

Three Commentators on Isaiah 49:1-6

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The servant song found in Isaiah 49:1-6 has been called “the most awkward of the Servant songs.”¹ Students of Isaiah have struggled mightily to identify the servant portrayed in this song. Many have posited their best guesses. Others believe that, “The identity of the first person singular voice in 48:16 and 49:1-6 remains fully concealed.”²

Nation or Individual?

The issues begin already in verse one. The person speaking makes mention of his call, an event that took place before he was born. He states that “from my birth he has made mention of my name.” These details seem to be pointing to an individual, rather than to the nation of Israel as a whole. Most see this as the first clue that the servant is not the nation. Whybray notes, “The vividness of the detail of the presentation of the servant as an individual is extremely marked, and goes beyond the possibilities of metaphor. For example, although the figure of being **called...from the womb** (verse 1) is used elsewhere (44:2,24) of Israel, the phrase **the body of my mother** could hardly be used in that connexion.”³ Oswalt concurs when he writes, “But is this not then merely Israel carrying out the command to tell the nations about God’s salvation? The first indication that this is not the case is found in this verse. At the least, the language of the Servant’s call is that of an individual prophet (cf. Jer. 1:5; Gal 1:15).”⁴

If the servant is not the nation, as the individualistic language of verse one seems to indicate, verse three causes difficulties. There the prophet wrote, עֲבָדֵי־אֲתָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

¹ Wilcox, Peter and David Paton-Williams. “The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*. Vol. 42: 88,

² Childs, Brevard. *Isaiah*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 385.

³ Whybray, R.N. *Isaiah 40-66*. (London: Oliphants, 1975) 136. (Emphasis original).

⁴ Oswalt, John N. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 289.

If the servant is not Israel, how can Isaiah write, “You are my servant, Israel?” Some commentators suggest that the word “Israel” is a gloss. As North states, “Nearly all the protagonists for an individual interpretation of the Servant have deleted the word.”⁵ The BHS textual apparatus notes one manuscript (Kenn 96) that does not include this word. Most believe that this is not enough evidence to support its omission. However, Whybray disagrees. He writes, “The evidence of Kenn 96 should not, perhaps, be allowed to carry much weight; however, as has been pointed out by H.M. Orlinsky, that MS has never been scientifically evaluated...but the case against retention is made overwhelmingly probable by the impossibility of reconciling it with the servant’s mission *to* Israel in verse 5.”⁶

With virtually no textual evidence and almost as little support from other scholars, Whybray’s view is unlikely. North comments, “No one would ever have deleted the name were it not that it is suspect on dogmatic grounds.”⁷ Among those who believe the word should be retained, many point to the syntax of the word. It is not a vocative, but another predicate, parallel to “servant.” Oswalt writes, “First, it is important to note that the term *Israel* is used not so much as a name as it is a parallel term to *servant*. It is as though the Lord had said, ‘You are my Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’ Thus it is the function, not the identity of Israel that is emphasized.”⁸

But Oswalt goes one step further. Not only is the use of the term *Israel* a defensible name for this individual servant. He considers the name necessary in light of what precedes this song in chapter 48. Oswalt writes, “God has said that the lives of his servants, Israel,

⁵ North, C.R. *The Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary to Chapters XL-LV*. (Oxford University Press, 1964. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) 187.

⁶ Whybray 138.

⁷ North 187-8.

⁸ Oswalt 291.

would be the evidence to the world that he alone is the Holy One. The Section 48:17-22 brings that thought to its climactic expression. But how is that possible? Will God simply ignore the sin that projected Israel into slavery in the first place? How will the blind, deaf, rebellious servant Israel be any different just because Cyrus has sent them home? The answer is: the Servant, ideal Israel, will give himself to be for and in Israel what Israel could never be in itself.”⁹ Therefore, God’s design for the nation of Israel, to bring glory to his name among the nations, is more than enough reason to call by the same name the individual through whom this design will be realized.

Those who would wish to see the servant as collective Israel run into more difficulties in verse five. There the LORD tells the servant that his mission is “to bring back Jacob to him and gather Israel to himself...” If the servant is Israel, how can he be described as having a mission to Israel?

Commentators suggest two possibilities. The first possibility states that Israel always had a mission to itself. North writes, “...it is quite properly argued, Israel could have a mission to Israel, very much as we say that the first mission of the Church is to the Church.”¹⁰

Another suggests that the infinitive constructs that describe the mission of the servant (לְשׁוֹבֵב in verse 5, לְהַקִּים and לְהַשִּׁיב in verse 6) have the LORD as their subject, not the servant. Therefore the LORD’s purpose is to bring Israel and Jacob back to himself. It is not his purpose to have the servant bring back Israel for him. However, as North notes, “These translations are grammatically possible, but they are awkward and involved, and most

⁹ Oswalt 287.

¹⁰ North 189.

exponents of the collective theory have now abandoned them.”¹¹ Whybray is willing to grant taking these verbs this way, but comments, “Even if, as some commentators have argued, the subject of the three infinitives **bring...back** (verse 5); **raise up, restore** (verse 6) is Yahweh and not the Servant—and this would be syntactically clumsy, if not impossible—it would still be true that the Servant is involved in the task, and therefore cannot be himself Israel.”¹² It seems as though the most natural way to take these infinitives is that they describe the mission of the servant. This makes it difficult to take the servant as collective Israel.

These three features of the song (the individualistic language, the plausible explanation for referring to the servant as *Israel*, and the difficulty of the nation having a mission to the nation) strongly suggest that the servant is an individual, not the nation as a whole. However, the problem is not yet solved. If the servant is an individual, who is it?

If an individual, which individual?

Many who see the servant as an individual assume he is the prophet (whoever that might be). Whybray is one of them. He writes, “The speaker, who claims that Yahweh appointed him to be **his servant** (verses 5,6) is identical with the person whom Yahweh calls **my servant** in the first ‘Song’ (42:1-4): that is, he is Deutero-Isaiah himself.”¹³ As his main argument for such an identification, Whybray states, “In view of the fact that in the prophetic books generally the subject of speeches in the first person singular, when it is

¹¹ North 189.

¹² Whybray 138.

¹³ Whybray 135.

not Yahweh and not otherwise indicated, is normally the prophet himself, it is remarkable that this identification should have been contested in this case by so many commentators.”¹⁴ However, Oswalt presents a pretty convincing case that the Servant is not the prophet, but rather the Messiah. He sees clues to the servant’s identity as the Messiah throughout the song, beginning in verse one. Concerning the last phrase of verse one, **מִמְעַי אֲמִי הַזְכִּיר** **שְׁמִי**, Oswalt comments, “When this point [the individualistic nature of the phrase “my mother”] is then coupled with the idea of the Messiah being named before birth (Isa. 7:14; Matt 1:21-23), one begins to think that this is not Israel who calls the nations to listen to his message, but someone else.”¹⁵ Thus Oswalt sees a clear connection between what is stated about the servant here, that he will be named before birth, and name given to the Messiah before his birth in Isaiah 7:14.

Oswalt also sees the use of the name *Israel* in verse three as a clue to the servant’s identity. He writes, “The presence of this term has a second important implication. It decisively rules out the thought that the individual being spoken of is the prophet himself. No prophet ever thought of himself as the ideal Israel.”¹⁶ In Oswalt’s mind, not only does the term *Israel* preclude the servant from being the prophet, it precludes him from being any human being. Oswalt writes, “It is also hard to imagine any true prophet assigning that role to any other human of his or her acquaintance; it is simply too lofty a concept. Thus when

¹⁴ Whybray 135.

¹⁵ Oswalt 289.

¹⁶ Oswalt 291.

this thought is combined with the lofty role assigned to the Servant in vv.5-6, it is evident that this person is no merely human individual.”¹⁷

Besides seeing the Messiah in the terms used to describe the servant, Oswalt also sees the Messiah in the terms used to describe the servant’s mission. In verse five there is a textual question regarding the description of the servant’s mission. After the purpose clause, לְשׁוּבָב יַעֲקֹב אֵלָיו (to bring back Jacob to him), the Ketiv is וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִאָּסֵף (And Israel will not be gathered/scattered). While the Ketiv makes fine sense, many prefer the Qere, which changes the לֹא to לוֹ . Thus the last phrase would read, “And he will gather Israel to him.” North prefers the Qere. He writes, “RSV, probably right, follows Qere, which is supported by 1QIs^a and some MSS and Versions, in preference to Kethib, which has not *lo* (‘to him’) but *lo’* (‘not’).”¹⁸ Many also cite the parallelism that would be present if the Qere were adopted.

However, Oswalt sees even more significance in the two prepositional phrases indicating “to him.” He writes,

The first appositional statement in v.5¹⁹ reminds us of the calling that coincided with the Servant’s conception. From the first instant of his human existence the Servant existed to do the will of God. That calling was to do what Jacob/Israel could not do for itself. Cyrus was needed to restore Israel to Judah, and the Servant was needed to restore Jacob *to him*, that is, to God. It is important not to overlook this point. Israel’s real problem was not captivity in Babylon; it was estrangement from God. Who could solve that problem?”²⁰

¹⁷ Oswalt 291.

¹⁸ North 139.

¹⁹ By “the first appositional statement” he means “to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself.”

²⁰ Oswalt 293.

Finally, Oswalt sees one more indication that the servant is the Messiah. It is found in verse six. He writes,

Some modern translations render the final phrase of the verse as “that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” While this is not impossible, it is not the obvious sense of the grammar. The plain sense is: “I have appointed you...to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.” The former translation obscures the point that the Servant is not merely to be the means of God’s salvation coming to the world, he is to *be* that salvation.²¹

Conclusion

From the details of the song, it seems quite likely that the servant is an individual. The natural inclination of commentators is to assume, then, that it is the prophet. In their minds, who else could it be? Admittedly, Oswalt approaches the song with presuppositions. He presupposes that predictive prophecy is possible with an omniscient God. He perhaps even presupposes based on the New Testament witness that the servant in this song is the Messiah. However, his presuppositions, unlike those of many other commentators of a historical-critical bent, do not close his mind to the meaning of the song. Rather, they enable him to see the beautiful details of the song that confirm what he may have known all along. The servant whom the LORD appointed to do what Israel could not do and to be salvation for all the earth is none other than the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

²¹ Oswalt 294.