

The Fourth Song Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 Revised Standard Version

This really is the one which Christians get excited about. It seems to have so many associations with the suffering and death of Jesus. First I think we need to look at what is said. Second we need to iron out any difficulties that apply to Deutero Isaiah.

This fourth song is made up of 5 units

precis

52:13-15 Behold my servant shall prosper. He will be exalted and lifted up. His appearance was marred though beyond human semblance Kings will be horrified by his appearance
His presence and suffering has international effects

53:1-3 Kings and nations express their dismay
He grew up like a young plant (?branch) He was despised and rejected by men

53:4-6 World rulers continue to speak - formerly they had no respect for the servant. He had been smitten and afflicted by God. Actually he had been suffering in their stead His humiliation and affliction was the source of their healing. His sacrifice was a redemptive act for their welfare
“All of us, like sheep have gone astray.”

53:7-9 Nations are still speaking emphasising the way in which the servant endured his hardship – without complaint or vindictiveness – “lamb to the slaughter...” . He died in loneliness and was buried in a criminal’s grave.

53:10-12 The servant typifies the meek who will inherit the earth. God is the speaker here. This was not a martyrdom. Yahweh punishes the servant on behalf of others. The servant’s sacrifice was an activity within the activity of God.

Text

¹³Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high.¹⁴As many were astonished at him^[b]—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men—¹⁵so shall he startle^[c] many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand.

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?²For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.³He was despised and rejected^[d] by men a man of sorrows,^[e] and acquainted with grief;^[f] and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴Surely he has borne our griefs^[g] and carried our sorrows;^[h] yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief;^[i] when he makes himself^[j] an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand; ¹¹he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Questions that might be asked of the text

1. Is the action being described present or future?

All three tenses are used in the text

2. To what extent is this vicarious suffering? – suffering on behalf of others.

Leviticus 16:8-26 described the atonement scapegoat who carries the sins of the community. Two goats are presented for sins, one is sacrificed and the other has the sins of the community symbolically laid on it and is chased away into the wilderness – hence the name scapegoat.

The Priestly writer of the Pentateuch at about the time Deutero-Isaiah was writing recorded and codified the Pre-Exilic system of sacrifice which had been in operation at the Temple. What is described here is something quite different from anything that had gone before.

3. Final exaltation of the servant?

¹²Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
What is being said here? - what is the impact of these verses?

4. Could the servant be the Messiah?