

ISAIAH 52:13–53:12: THE MESSIAH’S SUFFERING AND HIS VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

*Seth S. Erlandsson*¹

The Messiah’s assignment causes amazement (52:13-15)

The LORD’s different salvific interventions throughout Israel’s history are portents and shadows of the incredibly comforting and shocking salvation which Isaiah had already seen through God’s revelation and of which he now gives an account in 52:13–53:12. To draw attention to the decisive importance of this act of salvation Isaiah has placed this account directly in the middle of chapters 40–66, the so-called book of comfort. Without the Messiah’s act of salvation there is no true comfort for sinners, no rescue from the worst enemies of mankind: sin, death, the devil, and eternal damnation. This central text, which is usually called “Isaiah 53,” consists of five equally large segments with the third segment, 53:4-6, standing in the exact center of 52:13–53:12, the middle section in chapters 52–54, which is the middle section of chapters 49–57, which is the middle section of chapters 40–66. Isaiah could not make the importance of the Messiah’s act of salvation any clearer.

The introductory section, 52:13-15, uses the word “*See!*” to draw attention to the LORD’s true servant, who in contrast to the servant Israel is without deceit and fully accomplishes his mission. Through Isaiah, the LORD states the following concerning his servant Israel: “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (1:3), and: “Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD?” (42:19). But now, “*See!*”—pay attention to my true servant! “See, my servant (whom I already spoke about in chapters 42, 49, and 50) *will accomplish his mission*” (can also be translated: “will have success, will act wisely”) (v 13). Even though he carries out his mission in humiliation and poverty (see v 14 and 53:1-3), he is no less than the three-fold exalted himself: “raised,” “lifted up,” “highly exalted” (the same words are used for the LORD in 6:1; 33:10, and 57:15). His exaltation will clearly appear after he has completed his work of salvation: *He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted* (v. 13b). Paul con-

¹Dr. Erlandsson is the former director and professor emeritus at *Biblicum*, an institute for biblical faith and research located first at Uppsala and later at Ljungby, Sweden. He is editor of the quarterly journal *Biblicum*.

cludes the same thing about Jesus in connection with this prophecy: he “made himself nothing by taking the form of a servant and became like other humans. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! *Therefore God exalted him to the highest position*” (Php 2:7-9).

Verses 14-15 have been the subject of several interpretations. Who is “you” referring to when it says: *Just as there were many who were appalled at you*? Is the LORD speaking about Isaiah here or his Messiah? Most people believe that “you” refers to the Messiah and that is why many correct the text from “you” to “him,” even though there is no support for that in the original. Both the Masoretic text and the Great Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1QIsa^a) have “you” (as well as the Septuagint, the early translation into Greek). In verse 14, a comparison is being made between “you” and “his appearance” (the Messiah) (מִן־מַרְאֵהוֹ). So it would be strange for “you” and “his” to be referring to the same person. In my opinion, it is the most natural to understand “you” as referring to Isaiah. Just as many were appalled at Isaiah, so will the appearance of the Messiah and his salvation of the Gentiles (גוֹיִם) cause even more amazement.

Isaiah’s appearance and proclamation was often shocking, e.g., when he went around naked and barefoot for three years as “a sign and a portent against Egypt and Nubia” (20:3-4). He had said: “See, I and the children the LORD has given me are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Sebaoth” (8:18). He had also in shockingly accurate detail prophesied the devastating invasion of the Assyrians (e.g., 8:7-8) and the fact that Sennacherib, against all odds, would not succeed in capturing Jerusalem but suffer a great defeat (37:29, 33-34, 36-37). The Messiah’s appearance would arouse even more amazement. What is so shocking is partly his outer poverty and humiliation (introduced with the Hebrew word כִּי = so), and partly that his salvation encompasses not only Israel’s people but also the Gentile enemies (גוֹיִם), also introduced with כִּי = so, in this way. The clause construction is “just as—so—so (in this way)”: *Just as there were many who were appalled at you, so is his appearance marred more than any man and his form more than the children of Adam. In this way he will sprinkle many nations.*

The Messiah, Zion’s true king, will come in a poor and lowly form (cf. Zec 9:9) and be severely mistreated as he completes his work of atonement, his purification of the sins of all mankind: *Just as there were many who were appalled at you (Isaiah), so is his (the Messiah’s) appearance marred more than any man and his form more than the children of Adam.* And 53:3 adds: “Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not.” How can the LORD’s Messiah, the three-fold Exalted, be so humiliated? It doesn’t make

sense! But it must happen in order for him to complete his mission of salvation: to redeem all mankind and purify them from all sin. This can be concluded from the second כִּן in v. 15a: *In this way* (כִּן, LXX οὕτως) *he will sprinkle many nations* (כִּן רַבִּים גּוֹיִם) (v. 15a), that is, purify them from all sin. Thus, what caused such amazement in Israel was partly the Messiah's poverty and great humiliation, and partly that his salvation mission included אֹיְבֵי, Gentile enemies (compare with Mark 2:16-17).

If one interprets the clause structure in v. 14-15 that the clause "Just as there were many who were appalled at you" (v. 14a) continues with v. 15 ("in this way he will sprinkle many nations") and not with v. 14b, the comparison falters. Therefore, some have asked if הִיָּיַם in v. 15 could possibly mean something else besides "he will sprinkle." Could הִיָּיַם (from the root הִיָּיַם) stem from a similar word in Arabic which means "jump up"? In that case one could translate: "in this way he will make many people marvel (understood as: jump up from astonishment)." Then the comparison does not falter anymore.² But if one does not interpret the first כִּן-clause as an interjecting parenthetical statement, then there is no need to stray from the natural translation of כִּן יִיָּה גּוֹיִם רַבִּים: *In this way he will sprinkle many people*, that is, purify them from all sin. That also agrees with the summary in 53:11: "The righteous one, my servant, will justify the multitudes."

Besides in Isa 52:15, the verb הִיָּיַם appears 23 times in the OT, always with the meaning "sprinkle;" see, e.g., Lev. 4:6; 16:18-19. As a rule, the verb is followed by the preposition עַל ("on") when the meaning is "to sprinkle upon." But here the closest meaning is "sprinkle, purify" and in that case no preposition "on" is needed. Furthermore, the preposition עַל appears immediately after the word "many people," and Hebrew generally avoids two occurrences of עַל following each other so closely. "Many" or "the multitudes" is the OT expression for the general masses, that is, everyone (see also Mt 26:28 and Mk 14:24). So "many people" is the same as "all people."

Can the Messiah really be a king when he appears in such great poverty and humiliation and allows himself to be abused to the point

²Many translations have chosen this as their way out, e.g., the Norwegian Bible from 1930: *således skal han få mange folkeferd til å fare op* ("in this way he will cause many peoples to jump up") and the latest from the 2011 translation: *slik skal mange folkeslag undres* ("so will many nations marvel"). August Pieper translates (*Jesaias II*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1919, p 392) *in Erstaunen setzen* and John N. Oswalt (*The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998], p 374) "startle." The Swedish Church's Bible from 1917 has: *så skall han väcka förundran hos många folk*, "in this way he will arouse astonishment among many peoples." But the majority translates *han ska bestänka*, "he shall sprinkle," *er wird besprengen*.

where he is beyond recognition? And can he really purify all people from their sins, even the wicked $\square'j\ddot{z}$? Other kings have never heard of a king like that. They are absolutely speechless before the LORD's true servant and his actions: *Kings will shut their mouths because of him, for what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will experience* (v. 15). Also the leaders of the Jews could not believe that Jesus was a king, nor could they believe that he could cleanse wicked people from sin. They asked Pilate not to write on the sign above Jesus' cross "king of the Jews": "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews" (Jn 19:21). Neither could they accept that Jesus forgave sins: "He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). Compare Jesus' words: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17), and Paul's words: "To the man who does not perform deeds but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom 4:5).

The Messiah is met with unbelief and rejection (53:1-3)

Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (v 1). Isaiah and the other prophets of the LORD are met with constant doubt in the truth of their proclamation. This is especially true of the gospel of the Messiah's act of salvation, his humiliation and vicarious atonement for all mankind. Paul experienced the truth of Isaiah's words: "But not all accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'" (Ro 10:16).

The "arm of the LORD" refers to the LORD's acts of intervention bringing judgment or salvation (52:10; 59:16). Most people do not realize that the LORD's *suffering* servant is one with the LORD himself, who according to his promise comes to Zion and intervenes to bring judgment and salvation. But some had paid attention to the prophet's teaching. Old Simeon recognized the baby Jesus as the promised salvation ("your salvation"). Luke records that Simeon took the child in his arms and said: "My eyes have seen *your salvation*, which you have prepared in the sight of all people. . . See, this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be *a sign that will be spoken against*" (Lk 2:30-34).

According to human wisdom, the Messiah's outer appearance does not fit his exalted being. If he really is the three-fold Exalted One and a royal high priest who makes atonement for all people, then should he not appear in high priestly brilliance and splendor? But what do we hear from Isaiah, the one who has already seen the coming Messiah and his act of salvation: *He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him*

(v 2). The term “root” appears several times in the Messianic prophecies. In 11:10 the coming Messiah is called “the root of Jesse” and in 4:2 “the Branch of the LORD” (cf. Jer 23:5 and Zec 3:8). A branch or a twig has no outer brilliance or beauty. It is rejected and swept away. That is also what happened to the Messiah. “By violence and judgment he was taken away” (53:8).

In Rev. 5:5 Christ is called “the Root of David.” In 6:13 and 11:1, Isaiah compares Jesse’s son David and his kingdom to a stump, a cut-down tree. But out of that root of Jesse the Messiah would come to take David’s fallen kingdom to new greatness, a greatness of a different kind than what David created. If the people had listened to the prophet’s preaching about the Messiah, then it would not have only been Simeon who recognized the tender shoot as the promised Messiah. But the majority did not recognize him. “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (Jn 1:11). *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not* (v 3).

“A savior who is humiliated, who suffers and dies, cannot be the liberator we desire,” say the wise of this world and man by nature. Those who hope for a messiah after their own imagination are still waiting today for a strong and powerful warrior king or a president with great earthly power. In Jesus’ time people were waiting for a messiah who could liberate the land from the Romans and create a successful earthly kingdom. A Messiah who was severely mistreated and beaten and finally nailed to a cross was despised and seen as a fraud. “They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Messiah! Who hit you?’” (Mt 26:67f). “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the son of God!’ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself’” (Mt 27:39ff).

The expression “familiar with suffering” can also be translated “familiar with sickness.” The translation “sickness” has to be explained because it has a deeper meaning than how we understand it. It is talking about the root of all evil and all suffering, that is, sin and all of its consequences. The Savior is familiar with, that is, he has intimate knowledge of the consequences of the fall into sin: sin, suffering, sickness, hate, and separation from God (see Ps 22). The expression “one from whom men hide their faces” is used in the OT for people who are struck with a curse. That is why the believer prays in the psalms: “Do not hide your face from me” (Ps 102:3). In our place the Messiah was

struck by the curse which rightly should have struck us sinners. Paul writes: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law *by becoming a curse for us*” (Gal 3:13). This is explained in greater detail in the next section, which is located in the middle of the middle of the middle.

The Messiah suffers and dies in the place of sinners (53:4-6)

Here we have the very heart of Isaiah’s proclamation about the Messiah. It is introduced with the Hebrew word יִצְחָק , a reassurance that this is how matters stand. The meaning of יִצְחָק is: this is the true explanation:³ *He, he bore our suffering and our sorrows lay on him like a heavy burden. But we, we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted* (v 4). The words “he” and “we” are specifically emphasized here. In the Hebrew “he” and “we” are already included in the verb, but here they are emphasized further by the free-standing pronouns אֵינִי (“he”) and אֲנִינִי (“we”). “Our suffering” or “infirmities,” that is, the sin corruption in all mankind and its consequences, “lay on him like a heavy burden.” The verb סָבַל means “bear a heavy burden.”

In sharp contrast to this fact follows: “*But we.*” Did we help the promised servant to bear this heavy burden? Just the opposite! We made the burden even heavier through our unbelief. Even though the LORD’s Torah (divine instruction) over and over made clear that our sins must be borne by an innocent substitute in order for them to be taken away and atoned for, the people of Israel (“we”) were spiritually blind to the true meaning of the Messiah’s suffering. According to the regulations in the Torah, many sacrificial animals without defect were required in order to vicariously atone for sin during the time of the old covenant. These sacrifices pointed forward to and foreshadowed the faultlessness of Messiah and his atoning sacrificial death. “You must present a male without defect from the cattle, sheep or goats in order that it may be accepted on your behalf. Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf” (Lev 22:19-20, cf. Mal 1:14). When the promised Messiah comes and once-for-all accomplishes what the Torah so clearly prefigured (cf. Heb 9:11-14), then we do not understand that he is bearing our sins and being sacrificed for them, but we believe that God has stricken, smitten and afflicted him for *his own sins!*

With an emphatic אֵינִי verse 5 makes the correct understanding clear: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.* The language can offer no stronger words than “pierced” and “crushed” to describe the Messiah’s incomprehen-

³In German *fürwahr*; in English often “surely.”

ble suffering and death for the sake of our sins. These words describe what Isaiah saw happen to the Messiah in his vision. Even though Isaiah was the LORD's obedient tool, he writes "*our* transgressions," "*our* iniquities." He knows that he, too, is a sinner for whom the Messiah suffered and died. "Our transgressions are many" (59:12). "All of us are unclean, all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6, MT 64:5). Isaiah does not downplay his own sinful corruption.

The Hebrew word that is translated "transgressions," פְּשָׁעַ in the plural, comes from a verb that means "revolt, rebel" (against God). We have set ourselves against God's holy will and revolted against him and his holy will. The word that is translated "iniquities," עֲוֹן in the plural, literally means "to deal crookedly," including what naturally follows from crooked dealing, namely, "debts." Our debts to God must be paid, but we are not able to pay them. Only the righteous servant can. Our rebellion and our crooked dealing draws God's wrath and punishment down on us. Sinners must be punished. But just as the innocent animal took the place of the sinner, bore his sins and suffered the punishment, so the Messiah takes the punishment on himself: *The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. He removed that which prevented God from standing in a relationship of peace with us. By his wounds we are healed.* A perfect atonement with God is won through the wounds of the servant. Sin, apostasy, rebellion against God, and everything that goes with them was laid on him and atoned for through his suffering and death in our place. "The one who should have had peace was punished, while those who should have been punished have peace" (Luther).

In the next verse our performance is contrasted with the Messiah's unparalleled goodness toward us. We have not contributed any good deed to our salvation. On the contrary: *We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, but the LORD has laid on him the debt of us all* (v 6). Without exception, we are by nature spiritually blind. Helplessly, we go astray, follow our own ways instead of God's ways. But instead of abandoning us, the LORD allows his righteous servant to be judged as guilty and be punished in our place. According to the LORD's will, "all our debt" is laid on the only righteous one, the only one who with his life can pay for all of our crimes and debts.

The Messiah's patience during his innocent mistreatment, judgment, and death (53:7-9)

He was mistreated, but he suffered patiently and did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (v 7). The verb translated here as "mistreated" is used to refer to slave drivers whip-

ping their slaves (e.g., Ex 3:7). The Messiah endured his heavy suffering patiently and voluntarily. Peter comments on Isaiah's prophecy and its fulfillment: "When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pe 2:23).

He was "led like a lamb to the slaughter." Here he is evidently alluding to the one-year old male lamb without defect, taken from the sheep or the goats (see Ex 12:5-7), the Passover lamb whose blood rescued the people. Peter comments on the connection between the Messiah and the Passover lamb: "You were redeemed. . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pe 1:18f). To illustrate the Messiah's patient suffering Isaiah uses the picture of a grown ewe (לָמְדָה) who quietly and patiently allows herself to be shorn.

Verse 8 has been the subject of various interpretations and widely differentiating translations. Here I give the translation which, in my opinion, does the original text the most justice: *By violence and judgment he was taken away. And of his generation—who complained that he was cut off from the land of the living? For the rebellion of my people he was stricken.* Isaiah had seen in advance in his vision how the LORD's righteous servant was mistreated and rejected. He was subjected to violence and condemned to death like the worst of criminals. He was "taken away," that is, executed.

When those in power had treated the LORD's true servant in this gruesome way and condemned him to death, how did his own countrymen, "his generation" (דִּוְרָו), react? The Hebrew word דִּוְרָו means "generation, contemporaries, the own people." Did they come to the defense of the innocent? No, his generation's reaction is so astonishing that "his generation" is placed first, in a position of emphasis: *And of his generation, his own—who complained that he was cut off from the land of the living?*⁴ The Hebrew word translated as "complained" (נִשְׁפָּטָה) here can be translated "considered, reflected on, pitied, complained, was worried." Long before, Moses had already used the word "generation" about his own people when he wrote: "They have acted corruptly toward him, they are a warped and crooked generation (דִּוְרָו)" (Dt 32:5), "a perverse generation (דִּוְרָו), children who are unfaithful" (Dt 32:20).

Jesus uses the word "generation" in the same way as Isaiah and Moses. Concerning the Son of Man (himself) he says: "First he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation (γενεά, the Greek word for דִּוְרָו)" (Lk 17:25). He uses the same word as Moses ("a wicked and unfaithful generation") when talking about the Jewish

⁴Aug. Pieper writes: *Wir haben hier einen Akkusativ der Hinsicht: "und was sein Geschlecht, d. h. seine Zeitgenossen, anbetrifft"* (Jesaias II, p 409).

teachers of the law and the Pharisees (Mt 12:39), and he addresses his people with the words: “O unbelieving and perverse generation” (Mt 17:17). John writes about the Messiah’s own countrymen, his generation: “His own did not receive him” (Jn 1:11). They mindlessly shouted: “Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!” (Jn 19:12).

Why then was the Messiah condemned to death? The last clause in verse 8 gives the answer, an answer which was already given in greater detail in verse 5: *For the rebellion of my people he was stricken*. The word translated as “rebellion” (עֲשָׂוֹן) is the word used for “rebellion against God, transgression of God’s laws.” The Swedish Bible commission in 1878 translated as I have done above, up to the last clause, which they connect with the previous words “for the rebellion of my people, a sin offering for them.” But the concluding words “for the rebellion of my people” should be understood as a new clause, which August Pieper correctly pointed out.⁵ In my opinion, he translates correctly: *Durch Zwang und Richterspruch ward er hinweggerafft, und sein Geschlecht—wer (unter ihnen) hat’s beklagt, dass aus dem Land der Lebenden er weggerissen ward? Ob meines Volkes Frevel traf ihn das Gericht.*⁶

⁵Der Letzte Satz mippescha° etc. lässt sich als selbständige, vom Vorhergehenden unabhängige Aussage fassen (Jesaias II, p 410).

⁶Jesaias II, p. 406. There are above all two Hebrew words which have led to different interpretations of verse 8, partly the word דֹרֹת “generation”, and partly the word דֹרֹתָי. דֹרֹתָי has in several translations been interpreted as “his descendants” (NIV 1984), *seines Lebens Länge* (his whole life long) (Luther 1545, adopted in Karl XII’s Swedish Bible translation 1703), *hans öde* (=his fate, Swedish Bible 2000) and “his time” (Norwegian translation, 2011). The verb דָּוַן, which means “complain, worry about, consider, reflect on” (as a substantive “complaint, worry, reflection”) has in several translations been interpreted as *tenkte* (= thought, Danish 1931), *tenkte på* (=considered, Norwegian 2011), “can speak of” (NIV 1984) and *will ausreden* (Luther 1545), which became *kan uttala* (can express) in Karl XII’s Swedish Bible translation 1703. These interpretations have led to the following deviating translations:

- Danish 1931: *Fra Trængsel og Dom blev han taget, men hvem i hans Samtid tenkte, då han reves fra de levandes Land, att han ramtes for mit Folks Overträdelse?*
- Norwegian 2011: *Etter fengsel og dom ble han tatt bort. Men hvem i hans tid tenkte på at han ble utryddet av de levandes land fordi mitt folks lovbrudd rammet ham?*
- Swedish Bible 2000: *Han blev fängslad och dömd och fördes bort, men vem ägnade hand öde en tanke? Han blev utestängd från de levandes land, straffad för sitt folks brott.*
- NIV 1984: *By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.*
- Luther 1545: *Er ist aber aus der Angst und Gericht genommen; wer will seines Lebens Länge ausreden? Denn er ist aus dem Lande der Lebendigen weggerissen, da er um die Missethat meines Volks geplaget war.*
- Karl XII’s Swedish translation 1703: *Men han är tagen utur ångest och dom: ho kan uttala hans lifslängd? Ty han är borttryckt utaf the lefwandes land: tå han för mitt folks missgerningar plågad war.*

Verse 8 is talking about the death of the Messiah, verse 9 about his burial. The Messiah died as a criminal, and as a criminal he was supposed to be buried among other criminals: *He was to be given a grave among criminals, but he was with a rich one in his death, because he had done no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth* (v 9). Things did not go according to plan. When the Messiah had completed his atoning death as the only one completely righteous, his time of humiliation was over. He suffered and died in the place of sinners. He himself had done “no wrong and no deceit was in his mouth.”

Verse 9 illustrates the transition between the Messiah’s humiliation and his exaltation. The verse’s introduction refers to his humiliation and the continuation of the verse points ahead to his exaltation. Because he was completely without sin and had perfectly fulfilled his work of redemption, he did not belong among criminals. Death could not hold him; he had to be raised to life again. God guided events so that his perfect servant received an honorable burial. This prophecy was fulfilled in this way: “There came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph. . . He went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body.” “He placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of rock” (Mt 27:57-60).

Many translators believe that “with a rich one” does not fit in context. Therefore they conclude that the words of the original must be changed. The Swedish Bible 2000 translates: *Han fick sin grav bland de gudlösa, fick vila bland ogärningsmän* (He was assigned a grave among the godless; he rested among evildoers). The revised Luther translation of 1984 also has *bei Übertäter* instead of Luther’s *wie ein Reicher* (“among evildoers” instead of “as a rich one”). Therefore they translate the preposition לְ as “although” instead of the normal meaning “because.”⁷ The Norwegian Bible from 1930 translated correctly: . . . *men hos en rik var han i sin död, fordi han inget utrett hade gjort* . . . (he was with a rich one in his death, because he had done nothing wrong).

The Messiah’s exaltation and bountiful spoils of victory (53:10-12)

The redemption which Isaiah saw the Messiah accomplish through his innocent suffering and sacrificial death happened according to the LORD’s plan and will: *It was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer. When you make his life a guilt offering, he will see offspring* (צֶדֶק , “seed”) *and prolong days, and the will of the LORD will have success through his hand*” (v. 10). Noteworthy for the guilt offering, which is mentioned 26 times in Leviticus, is the matter of pay-

⁷Die letzte Hälfte des Verses ist Begründung des zweiten Satzes der ersten Hälfte, August Pieper writes correctly (*Jesaias II*, p 412).

ment. Sinners cannot be redeemed or ransomed without payment. An offering without blemish is required, valuable enough to cover all the guilt. In Isaiah 53 the guilt in question is not just the guilt of one person, but of *all* mankind. The author of Hebrews writes: “[Christ] entered the Most Holy Place once for all, *not with the blood of goats and bulls, but with his own blood*, and he won an eternal redemption” (He 9:12). Paul writes: “*One died for all, and therefore all died*” (2 Cor 5:14). In Revelation, Christ is addressed as the true sacrificial lamb: “*With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (Rev 5:9).

The verb $\square\psi\tau$ can be third-person feminine singular or second-person masculine singular. If “his soul” is the subject of $\square\psi\tau$ (the Hebrew word for “soul” is feminine) the translation will be: “When his soul became (carried out) a guilt offering. . .” It is also possible to translate: “When you (God) made his soul a guilt offering. . .” The NT talks both ways about the Messiah’s offering, emphasizing both that God made the Messiah to be sin for us (2 Cor 5:21) and that the Son of Man gave his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28).

The Old Testament guilt offering had to constantly be repeated and new sacrificial animals gathered because the animal that had been sacrificed remained in the realm of death. But the story is different for the Messiah, the LORD’s true servant. He does not remain in the realm of death. After his completed sacrificial death, he receives life again. Death had no right to hold the righteous. “He will see his offspring and live long,” and that’s exactly what happened. The expression $\square\tau\tau$ $\tau\tau\tau$ (in Akkadian *urruku ume*) literally means “prolong days.” Death cannot place a limit on the days of the righteous Messiah and his children. After he fulfilled redemption he will rise from the dead and no death can now shorten his days.

The expression “will see offspring” guides our thoughts to *God’s promise to the patriarchs of numerous offspring* (see Ge 15:5; 22:17; 28:14), a promise which later on is bound to the new David: “I will make the descendants of David my servants and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore” (Jer 33:22). The Messiah’s sacrificial death is a death leading to life and abundant fruit. The promise to the fathers and to David comes into fulfillment. Cf. Rev 7:9: “After this I looked, and see: *a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language*, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.”

For the sake of his suffering he will see it and be satisfied. By his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will declare the many righteous, and he is the one who bears their debts (v 11). “He will see it,”

namely, he will see what the LORD had promised his Messiah: that he “will see offspring” and be raised to life again (“prolong days”).⁸ The LORD’s will has success through the hand of his servant. Because the Messiah patiently and obediently carries out his Father’s will and offers his sin-free life in the place of every sinner, he will see the fruits of his suffering: eternal life for a bountiful offspring. Compare Jesus’ words about the bountiful fruit brought about through his death: “Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it *dies, it produces much fruit*” (Jn 12:24).

What do the words “*by his knowledge*” mean? The Hebrew word for knowledge (יָדָעַ) has a rich meaning. It is used not only for knowing something but also for an intimate relationship, e.g., between husband and wife (“the husband *knew* his wife,” Ge 4:1). By the Messiah’s knowledge and perfect relationship with the LORD, completely without sin, his righteousness is reckoned to “the many,” that is, all sinners. He, the only righteous one, through his vicarious atonement justifies “the many” because he has atoned for all their sins, carried them and paid for them. “His knowledge” can also mean “knowledge about him (the Messiah).” In that case the meaning would be that those who know the Messiah and live in close fellowship with him are declared righteous by him, that is, justified *through faith* (the so-called subjective justification). Considering the context, the emphasis here probably rests on the objective justification, that is, what the righteous servant (the Messiah) does and what he has accomplished through his act of redemption. To be sure, the whole way through the text is talking about the true servant’s act of salvation, his complete faithfulness to the LORD’s will in contrast with our unfaithfulness.

Therefore I will give him the many as an inheritance and the strong as spoils, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered among criminals. He was the one who bore the sin of the many and took the place of the criminals (v 12). With the word “*therefore*” the concluding verse powerfully underscores the reason for the righteous servant’s victory over death. By taking the place of sinners, suffering and dying in their place, the Messiah bore the sin of all mankind and paid their debt of sin. As the LORD’s righteous servant, death could not hold him; he rose to life again and won great spoils of victory. He even defeated “the strong” and now offers “the many” an eternal inheritance. Like Isaiah, Paul uses the word “*therefore*” to underscore the cause of the Messiah’s victory over death and his great exaltation: He “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! *Therefore* God exalted him to the highest position and gave him the name that is above every name” (Php 2:8-9).

⁸1QIsa^a, 1QIsa^b, and 4QIsa^d have the addition “light”: “he will see *light*.”

Earlier in his book Isaiah already made use of a military idiom to illustrate the result of the LORD's act of salvation: "See, his reward is with him, and his plunder accompanies him" (40:10b). "They rejoice before you . . . as men rejoice when dividing the plunder" (9:3b). The great battle against God's enemies focuses in on the enemies' sin and death. They must be defeated, and the only Righteous One defeats them. "The many" are now his spoils of victory, his possession which has been bought at the heavy price of his innocent blood. The victory was not won with the help of a large, earthly army. The righteous servant was alone, rejected and forsaken by men, when he "took the place of the criminals." The Messiah "placed himself between the transgressors and the punishment they had earned."⁹ Cf. 63:3: "I have trodden the winepress, *I alone; no one from the nations helped me.*"

It is striking how little Isaiah 52:13–53:12 talks about man's contribution to being saved. Men have nothing to offer the LORD's suffering servant besides their sins. They have not supported him or helped him bear the heavy burden of sin. The great contrast in "Isaiah 53" is between "he" and "we": "*He* was despised and rejected by men," "*he* was pierced for *our* transgressions," "the punishment that brought *us* peace was upon *him*," "*he* had done no wrong," "*we* all like sheep have gone astray," "*we* did not esteem him," "it was *he* who took up *our* infirmities and *our* sorrows. They lay on *him* like a heavy burden."¹⁰

⁹C. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p 246.

¹⁰Until the end of the 1700s, Christian commentators were in near unanimous agreement that Isaiah 53 was a Messianic prophecy. In and with "the Enlightenment" and rationalism, however, that all changed. At the same time as people began to deny that Isaiah wrote Isa 40–66, the interpretation of Isa 53 began to change. We can find a typical rationalistic conclusion in F. Hitzig's commentary: "The Messianic interpretation is completely in conflict with the essence of the prophecy, which excludes prediction" (*Der Prophet Jesaja*, Heidelberg 1833, p 577). Still today exegetes have differing opinions about to whom the suffering servant is referring. Those who believe that the servant is an individual suggest, among others, a contemporary to Deutero-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah himself, a historical person from the past (Moses, Jeremiah, or a Messianic pretender). Those who think that the servant is a group suggest the nation of Israel or a particular group within Israel, the ideal Israel or a righteous minority (see Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40–66* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012], p 397). R. N. Whybray believes that "Isa 53" must have been written by one of Deutero-Isaiah's disciples in thanksgiving that Deutero-Isaiah had been freed from Babylonian captivity, where he has been subjected to suffering (*Isaiah 40–66* [London: Oliphants, 1975], p. 176f). It is tragic that exegetes, who are supposed to come to a correct biblical interpretation by studying the facts, can express so much loose speculation without the least bit of support from any sources.