweh comforts His people by announcing His coming (40:1-11, a prologue), and the prophet encourages the people by demonstrating Yahweh’s superiority over all possible rivals (40:12-31, a disputation). The song then concludes the second section in which Yahweh proves He controls history by demonstrating His ability to prophesy (41:1–42:9). This section consists of (a) a trial speech in which Yahweh proves His case by giving a near prophecy of His choice of Cyrus as a righteous liberator (41:1-7), (b) two salvation oracles and a proclamation of salvation in which Yahweh gives a distant prophecy of Israel’s final triumph over her foes (41:8-20), and (c) another trial speech in which Yahweh reaffirms His control of history and prophecy (41:21–42:9). In this final unit (41:21–42:9) Yahweh challenges the idols to present their case (41:21-24) and responds with two prophecies — a near prophecy of the victories of Cyrus (41:25-29) and distant prophecy of His servant who will bring salvation and order to the earth (42:1-9).

In this first servant song⁵ Yahweh gives a distant or long-range prophecy of His servant⁶ who will bring salvation and establish a proper order on the whole earth. The emphasis of the passage is on the introduction of the servant and the outcome of His completed task. The servant is called to accomplish His work. The poem thus predicts the servant’s faithfulness in fulfilling the mission for which He was designated.

Yahweh is the Speaker throughout the poem.⁷ Verses 1-4 are apparently addressed to all mankind (certainly to all who hear of this designation of Yahweh’s servant⁸) and constitute Yahweh’s designatory call of and promised accomplishments by His servant. Verses 5-7 are spoken directly to the servant as a promise of the divine empowerment needed for the accomplishment of His task. Verses 8-9 are a divine self-predication

based on fulfilled prophecy and addressed to His people Israel in exile. The first servant poem thus includes these points: (1) Yahweh predicts His servant's success in causing a just order to prevail in the earth (vv. 1-4), (2) Yahweh promises to empower His servant in the accomplishment of His righteous rule (vv. 5-7), and (3) Yahweh directs glory to Himself by the use of prophecy (vv. 8-9).

Yahweh Predicts Success for His Servant (42:1-4)

¹Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen one in whom I delight;
 I will put my Spirit on him
 and he will bring justice to the nations.
²He will not shout or cry out,
 or raise his voice in the streets.
³A bruised reed he will not break,
 and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
 In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴he will not falter or be discouraged
 till he establishes justice on earth.
 In his law the islands will put their hope.⁹

Beuken has demonstrated that the literary genre of this unit is very similar to the royal designation oracle¹⁰ (cf. the divine designations of Saul [1 Sam. 9:17], David [1 Sam. 16:12-13], and even Zerubbabel [Zech. 3:8; 6:12]). In this paragraph (1) Yahweh designates His servant who will establish a just order through His Spirit (v. 1), (2) Yahweh describes negatively the character of His servant's service who will neither seek publicity nor promote violence (v. 3a), (3) Yahweh describes positively the success of His servant's mission (v. 3b), and (4) Yahweh declares the unfailing endurance of His servant (v. 4).

YAHWEH DESIGNATES AND ENDOWS HIS SERVANT (42:1)

Yahweh identifies His servant to others and with Himself (42:1a). Before Yahweh affirms His servant's endowment with His Spirit and His servant's resultant success, Yahweh first identifies His servant *to others* and *with Himself* — "Here is¹¹ my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight" (v. 1a).

This introduction of the servant by Yahweh to all who will hear is prophetic of the servant's appointment and call to office as the Messiah.¹² The need for a fresh introduction of the servant, after reference had already been made to Israel as "servant" in

41:8-9, suggests that this servant differs from Israel.¹³ Yahweh willingly acknowledges Him as “my servant,” thus indicating that the servant belongs to and has a close relationship with Yahweh Himself. In fact “my servant” is an expression parallel to “my chosen one,” suggesting that the divine choice or election is the foundation for the honorable position of and faithful performance by the servant.¹⁴ Election by Yahweh made a person His servant (cf. 1 Kings 11:13, 32-34; Ps. 105:26; Hag. 2:23). The servant’s task cannot be performed by just anyone — it can be accomplished only by Yahweh’s “chosen one.” Election and service go hand in hand (43:10-12, 21; cf. 41:8-9). The expression “my servant” is not only a title of honor, but also, since Yahweh is viewed as the King of Israel in the immediate context (41:21; cf. 43:15; 44:6), a description implying royal characteristics.

A recognition of the servant as a royal figure is important for a proper understanding of the messianic significance of this passage. While it is true that terms such as “my servant” and “my chosen one” are not exclusively royal terms, there is much evidence that the passage views the servant primarily as a royal personage. Not only is the literary genre of the passage similar to a royal designation oracle (as already indicated), but the task of establishing *מִשְׁפָּט* (“a just order”) is a characteristically royal responsibility. Odendaal has demonstrated that the servant is a royal personage,¹⁵ and that “the identification of the Suffering servant and the Messiah did not take place for the first time in the self-consciousness of Jesus, but it was there from the beginning.”¹⁶ However, even Odendaal recognizes that the terminology describing the servant is not completely royal, for in the servant “the priestly and prophetic offices find their divinely ordained integration in and subordination to the royal office.”¹⁷

As indicated by Payne, “The language seems to link kingly and prophetic characteristics in a role reminiscent of that of Moses. It is as if to say that the Second Exodus, such a major theme in these chapters [Isa. 40–55], will require a Second Moses.”¹⁸ This is a helpful identification when one recognizes the royal function of Moses as the vice-regent under Yahweh at the establishment of the Sinaitic covenant.¹⁹ A recognition of the royal features of the servant forges a link between the concepts of the royal Davidic Messiah and the suffering servant.²⁰ Thus it may be concluded with Odendaal that the servant is “a royal, individual, eschatological figure, who is instrumental in bringing about the royal eschatological dominion of Yahweh.”²¹

To resume the exposition, the identification of the servant with Yahweh is indicated not only in the titles designating the servant ("my servant" and "my chosen one") but also in the phrases describing their relationship²² ("whom I uphold" [i.e., grasp by the hand, e.g., Exod. 17:12; Prov. 31:19] and "in whom I delight"). Yahweh sustains His servant by upholding Him with strength as God the Creator (cf. v. 5). The entire expression ("my servant whom I uphold") is tantamount to saying, "He's mine — no power can overcome Him!"²³ How can He not succeed in His task of causing a just order to prevail in the earth?

Yahweh also speaks of His selected servant as one "in whom I delight." Although in the perfect tense, the verb "delight" probably refers to Yahweh's continual delight in the servant and is not to be limited to the moment of choice. In summary, then, Yahweh sustains His servant whom He has specified, and savors His servant whom He has selected.

Yahweh declares that He will endow His servant with the power of the Spirit (42:1b). The prediction — "I will put my Spirit on him" (v. 1b) — clarifies Yahweh's means of sustaining His servant as indicated in the preceding line — it is by the power of His own Spirit that Yahweh assures the success of the Servant's mission. The results of the endowment with Yahweh's Spirit are described in Isaiah 11:2-4, a messianic passage containing concepts found in the servant songs. A further messianic passage (Isa. 61:1-3; cf. Luke 4:17-21) describes the divine enablement of the Spirit on an anointed one entrusted with a task. Such an endowment with the Spirit of Yahweh as described in this verse is typical of the special gift of the Spirit to empower the leaders of Israel. Especially significant is the gift of Yahweh's Spirit to the Davidic kings.²⁴

The divine endowment is conveyed in the term *נָתַתִּי* ("I will put," NIV). Is this term to be understood as a prophetic perfect with a specific fulfillment in the descent of the Spirit like a dove at Christ's baptism (Mark 1:11)? Or is it a characteristic perfect, referring to Christ's continual endowment with the Spirit for His difficult ministry (Matt. 12:28)? Perhaps both nuances are included since the servant Messiah obviously had a permanent (Isa. 11:2) and plenary endowment of the Spirit, although He was particularly marked out as Messiah by the anointing of the Spirit at His baptism which inaugurated His messianic ministry.

Yahweh declares that His servant will succeed in His mission (42:1c). Yahweh's declaration that He will endow His

servant with the power of the Spirit (v. 1b) is foundational to His declaration that His servant will succeed in His mission — “and he will bring justice to the nations” (v. 1c). North rightly calls this statement “the key to the understanding of the passage.”²⁵ This is supported by the threefold reference to the servant bringing forth or establishing justice: “he will bring justice to the nations” (v. 1c), “in faithfulness he will bring forth justice” (v. 3c), “till he establishes justice on earth” (v. 4b). The meaning of the Hebrew word translated “justice” (משפט) is very significant (and is also much disputed) in this servant song. Whybray says that it should “probably be assumed” that the word has the same meaning all three times it occurs in these verses.²⁶ The extent to which this assumption can be allowed demands evaluation, but it is necessary first to summarize the possible meanings of משפט (“justice”) which Whybray calls “a word of many meanings.”²⁷

The primary meaning of the noun משפט (“justice”) is that of a judicial decision or sentence (e.g., Num. 27:21; Deut. 16:18; 1 Kings 3:28; 20:40). A variety of derived meanings also relate in some way to the judicial process, such as the act of deciding (Deut. 25:1; Josh. 20:6), the place of decision (Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 7:7), the process of litigation (Isa. 3:14; Job 22:4; Ps. 143:2), the case presented for litigation (Ezek. 23:24; 1 Kings 3:11; Job 13:18), the time of judgment (Ps. 1:5), and the execution of the sentence (Jer. 7:5; Ezek. 18:8).²⁸ However, משפט “can be used to designate almost any aspect of civil or religious government,”²⁹ such as sovereignty (Deut. 1:17; Jer. 8:7) or magisterial authority (Ps. 72:1-2), the attribute of justice employed by civil leaders (Mic. 3:1), an ordinance of law (Exod. 15:25; Lev. 5:10; 9:16; Deut. 33:10, 21), or one’s right under law (Deut. 18:3; Jer. 32:7). משפט also has the meaning of that which is fitting or proper (1 Kings 5:8; Isa. 28:26; 40:14). The related verb שפט (“to judge, govern”) in its primary sense means “to exercise the processes of government,”³⁰ whether legislative, executive, or judicial. God Himself is “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25; cf. Isa. 33:22) and has delegated this function of judging or governing to His theocratic representatives (but not to prophets) such as Moses (Exod. 18:13), the judges (e.g., Deborah [Judg. 4:5] and Samuel [1 Sam. 7:6, 15]), and the kings (1 Sam. 8:19-20; Ps. 72:1-3, 12-15).

This variety of usage raises the question of the meaning of משפט in Isaiah 42:1-4. Whybray is surely correct that “vague renderings” such as “revelation”³¹ or “true religion”³² are “hardly

justified."³³ Equally unsatisfactory is Pieper's view that *משפט* refers to the gospel.³⁴ Since *משפט* is the key concept employed three times in this first servant song to emphasize the totality of the servant's task, any translation less comprehensive than "a right order" or similar phrase, fails to take account of the far-reaching accomplishments purposed for Yahweh's servant. The servant's task is to make right within history all aspects and phases of human existence — whether moral, religious, spiritual, political, social, economic, and so forth — so that the prayer will be fulfilled, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

The meaning of *משפט* in this poem rests in part on the significance of the verbs used in the three occurrences of the word. In verses 1 and 3, what is the significance of *יוציא* . . . *משפט* ("he will bring forth justice")? Does the verb mean "to proclaim" justice or "to produce" (i.e., establish) justice? *יוציא* has the basic meaning of "bring forth, cause to go out." North maintains that when the object of the verb is not a material object, the verb always has the meaning of "cause to go out from the mouth" or "bring forth words" (i.e., "speak, impart, reveal").³⁵ This meaning of "proclaim" is also supported by Whybray.³⁶ The verb has this meaning in Isaiah 48:20 (cf. 2:3). In support of this view is the citation of this verse in Matthew 12:18 where the Greek word *ἀπαγγελεῖ* clearly means "proclaim."

On the other hand the verb may mean "bring forth" in the sense of "cause to appear, cause to exist, produce, establish" (as in Isa. 40:26; 54:16; 61:11; Hab. 1:4). Beuken concludes that in verses 1 and 3 *משפט* is "more a situation, a state of being, to be realized than a decision to be proclaimed . . . an event to be realized, a process and its execution resulting in relations of righteousness, the background obviously being this: that the present situation is devoid of justice."³⁷ Thus the conclusion of Kelley regarding the meaning of *משפט* in these verses seems to be justified. He understands *משפט* in this passage to refer to "a just order," that is, the kind of life that will prevail on earth when all nations are brought under God's rule, to be accomplished through the instrumentality of God's servant.³⁸ This seems to be the best solution when understood in the sense of the Davidic kingdom of righteousness and peace that Messiah will cause to prevail on the millennial earth following His second advent. Isaiah, of course, does not distinguish between the servant's

accomplishments to be fulfilled in the first advent and those to be fulfilled in the second advent (cf. Isa. 61:1-3 with Luke 4:17-21).

Yahweh only summarizes the task which His servant will accomplish — the servant will cause a just order to prevail for the nations. The servant's success in this mission is assured by the empowering presence of the Spirit of Yahweh who continually rests on Him (cf. Isa. 11:2-4). Some clarification and expansion of the task of the servant will be presented in verse 6, but the main development of the servant's task will come only in the later songs, especially the fourth (52:13–53:12).

YAHWEH DESCRIBES NEGATIVELY THE CHARACTER OF HIS SERVANT'S SERVICE (42:2-3a)

The positive description of the servant's success (v. 3b) is preceded by a negative description of the servant's service (vv. 2-3a). This description includes five negative verbs (followed by two more in v. 4). The more probable interpretation of these verbs indicates that the servant will not seek publicity (v. 2) or promote violence toward the oppressed (v. 3a). An alternate view that the servant will not utter lamentation in His distress is a definite possibility and merits some attention.

The servant will not seek publicity (v. 2). Yahweh indicates that His servant will not seek publicity, that He will not be clamorous or ostentatious in the accomplishment of His mission — "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets" (v. 2). The majority of commentators interpret this verse as referring to the nonclamorous or gentle character of the servant's methods in fulfilling His mission — that "He will not shout" in strife or dispute, that "He will not quarrel or cry out" (Matt. 12:19, citing this verse). Many of these scholars think that the negative clauses suggest a contrast between the servant's functions and those of someone else, such as earlier prophets of doom or even Yahweh's anointed one, Cyrus (Isa. 45:1-13). In the latter instance, the verbs are said to describe how a worldly conqueror performs his deeds, in contrast to the gentleness of Yahweh's servant. On the other hand the statements may simply be the figure of speech called litotes (a negative, minimizing statement used to emphasize its opposite), thus indicating the meek, humble, gentle character of the servant (cf. Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:5).

The alternate interpretation of this verse is that the Hebrew verb שָׁחַח translated "shout" (NIV) is properly the term for crying out to God in lamentation, a cry for relief or justice, for deliver-

ance in deep need or trouble (cf. Exod. 14:10; 17:4; Judg. 4:3; Ps. 107:6; Lam. 2:18).³⁹ The second verb (נָשַׁח, "cry out") literally means "to lift up (the voice)" as in a cry of protest (cf. Gen. 21:16; Num. 14:1; Judg. 2:4), although it can also be used of a cry of joy (cf. Isa. 24:14; 52:8). This alternative view understands in the same way, the statement, "He will not . . . raise his voice in the streets," since the streets may be a place of weeping and mourning (Isa. 15:3; 24:11; 33:7). Thus the verse may be interpreted to mean that the servant neither laments from discouragement in oppressive conditions nor becomes defeated, but rather perseveres in the task of administering justice.⁴⁰

The servant will not promote violence toward the oppressed (42:3a). The servant's nonviolent and gentle approach toward the oppressed is expressed in the clauses, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (v. 3a). The servant seeks to bless, not to destroy. He is a gracious Sovereign, not a tyrant. A reed is weak to start with, but this one is cracked or partially broken (cf. 36:6). He will handle such a "bruised reed" with great care. A "smoldering wick" (lit. "flax," cf. 43:17; 19:9) is one that is almost extinguished, but He will keep it burning (not to destroy it, but to enable it to perform its designated function). The "bruised reed" and the "smoldering wick" are figurative for weak and oppressed people, whether among Israel or the Gentiles, to whomever the servant might minister.⁴¹ Ultimately the reference is worldwide, corresponding to the extent of His messianic kingdom in which He will cause a just order to prevail.

YAHWEH DESCRIBES POSITIVELY THE SUCCESS OF THE SERVANT'S MISSION (42:3b)

The task of the servant in causing a just order to prevail on the earth was already described in verse 1. This truth is reaffirmed in verse 3b in the same words ("he will bring forth justice"). The full prediction is "in faithfulness he will bring forth justice."

The word translated "in faithfulness" is לֵאמֹת, "according to truth, truly." Whybray translates it "undoubtedly."⁴² Westermann renders it "to be truth," that is, it becomes truth, is made to prevail.⁴³

YAHWEH DECLARES THE UNFAILING ENDURANCE OF THE SERVANT IN ACHIEVING HIS MISSION (42:4)

The servant will endure and so He will ultimately succeed over any and all adversity or difficulty in establishing a right

order on the earth — “he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth” (v. 4a, b). The unusual word selection in the Hebrew grows out of Isaiah’s play on words in verses 3 and 4. The word “falter” is literally “grow dim, fade,” and echoes the “smoldering” or “dimly burning” wick in verse 3. “Be discouraged” is literally “be crushed, bruised” and echoes the “bruised” reed of verse 3. The servant will persist through a difficult situation, He will not “go to pieces” in adversity. Thus the servant who in gentle grace does not promote violent destruction will Himself persist with unfailing endurance, will not perish under oppression in carrying out His task to completion. Delitzsch says that “His zeal will not be extinguished, nor will anything break His strength till He shall have secured for right a firm standing on the earth.”⁴⁴ This verse contains the only implication in the first servant poem that the servant’s road to success carries Him across difficult terrain. The vale of suffering through which the servant must pass is the subject of later poems (esp. 52:13–53:12).

The endurance of the servant leads on to the establishment of a right order — “till he establishes justice on earth” (v. 4b). Since the verb used here with *משפט* is different from the verb in verses 1 and 3, and because of the parallelism between *משפט* (“justice,” v. 4b) and *תורה* (“law,” v. 4c), Beuken says that *משפט* has a different nuance in verse 4, namely, “an ordinance, a law to be proclaimed, the juridical statute of the new situation of justice.”⁴⁵ It is unlikely, however, that *משפט* can bear a meaning in verse 4 different from its meaning in verses 1 and 3. Verses 1 and 4 are stylistically an *inclusio* with repeated words, meanings, and concepts, thus marking off verses 1-4 as the first strophe of this servant song. *משפט*, which describes the totality of the just order which the servant will cause to prevail on the earth, is the theological center of these verses. The use of the verb *ישים* (“to put, set, place”) also supports a continuity in meaning for *משפט* throughout the strophe. In view of the universal scope of the context (the distant coastlands, v. 4c) the phrase “on earth” indicates all the earth, not just Palestine.

The expectancy of the peoples for this just order is indicated — “In his law the islands will put their hope” (v. 4c). *תורה* (“law, instruction”) is often found parallel to *משפט* (“justice”) (cf. Hab. 1:4; Ps. 89:31; Isa. 51:4). It connotes “authoritative instruction for life.”⁴⁶ It was given by God first through Moses, but later through priests or prophets (cf. Jer. 26:4-5). That the “islands”

will put their hope in the servant's תִּוְרָה is understood by Pieper as personification.⁴⁷ But it is better to understand the figure as a metonymy for the people who inhabit the shores or islands.⁴⁸ The word translated "islands" was "a vague tero for distant lands along the Mediterranean coast."⁴⁹ The word translated "will put their hope" (NIV; the AV has "wait") is said by Delitzsch to mean "to wait with longing for a person's instruction" (Job 29:23), which he, along with many other writers,⁵⁰ relates to the doctrine of prevenient grace.⁵¹

Yahweh Promises Empowerment to His Servant (42:5-7)

⁵This is what God the LORD says —
 he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
 who gives breath to its people,
 and life to those who walk on it:
⁶"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
 I will take hold of your hand.
 I will keep you and will make you
 to be a covenant for the people
 and a light for the Gentiles,
⁷to open eyes that are blind,
 to free captives from prison
 and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

Others have been informed of Yahweh's designation of His servant who will cause a just order to prevail on the earth (vv. 1-4). Now Yahweh turns directly to the servant Himself, affirms His divine call, and promises to empower Him in the accomplishment of His righteous purpose (vv. 5-7). After being introduced as the sovereign Creator in order to accredit His empowerment of His servant (v. 5), Yahweh affirms to the servant His divine call (v. 6a), promises divine aid to the servant (v. 6b), and outlines the task in which He will help the servant (vv. 6c-7).

YAHWEH IS ACCREDITED AS THE SOVEREIGN CREATOR (42:5)

Yahweh's creative power is evidence that He can empower the servant to perform His mission, which is described in verses 1-4 and partially repeated and clarified in verses 6-7.⁵²

Yahweh is introduced as "God the LORD" (v. 5a). Isaiah employs the standard "messenger formula" ("This is what . . . says") to introduce Yahweh as the true and only God whose sovereign power as the Creator of heaven, earth, and mankind

qualifies Him to empower His servant (cf. 40:22; 45:12) as well as to establish His claim to control history (cf. vv. 8-9). The title "God the LORD" is found only here in Isaiah (cf. Ps. 85:8).

Yahweh is described as the Creator of heaven, earth, and mankind (v. 5b). The doctrine of creation is stated in "a series of participial clauses drawn from the style of the hymn of praise"⁵³ (cf. 40:22; Ps. 104:2-4; 136). Yahweh's creation of the atmospheric and stellar heavens is described in the clause, "he who created the heavens and stretched them out," stating the literal fact of creation, and then picturing it in figurative language as when stretching out a curtain or tent (cf. Isa. 40:22).

Yahweh's creation of the earth and its produce is next described — "who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it." This metaphor for creation comes from the activity of a goldsmith or silversmith who "spreads, beats out" the malleable metal with his tools. The creation of the heavens and earth is probably a merism ascribing to God the creation of all things everywhere.⁵⁴ Further, Yahweh created all mankind — "who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it." "Breath" and "life" are here used in poetic parallelism to describe the natural life which the Creator imparts to all mankind. The word translated "people" (אֱמָוּת) normally refers to a nation, particularly Israel (cf. v. 6), but here refers to mankind — "those who walk on" the earth which God has created.

YAHWEH AFFIRMS THE SERVANT'S CALL (42:6a)

Although Yahweh has been accredited as the sovereign Creator, yet before promising help to His servant, Yahweh affirms the servant's call — "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness" (v. 6a). The position of "I, Yahweh" in the sentence emphasizes it: the covenant God, who has entered into a personal relationship with Israel, is the same One who has called His servant. His is the power of the Creator and His is the covenant love of the LORD ("Yahweh").

The affirmation of this call addressed to the servant is comparable to the previous designation of the servant addressed to mankind (v. 1). Both contexts emphasize the close relationship which exists between Yahweh and His servant.

The phrase "in righteousness" (בְּצִדְקָה), used to describe the call, is also used in 41:2 (cf. 45:13) to describe Yahweh's call of Cyrus. The language of verse 6 is also similar to the language used of Yahweh's call of the nation Israel as His servant in 41:9-10.

However, the task assigned to this servant in verses 6-7 is more far-reaching and more spiritual than any task Yahweh purposed or accomplished through Cyrus. Furthermore since it is mediatorial for Israel, it could not be accomplished *by* Israel.

YAHWEH PROMISES THE SERVANT HELP (42:6b)

Now that the servant is informed of His call, He is promised divine help to fulfill the task to which He has been called — “I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you” (v. 6b). Yahweh’s action on behalf of the servant emphasizes strengthening guidance and securing protection. The language and concepts are similar to that promised to the servant Israel in 41:9-10, especially the clauses “I took you . . . , I called you . . . I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” The provision extended to Israel would become fulfilled absolutely only in the messianic servant. The enablement of Yahweh is further described in the verb introductory to the phrases describing the servant — “I will make you to be”

YAHWEH SUMMARIZES THE SERVANT’S TASK (42:6c-7)

God’s call and enablement of the servant were for the purpose of enabling the servant to accomplish God’s will. Therefore Yahweh now summarizes the task in which He will help the servant. The divinely purposed and predicted performance of the servant is summarized in three particulars: (1) effecting a new covenant for Israel (v. 6c), (2) being a light for the nations (v. 6d), and (3) delivering blind prisoners (v. 7).

The servant will effect a new covenant for Israel (42:6c). One of the most controversial clauses in this servant poem is “I . . . will make you to be a covenant for the people” (v. 6c). Odenaal suggests that the various explanations “consist, broadly speaking, of attempts to find a shade of meaning differing from the usual for *בְּרִית* [‘covenant’] or for *עַם* [‘people’] and often for both.”⁵⁵ The three main views of this phrase have been summarized by North:⁵⁶ (1) “a covenant people,”⁵⁷ (2) “a covenant of the peoples (i.e., nations),” taking *עַם* (“people”) as a reference to mankind (as in v. 5), and (3) “a covenant of the people (i.e., Israel).” This latter view is preferable since unless the context requires a broader sense (as in v. 5) *עַם* always refers to Israel as a nation. Delitzsch says that when *עַם* (people) and *גוֹיִם* (nations)

stand side by side (as in this verse) they “can only mean Israel and the Gentiles.”⁵⁸ He adds that this interpretation is “put beyond doubt” by the parallel passage in 49:8 (cf. 49:6), where “a covenant for the people” clearly refers to Israel as a nation.⁵⁹

In comparison with the next phrase (“and a light for the Gentiles”), it appears that the servant is not literally either “a covenant” or “a light” but one who in some way is a cause, source, mediator, or dispenser of covenant realities or illuminating benefits. The figure of speech is probably metonymy of effect (the covenant) for the cause (the covenant mediator).⁶⁰ The servant is the messianic “messenger of the covenant” of Malachi 3:1. In short, He is the mediator of the New covenant with Israel, elaborated in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and referred to in numerous other prophetic texts (cf. Isa. 54:10; 55:3; 59:20-21; 61:8; Ezek. 16:60-63).⁶¹

The servant will become a light for the Gentiles (42:6d). While the loetic parallelism of the two phrases (“a covenant for the people” and “a light for the Gentiles”) could equate “the people” with “the Gentiles,” the context and the parallel passage in 49:8 indicate a contrast between the two groups.⁶² The figure (again metonymy of effect for cause) pictures the servant as bringing a condition of spiritual light, illumination, and salvation to the Gentiles.⁶³ It is also worth noting that “light” is associated with “justice” in 51:4-6 and 59:9, so the idea may indicate the conditions among men in which *מִשְׁפָּט* (“justice”) is administered. But 49:6 strongly suggests that light is virtually equivalent to salvation.

The servant will deliver blind prisoners (42:7). The third aspect of the servant’s task⁶⁴ is “to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (v. 7). Two interpretive questions concern the identity of those thus delivered (whether Jews, Gentiles, or both) and the reality of the language describing their condition (whether literal or figurative, i.e., physical or spiritual). The association of “blind” with sitting “in darkness” suggests figurative blindness (how many of the captives would be physically blind?). Metaphorical blindness fits the preceding context of metaphorical light (v. 6). Also the blindness in 42:18-20 is spiritual (cf. 6:9-10; 44:9, 18-20). If this blindness is not physical, then the “prison” and “dungeon” are not likely physical. The imprisonment may refer to the nation Israel in Babylonian Captivity (the prophetic background for Isaiah 40–66)⁶⁵, the spiritual

blindness being due to idolatry (cf. 40:18-20; 46:5; 48:4-5). The Gentiles were also blinded by idolatry (cf. 41:5-7), unable to perceive that Yahweh is the true God and that their idols are worthless (41:25-29).⁶⁶

Such an exilic significance in the passage does not rule out reference to the servant-Messiah,⁶⁷ as the messianic promises and the Davidic covenant could potentially have been fulfilled in the postexilic return (cf. Hag. 2:21-23; Zech. 4:6-10; 6:12). However, due to the incomplete obedience of the nation, the "fulness of time" would not arrive for about four more centuries. Even then, the further blindness of the national leaders (cf. Matt. 12:22-32) resulted in a postponement (from man's perspective) of the ultimate fulfillment of the messianic deliverance that incorporates "a covenant for the people" and "a light for the Gentiles" into one ultimate fulfillment. As Paul notes, at the Messiah's second advent "the deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:26-27, citing Isa. 59:20, 21; 27:9).

Yahweh Procures Glory for Himself (42:8-9)

"I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
"See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you."

Yahweh directs glory to Himself by the use of prophecy. The addressees indicated by the plural "you" (v. 9) are the Jewish exiles.

YAHWEH ASSERTS HIS UNIQUE PERSON (42:8)

Yahweh first directs glory to Himself by asserting His uniqueness. He affirms His name — "I am the LORD; that is my name!" Then He asserts His refusal to share His glory — "I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols" (cf. 48:9-11). Yahweh's intolerance of all rivals is absolute. He will put an end to all idolatry.⁶⁸ The glory of which Yahweh is so jealous is that of being recognized and worshiped as sovereign Ruler and righteous Deliverer.

YAHWEH DIRECTS ATTENTION TO HIS USE OF PREDICTION (42:9)

Contrary to Westermann's view,⁶⁹ this verse draws to a climax the servant poem and indicates its close relationship to the context. In it Yahweh directs attention to His use of predictive prophecy, namely, that just as the first predictions ("the former things") have been fulfilled, even so new predictions which will likewise be fulfilled are now being declared (i.e., the prophecies concerning the messianic servant).

"The former things" are neither the Exodus from Egypt⁷⁰ (cf. Isa. 43:14-20) nor the fall of Babylon (predicted in Isa. 13:17; Jer. 51:11, 28),⁷¹ but the predictions of the deliverance of Israel from exile by the early events of Cyrus's career. Isaiah's perspective has changed since 41:22 when the "first things" are identified with "what is about to come." The "new things" are the conditions associated with the millennial righteous order which the messianic servant will cause to prevail on the whole earth.

Conclusion

The anonymous servant of Isaiah 42:1-9 can be neither Israel nor Cyrus nor any person other than the royal Davidic Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. This first servant song introduces the servant and highlights the successful completion of the task to which He is divinely called. Only a hint is given of the pathway of suffering that the servant must tread to arrive at the glory of a completed mission when He will have caused a righteous order to prevail on the earth. He will bring in a just order on the earth following His second advent at the time of the fulfillment of the promised New covenant for the nation Israel. Gentiles also will benefit from the worldwide blessings of this covenant and kingdom.

Notes

1 The term "songs," though not a technical designation of literary genre, has been retained in this article because of traditional usage.

2 August Pieper, *Isaiah II: An Exposition of Isaiah 40-66*, trans. Erwin E. Kowalke (German ed., 1919; Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), p. 177.

3 For the history of interpretation of the identity of the servant, see Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), esp. pp. 6-116; H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament*, 2d ed.

(Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp 1-57 and Colin G Cruse, "The Servant Songs Interpretive Trends since C R North, *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 8 (April 1978) 3-27

4 For conservative defenses of the unity and Isaianic authorship of the entire Book of Isaiah, see Edward J Young, *Who Wrote Isaiah?* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958) and Oswald T Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (Philadelphia Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1950)

5 Isaiah 42 1-9 is usually viewed as three paragraphs (vv 1-4, vv 5-7, and vv 8-9), but the extent of the "servant song" is disputed Verses 1-4 constitute the basic unit, but how much further (if any) does the reference to the servant extend? Critical scholars of the last generation not only viewed the basic unit (vv 1-4) as an addition to the text, but also regarded verses 5-9 as still later accretions However, more recent scholarship accepts both the (Deutero-) Isaianic authorship of 42 1-4 and, for the most part, the unity of this passage with its following context Thus a number of scholars include 42 1-7 in the first servant song while others extend it through verse 9 as is done in this article

6 The identification of the servant in this poem generally coincides with the interpreter's overall view of the identity of the servant throughout the servant songs Cundall, however, views verses 1-4 as speaking of the Messiah but verses 5-9 as speaking of Cyrus (Arthur E Cundall, *Isaiah 40-66 and Jeremiah*, Scripture Union Bible Study Books [Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969], p 6)

7 Isaiah 42 5 conveys the typical "messenger formula," introductory to the words of Yahweh in verses 6-7

8 The view of Whybray that these verses are addressed to Yahweh's "heavenly council" is speculative and unsupported in the passage (R N Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981], p 71)

9 All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless designated otherwise

10 W A M Beuken, "Mišpāt The First Servant Song and Its Context, *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972) 3 Beuken has called attention to the following features this passage has in common with acts in which Yahweh designates His king (1) The designation is by Yahweh, and mostly expressed with "behold" (2) Yahweh endows the chosen one with His Spirit, (3) מִשְׁפָּט is the characteristic task of the royal figure Westermann has mentioned an additional feature which further distinguishes this designation from a prophetic call narrative (as in Isa 6) The prophet's call never has human witnesses, whereas the king's call requires such witnesses (Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66 A Commentary* [Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1975], p 94) However, not all scholars who identify this unit as a designation oracle limit it to the designation of a royal personage (e.g., Roy F Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55* [New York Walter de Gruyter, 1976], pp 66-67)

11 The opening הן ("Behold," AV, "Here is," NIV) contrasts with the הן of 41 29 which introduces the impotent idols chosen by the nations Yahweh's servant is divinely powerful

12 The words of the Father at the baptism of Jesus combine this passage with Psalm 2 7

13 For evidence that the servant here differs from the servant Israel, see the exposition below on verse 6

14 The word עַבְד ("servant") ranges in meaning from a slave to a vassal king, but always refers to one characterized by dependence and servitude Royal officials and personal representatives of a king were thus designated "servants" The term "servant" indicated a degree of honor, depending on the position of the one served To be the "servant of God" denoted the highest honor

15 Dirk H Odendaal, *The Eschatological Expectation of Isaiah 40-66 with*

Special Reference to Israel and the Nations (N p Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), pp 129-35

16 Ibid., p 129

17 Ibid., p 134

18 David F Payne, "Isaiah," in *The New Layman's Bible Commentary*, ed G C D Howley, F F Bruce, and H L Ellison (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p 800 Westermann suggests that the functions of prophet (mediator by word of mouth) and king (mediator by action) which parted company after Moses' time are reunited in the servant (*Isaiah* 40-66, p 97)

19 Under the leadership of Moses, God formed Israel into a nation on the basis of election and redemption, and He established a theocratic relationship with Israel with Himself as her King (Exod 19-24, 32-34, cf Deut Josh 24, see M G Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* [Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963]) The kingship of Yahweh is a prominent concept in the history of Israel (cf 1 Sam 12 12, Isa 33 22, 43 15, Ps 98 6, Ezek 20 33) Moses, the covenant mediator, and his successor Joshua, and later the judges, functioned much like kings during the premonarchical period of the theocracy Then with the beginning of the monarchical period of the theocracy, the kings functioned as vice-regents under Yahweh who was still the King of Israel

20 The sufferings of the servant, barely hinted at in this first poem, await further expression in the other servant songs, especially 52 13-53 12

21 Odendaal, *Eschatological Expectation*, p 135 Odendaal, however, does not intend this statement in a premillennial sense

22 In each case the Hebrew text merely juxtaposes two simple sentences

23 Cf Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p 178

24 The Spirit enabled kings (1 Sam 11 6, 16 13, cf Isa 11 2), prophets (Num 11 29, 24 2, 2 Chron 24 20, Ezek 11 5, Mic 3 8), leaders (Num 11 17, Judg 3 10, 6 34) and artisans (Exod 31 1-5)

25 Christopher R North, *The Second Isaiah Introduction, Translation, and Commentary to Chapters XL-LV* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p 107

26 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p 72

27 Ibid.

28 Cf Mark A Arrington, "The Identification of the Anonymous Servant in Isaiah 40-55" (Th M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971), p 15

29 *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s v "2443 מִשְׁפָּט", by Robert D Culver, 2 948

30 Ibid., p 947

31 John L McKenzie, *Second Isaiah Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), p 37

32 Volz, cited in North, *Suffering Servant*, p 141

33 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p 72

34 Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p 179

35 North, *Second Isaiah*, p 107

36 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p 72

37 Beuken, "Mišpāt," p 7

38 Page H Kelley, *Judgment and Redemption in Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968), p 63 Kelley, however, does not seem to identify this just order with the millennial Davidic kingdom from the premillennial viewpoint

39 Melugin asserts, "Given Deutero-Isaiah's proclivity for the language of the psalms, lo' yis'âq ["he will not shout," NIV] surely means that the servant will not utter lamentation" (*The Formation of Isaiah 40-55*, p 99)

40 Arrington, "The Identification of the Anonymous Servant," pp 21-22 Kelley takes the passage to mean the servant's sorrow will not be prolonged, that His cry of distress will be banished forever from His lips by the relief that the Lord will provide for Him (resurrection?) (Page H Kelley, "Isaiah," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, 12 vols [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971], 5 307) However, if the

reference is at all to His sufferings, could it not refer to His quiet endurance of suffering where no cry of justice (for Himself) is directed toward God?

41 Melugin views the "crushed reed" and "quenched flax" as alluding to Egypt's inability to provide security — when Israel leans on the reed it breaks (Isa. 36:6; Ezek. 29:6) (*Formatton*, p. 99). Thus he says that "the servant will not rely on a crushed reed and thus break it; nor will he depend upon and thus extinguish a dimly-burning wick." De Boer identifies the "bruised reed" and "dimly-burning wick" as the servant himself, who will not be broken or quenched (P. A. H. de Boer, *Second Isaiah's Message* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1956], pp. 9, 92-93).

42 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 73.

43 Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 96.

44 Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 2:176.

45 Beuken, "Mišpāt," p. 7. Whybray sees no difference in meaning between verses 3 and 4, but understands both as "the proclamation of a prophetic message" (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 73).

46 Lon Jay Gregg, "An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 42:1-4" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 43.

47 Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 183.

48 Bullinger identifies it as "metonymy of the subject" (E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968], p. 574).

49 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 60.

50 For example, H. P. Leupold, *Expositon of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 2:63.

51 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:177. Westermann limits the concept to an "expectancy of deliverance" (such as Israel had at the time of the Exile), not a yearning for the one true God (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 96).

52 Kelley says, "The emphasis upon the creation motif is designed to awaken faith in God. One who has revealed His power in creation is surely able to redeem His people and deliver them from their enemies" (*Judgment and Redemption*, p. 63).

53 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 74.

54 Westermann says the passage describes "the whole range of creation by means of the two parts, heaven and earth" (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 99).

55 Odendaal, *Eschatological Expectation*, p. 130.

56 North, *Suffering Servant*, p. 132.

57 This grammatically doubtful view is taken by those who regard the servant as the nation Israel.

58 Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 2:179.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Cf. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, pp. 560-62. However, Delitzsch, like a number of other scholars, maintains that the servant is not only the medium of the covenant but is also Himself the covenant (*Isaiah*, 2:180). Odendaal develops the concept of covenant representation by a king who establishes a covenant on behalf of the people of his nation (*Eschatological Expectation*, pp. 129-34). This concept fits well with both the theocratic monarchy of ancient Israel and the royal character of the Isaianic servant.

61 For a theological treatment of the New covenant, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findley, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1958), pp. 116-28, and John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pp. 208-20.

62 Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965, 1969, 1972), 3:119-20.

63 Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 100.

- 64 This views the servant ("you," v. 6) as the subject of the following infinitives. It is also possible to regard Yahweh ("I," v. 5) as the subject, the infinitives thus denoting Yahweh's goal to be accomplished through the servant's mission to Israel and the Gentiles. Verse 7 can also be taken as an explanation of how the servant is a light to the Gentiles.
- 65 The "captivity" in Babylon, however, does not necessarily rule out literal "prisons" and "dungeons" (cf. 42:22, 24-25).
- 66 Arrington, "The Identification of the Anonymous Servant," pp. 24-25.
- 67 Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66*, pp. 74-76.
- 68 Cf. the frequent trial speeches against idolatry in Isaiah 40-55 (41:1-7, 21-29; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 45:20-25).
- 69 Westermann says that verse 9 "has no connection with what precedes" (*Isaiah 40-66*, p. 98).
- 70 Pieper, *Isaiah II*, p. 191.
- 71 Leupold, *Isaiah*, p. 66.



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