

STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 7

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“The Servant of the Lord”

(“*Historia Salutis* vs. *Ordo Salutis*”)

Among the “motifs” or central themes in which the Bible casts its vision of the future, we have so far considered the seed, the land, the Day of the Lord, the salvation of the nations, and the last days. Now there are many eschatological motifs that concern the personage who would bring in the kingdom of God. Much of the prophecy of the future, as you know, is cast in terms of the appearance and the career of a coming individual. He would be the fulfillment of the expectation of the seed of the woman, his coming would be the great and terrible Day of the Lord, he would bring his people into the land, he would gather the nations to himself, and it would be his coming that would mark the appearance of the Last Days. Typical of the prophecies of the Bible, even now that we live in the Last Days, even though Jesus Christ has already come, we are still looking for him, his second coming, which will bring history to its end. His second coming is *the* Day of the Lord, according to the NT, we will enter the land when he comes again, and so on. In the matter of these prophecies of a coming individual the *prophetic perspective* still applies. The future is seen as a single whole, and the steps and stages of the unfolding of God’s purpose are not set out in their detail. When, in Jacob’s blessing of his son Judah, we first encountered the promise that the seed of the woman would be a great king whose coming would bless the world with unparalleled prosperity (Gen. 49:8-12), we had no idea that there would be two comings, separated by thousands of years.

Now, you know the various motifs of the Bible’s prophecy of Jesus Christ. He will be a prophet (Deut. 18:17), like the great prophets of the OT but greater still. He will be a king (this is the primary motif and the origin of the term “Messiah,” – the term means “the One Anointed to be King” – ; a king who will sit on David’s throne forever). And he will be a priest, though a priest after the order of Melchizedek. We could very easily consider each of those three offices as eschatological motifs in a separate study.

I chose instead, however, to sum up much of that teaching about the future by having us look at another of these motifs of the messiah to come, by whom and through whom the biblical vision of the future will come to pass, viz. *The Servant of the Lord*.

Turn, please, to Isaiah and let me summarize for you the “Servant of the Lord” material we find in that great book. This “Servant of the Lord” is key to Isaiah’s prophecy of the future. The famous “Servant Songs” are found in chapters 42, 49, 50, and, of course, most famously in 52:13-53:12. Now, Isaiah doesn’t call these texts “Servant Songs,” that is a scholar’s way of organizing Isaiah’s material, and it seems entirely fair to do so. Each of those texts is a poem about the Servant of the Lord. Furthermore, these four songs are thoroughly integrated into Isaiah’s prophecy, especially from chapter 40 through chapter 55 and “Servant” occurs frequently in these chapters outside of the four “Servant Songs.” Now taken together this material presents a multi-layered account of the servant.

The servant is sometimes in this material the nation of Israel.

Isaiah 41:8-9: “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.”

There are a number of texts in which *the servant is identified with the people of Israel*. Then there are instances in which the term, servant, is applied to *the believing remnant within the nation of Israel*.

Isaiah 48:20: “Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, ‘The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob.’ ”

There are other texts like these in these chapters in which either Israel as a whole or the faithful remnant is addressed as the Servant of the Lord.

But, without a doubt, *the term is used in these chapters of an individual*. Isaiah already has distinguished between Israel as a nation and Israel as a remnant of faithful followers of God – the term can refer to either entity, not all Israel are Israel, as Paul would later say. Now Isaiah goes on to distinguish the faithful remnant from the particular Servant who represents it and redeems it. In a sense we can say, just as Israel was once an individual man – Jacob or Israel, the grandson of Abraham –, so it will be again reduced to an individual man, the Servant of the Lord. As one scholar puts it, the individual Servant of the Lord is called “Israel” not because the nation is being viewed in some kind of idealized form, but because the nation has forfeited the right to its name (as Isaiah says in 48:1), and this one Servant alone has the right, the true right, to use it still. This is the man who is everything Israel should have been.

There is then in this section of Isaiah and his teaching about the Servant of the Lord a series of concentric circles, as it were, with Israel the nation in the outer circle, the faithful remnant of Israel a circle within that circle, and, finally, the Servant of the Lord as the individual Redeemer in the innermost circle.

There is all manner of evidence that Isaiah is certainly thinking in these chapters of the life and work of a particular individual: he is born of a woman (49:1, 5); he is the Lord’s chosen agent (42:1); and, while identified with the people, he is distinct from the nation. All of this is found elsewhere in these chapters, but is strongly emphasized in the fourth song in 52:13-53:12. Here, for example, we find not only someone with a particular life history, but a man who committed no sin (as we read in v. 9)! As verse 6 indicates, this servant could not be Israel, for Israel needs the forgiveness this Servant provides. And, as v. 8 indicates, he cannot be God’s people because he was stricken for the transgression of God’s people.

What is more, there is, in all of this material about the Servant a linking up with the great messianic prophecies of the early chapters of Isaiah, especially chapters 2, 7, and 9. This servant will be a man among men, with special gifts and endowments from God. He is both identified with the Lord and distinguished from Him, as in Isaiah 9, the child who is born but whose name will be Mighty God and Everlasting Father. Jack Collins, for example, draws attention to the

language of 52:13, where the Servant is described as “raised, lifted up, and highly exalted,” which is almost exactly how God is described in Isaiah 6:1 in the vision that Isaiah had of him in the temple.

Or, in 49:1, when the Servant says, “Listen to me...”, language is put in the Servant’s mouth that Isaiah elsewhere puts only in the Lord’s mouth. He is identified with the “Arm of the Lord” in 51:9 where the Arm of the Lord is identified as a person and the acts of the Lord are ascribed to him, and again in 53:1, and so on. And in the description of his life and work, we find the Servant fulfilling the offices of a prophet (49:1-2), a priest (53:10), and a king (42:1-4), which last makes him, of course, the Messiah. In 61:1-2, a text explicitly about the Anointed One, or Messiah, the same thing is said about him – viz. that the Spirit of the Lord is put upon him – as is said about the Servant in 42:1. There are many such overlappings in this material.

What is more – and this is a very helpful way to see the servant prophecies in the larger eschatological context of the Bible – in 52:13-53:12, the last and greatest of these Servant Songs, is followed by what one writer calls “two tailpieces,” viz. chapters 54 and 55.

Before in 49:6, for example, we read that the Servant of the Lord will do two things: he will restore Zion, Israel to its true covenant with the Lord, and he will bring the Gentiles also, bringing God’s salvation to the end of the world. In other words, he will be the means by which other parts of the Bible’s vision of the future will come to pass. The salvation of the nations will be his doing, for example. And this is confirmed by the two “tailpieces” that follow the last servant song in Isa. 53.

After the most complete and explicit account of his work as the Servant in 52:13-53:12, we have, in the following two chapters, these two results described: the restoration of Israel in chapter 54 and the salvation of the nations in 55. Note, for example 55:5:

“Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

In these great achievements, also, the Servant of the Lord fulfills the great messianic prophecies of the early chapters of Isaiah: He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, but the result of that will be that the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Now, all of this material in Isaiah is like Cinderella’s slipper. Only one foot could possibly fit it. When, in the Middle Ages, the great Jewish commentator, Rashi, developed the Servant = Israel interpretation (that is, it did not refer to an individual but only to the nation), no doubt as an alternative to the Christian interpretation of Isaiah’s servant songs, Maimonides, the 12th century scholar sometimes referred to as the Second Moses, referred to Rashi’s interpretation as “preposterous.” Israel as a nation couldn’t fit the description of the Servant given by Isaiah.

And, of course, this is what we are taught in the New Testament. You remember when Philip met the Ethiopian in the wilderness and found him reading from Isaiah 53, the last of the four

Servant Songs, we read that Philip “began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” And in Luke 4, where we have the record of Jesus’ very first sermon, we find that he took as his text Isa. 61:1-2, as we said a text about “the Anointed One,” or the Messiah, which is indisputably also about the Servant of the Lord, and declared that “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Now, with that introduction to the “Servant of the Lord” let me take you back to Isaiah 42:1-7.

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Now, let me just draw your attention to a few observations on this text.

1. We definitely find the prophetic perspective here. “I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” There is nothing to suggest that this bringing of justice will require two comings or a lengthy period of human history in between.
2. There is, however, some hint here that the consummation of God’s kingdom will not come in a moment. We read in v. 4 that the servant will not “falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.”
3. The servant will be the instrument of bringing about the great consummation of salvation in the world. We have that in v. 4 where we read that “the islands will put their hope” in his law.

So, we can summarize this way: the Servant of the Lord, the coming Great Prophet, Priest, and King, the Messiah, will bring about the future that has been prophesied, the coming of the kingdom of God, the salvation of the nations of the world, the judgment of the enemies of God, and the settling of God’s people finally in the land, the eternal country. The prophecy of the glorious future of God’s people is also the prophecy of a man by whom that future comes to pass. The seed of the woman and of Abraham and of Judah and of David is the Servant of the Lord.

Now I want to make a negative point as well as a positive one from this material because there is a misunderstanding that, in my judgment, bedevils the reading and interpreting of the Bible nowadays, even in our own Reformed circles, and it concerns the coming of the Messiah or the Servant and his work in the world.

We know very well what a remarkable event it was when he came into the world. When he began preaching he said to his hearers that the kingdom of God had come among them. And, of course, the great prophecies of the OT prophets present the coming of the Messiah, or the Servant as a titanic development that brings salvation to the world. There is no doubt about that. As we read the great fourth servant song in Isaiah 53, one of the most beloved chapters in all of the Bible, we understand without question that the Messiah will come to save his people from their sins, just as the angel told Joseph he would.

But, of course, no one thinks that nobody was saved before Jesus died on the cross and rose again, though many theologians and preachers speak as if to suggest that nobody was saved before the incarnation. It is intensely frustrating, but you come across this way of speaking all the time, as if until Christ died and rose again there was no salvation. But, God’s people had

long before been receiving the benefits of Christ's atonement. They were saved by a sacrifice *to be given* as we are saved by that same sacrifice *now given*. That point is confirmed a hundred ways in the Bible. Christ is, in one place, called "the lamb slain before the foundation of the world," indicating that the certainty of his saving work was a fact of human life long before the Lord Jesus was crucified during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. The gospel – which in the parlance of the NT is the good news of salvation and eternal life received by faith in Jesus Christ who died for his people's sins – was preached to Israel in the wilderness we read in Hebrews 4 and was believed by Abraham centuries before that, we read in Galatians 3. And as it was embraced people were saved then as now.

So, the question becomes: how are we to understand the chronological significance of the coming of the Servant of the Lord. It makes a difference.

I heard a fine sermon at our recent General Assembly. It was preached by a prominent Presbyterian Church in America minister. It was taken from Genesis 18 and Abraham's pleading with God for the deliverance of Sodom from the divine judgment that had been pronounced against it. You remember how Abraham asked if God would destroy the city if there were 50 righteous people in it? And God said that he would not. And then Abraham kept lowering the threshold. Would God destroy Sodom if there were 40 righteous people; 30; 20; even 10? The sermon was a summons for us to be like Abraham and exercise a priestly role toward unbelievers around us, praying as he did for the salvation of the pagan cities of our world. That was a great point and its application was made very well in the sermon. And the text certainly does present Abraham in that priestly role, seeking the salvation of the unbelieving world.

However, in explaining the meaning of Abraham's daring discussion with God, the preacher at GA argued that Abraham stopped at ten because he realized that there was no righteous man in Sodom, that there could be no righteous man, that what the people of Sodom needed was a man who was far more righteous than any ordinary man in this world ever was, is, or will be. The descending numbers in Abraham's pleading on Sodom's behalf emphasized the need for Jesus Christ, the one righteous man, who could in fact make up for the great sins of the multitudes who fill up the cities of the world. But that man had not yet come. But, said the preacher, he has come now. We have a high priest that Abraham did not have. We have an argument in pleading with God for the salvation of the lost that Abraham could not have made in his time, so long before the appearance of the Servant of the Lord.

Well, there were many problems with that preacher's exposition of Gen. 18, in my view. "Righteous" as it is used there, when Abraham speaks of a certain number of righteous men, refers to the character and quality of a believing life, it does not refer to the perfect righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers when they trust in him. In the context that seems entirely clear. What is more, the Bible itself, even Peter in the NT, says that Lot was a righteous man which seems to contradict the preacher's assertion that Abraham knew he would not find a righteous man in Sodom because such a man had not yet appeared in the world.

But the larger problem is to say that Abraham did not have Jesus Christ and his righteousness, he did not have the High Priest that we have today. He certainly did. The Bible says he did. Abraham is said in the NT to have been a believer in Christ long before the Messiah came into

the world and to have been given Christ's righteousness through faith. Fact is, if Abraham didn't have Christ and Christ's righteousness, then he could not have been saved; but Abraham was saved, by our Savior's express testimony. One hears such things being said all the time about how, now that Christ has come, we have his righteousness and his Spirit and communion with God. But, the Bible makes it unmistakably clear that saints in the epoch before the incarnation of the Son of God had those things as well. They had them by reason of the anticipation of what Jesus would do; we have them on the basis of the work that Christ has done. The benefits of Christ's sacrifice and righteousness were applied in the epoch before the incarnation *proleptically or prospectively*, in view of what Christ *would do*. God, of course, knew the future, knew what his son would accomplish on behalf of his people, and, standing above time as he does, he could apply the benefits of his life and death *prospectively*, in view of that certain future, to those believers, to the elect of God, who lived before the incarnation. It is not so different from our being said to have been already seated in the heavenly places in Jesus Christ in Ephesians 2. We are there in principle because we will certainly someday be there because of what Christ has done for us. The certainty of his second coming, which has not yet taken place, renders us the beneficiaries of that second coming already. In the same way, the certainty of his first coming, renders believers in the ancient epoch beneficiaries of the consequences of his first coming before hand.

What is certain, however, is that we cannot say, we must not say that Abraham did not have the High Priest that we now have or that he did not have the perfect righteousness that we now have through faith in Christ. That is not only unbiblical, it is impossible. No one could be saved in any other way than by the priestly work of Jesus Christ, no one ever has been saved in any other way. Well, then, what are we to say about all this in the Bible about the Servant coming and bringing salvation and achieving salvation for his people? If God's people already had that salvation, what is Jesus bringing with him and accomplishing for his people?

Well let me introduce you to an important theological distinction. It will help you in your reading of the Bible to keep this distinction clear in your mind. It is the distinction between *historia salutis*, the history of salvation, and *ordo salutis*, the way of salvation. With *historia salutis*, the history of salvation, we are thinking of the unfolding events in their order by which the salvation of the world is accomplished, from its promise first in Gen. 3:15 to its accomplishment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to its consummation in the second coming of the Lord Jesus and the new heavens and the new earth. In this sense, there is no salvation at all until Christ dies on the cross, pays the price of our sin in our place, and rises to new life on the third day. In this sense we understand very simply the statements we find everywhere in the NT to the effect that Christ came into the world and brought salvation to his people.

With *ordo salutis* or way of salvation, we speak of the experience of God's grace and the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of life that takes place in every believer's own personal history. Here we are speaking of the new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit, justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ, adoption into the family of God, and sanctification or the transformation of life, as these various dimensions of salvation are experienced by God's elect one by one. In this sense, God's people have been experiencing salvation in the same way, in the same dimensions, and with the same effects from the very

beginning of history to our own day. The gospel and Jesus Christ, in this sense, have been the same yesterday, today, and forever. Christ's coming into history secured salvation for all the people of God, but the salvation he secured has been known to God's people since Adam and Eve.

You see, when Jesus came into the world, when the Son of God became a man, he did not come to lift the spiritual experience of his people up above what it had been before. The significance of his coming was not some relative improvement in the spiritual life and blessing of the people of God. Jesus came to save his people from their sins. He came to save all his people from all their sins, all his people from Adam to the last Christian who will become a Christian before Jesus Christ returns to the earth. That work had to be done, divine justice had to be satisfied, the sacrifice had to be made. The fact that Christ redeemed his people from their sins *in the middle of history* can be confusing, given that the salvation he purchased for them with his own life and death, he has, by the Holy Spirit, applied to them from the beginning of human history. But that is the way the Bible speaks and that is the only way we can conceive of its teaching and of the experience of the saints through the ages. It is the same salvation from beginning to end. It was proclaimed from the beginning, purchased in the middle of history, and awaits to be consummated at the end of history.

Now, what is significant about all of this for biblical eschatology is that in this way we see the promise of the Messiah and his kingdom for what it is, a promise of the work he would do in the world that would save his people from their sins and, then, later, at his second coming bring all things to their completion. The prophecies of the OT do not concern themselves with relative differences between the situation and circumstances of God's people in the epochs of human history that succeed one another in time. They concern the outworking of salvation in the work of Jesus Christ. They concern *historia salutis* not *ordo salutis*. You do not find the notion anywhere in these prophecies of the future that we Christians of the NT epoch will live on a higher spiritual plane or walk nearer to God or enjoy a greater measure of spiritual triumph than did the saints of the past. Rather you find instead an account of what Christ would do *for all his people* and how he would bring that salvation *to them all*. That is the case whether we are considering the texts that speak of the coming Messiah, or the coming Priest, or the coming Prophet, or the Servant of the Lord.

This is not a central point, but I have been often reminded that it is a caution needing to be given or the Bible will be understood to teach what it does not. And the results of that misunderstanding can sometimes be very significant, especially when Christians are led to think that the Old Testament scriptures, the first 39 books of the Bible, contain and represent an inferior spiritual life and experience and the authority of those first 39 books is thereby diminished in Christian hearts.

No, the salvation has always been the same. Where it came from and how it was achieved, that is the great story of the Servant of the Lord.