

The Messiah in Isaiah

The Servant of the Lord in the Context of the Book of Isaiah

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Unless mentioned otherwise the Bible quotations are from the NIV.

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Foreword

This essay belongs to a seminar I hold on 26 May 2019 in the International Church of Leiden. Ideally the seminar would be a summary of this essay, but this is not how it has worked out. The content is approximately the same. I hope I have spotted all contradictions. It remains an unfinished document. I do not have the time to make it perfect, and is perfection not highly overrated?

This essay (as did the seminar) deals with a very difficult subject in the study of the Old Testament: who is the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40–54? Experts do not agree on this. I have come to the conclusion that the anonymity of the servant, the ambiguity of his identity, but also the close connection he has to Israel, all need to be part of our understanding of this servant. That is not an easy story to tell (or to understand). Especially if we try to understand the passages about this servant in its literary and historical context. But I would suggest we face similar problems if we try to understand these passages in a canonical or christological context. I do not think I understand everything about this servant, but I believe that I am moving in the direction of a better understanding. Both the seminar as this essay reflect the understanding I have now reached. In time this will change. Understanding the servant in Isaiah needs time and more reflection. But I am happy to explain what I now understand in the hope that it help hearers and readers on their own journey of understanding this part of the Bible. And I hope and pray it will lead to a better understanding of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Introduction

1.1 Jesus and the servant in Isaiah

Since the late nineteenth century it has been customary to distinguish in Isaiah the four Songs of the Servant of the Lord. They can be found in Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12.¹ The first passage is quoted in Matthew 12:18–20. Isaiah 49:6 is quoted in Acts 7:16. The third passage is not directly quoted in the New Testament. The fourth passage is quoted several times. 52:15 is quoted in Romans 15:21; 53:1 in John 12:38 and Romans 10:16; 53:4 in Matthew 8:17. 1 Peter 2:24–25 do not quote explicitly, but the words used there are very similar to Isaiah 53:4–6. 53:7–8 are quoted in Acts 8:32–33; 53:9 in 1 Peter 2:22; and 53:12 in Luke 22:37. Besides these quotations there are also numerous allusions to these passages. This all suggests strongly that these four passages are about the Messiah, which means they are about Christ Jesus.

However, when I read through Isaiah 40–54 I get the impression that the meaning of all those words applies to the time of writing, to the time of the exile, and not to a far future, like 500 years later. This reference to the future is not absent, to be sure, but the emphasis is on what is happening now, what YHWH² is doing now.

Another ‘however’ is that the word ‘servant’ is also used in ch. 40–54 outside the passages often labelled as the Servant Songs. In some of those texts the servant is clearly and unambiguously Israel or Jacob.

Still, reading through those chapters it is also very easy to see the parallels to Jesus. So, how does this work? How should we understand this?

1.2 Understanding Prophecy

The mistake that is often made is that prophecy is seen as prediction. Prophecies fulfilled in Jesus are then predictions that have come true in him. Hundreds of years before prophets already spoke words about him, only about him, and Jesus lived to fulfil them. This is not true.

1 This is according to the NRSV. The NIV has the same division except for chapter 50, that is there taken as one whole, although the superscription suggests the 50:4–11 is also seen as a Servant Song.

2 These four letters refer to the proper name of the God of Israel. The Hebrew Old Testament has only the consonants of this name, but scholars are pretty certain it was pronounced as Yahweh. I follow the tradition of the Hebrew text here is just write the consonant. In English translations the traditional rendering with LORD (in small capitals) is used.

Prophets speak the word of God into the present. There can be elements that refer to a future, but these are predictions pure and plain. Prophets speak the word of God, but they also speak out who God is and what this means for present and future. YHWH's will and heart shines through those words. That is where the emphasis lies. Without this connection to YHWH prophecies are misunderstood. When these prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus, it is said that in Jesus those words have come to their fullest meaning, showing fully who God is, what his plan is, what his heart and his will are.

An example of how the fulfilment of a passage does not exhaust its meaning but can go together with another reading, is 1 Corinthians 13, that chapter on the value of love. The intention of Paul is to explain the importance of loving one another, which is more important than other gifts. We can also see that the love described there finds its fullest expression, its fulfilment, in Jesus. These two can go together in our understanding of that chapter.³

It is, therefore, possible that a prophecy refers to something in the time of the prophet and his contemporaries, but also to the Messiah and to Jesus. That the words of the prophets had meaning beyond their own time, was also the belief of the scribes who copied and edited the words of the prophets. The original historical context is often not clear, but in the books the words of the prophets are placed into a literary context by which their meaning is saved for following generations. These following generations reflects on these words and on their continuous meaning for them and their children.

According to the New Testament it is not only messianic prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but the whole Old Testament: law, prophets and psalms.⁴ That also non-prophetic passages are quoted in the New Testament as fulfilled, shows that fulfilment is more than predictions coming true. It is about finding the ultimate meaning, about pieces falling into place, about a better understanding of the Old Testament, but also about how the Old Testament helps us to understand who Jesus is. For example, Isaiah 53 has helped the first Christians to understand and explain the suffering and death at the cross of Jesus. And the cross has helped them to read that chapter in a certain light.

I would then propose that understanding the prophets in their own context is very important for our understanding of who Jesus is and the meaning of his life, death and resurrection. That is why we will focus in this essay on the Book of Isaiah itself and postpone the question how this all relates to and is fulfilled in Jesus. Not that these latter questions are unimportant. On the contrary, we read Isaiah carefully because these questions *are* important.

1.3 Prophecy in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament we find prophets without books and those with a book. They may have been very similar in their actual performance, but they are very different in how they speak to

3 This example is taken from H. G. M. Williamson, *Variations on a Theme* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 143–144.

4 See for example Luke 24:25–27.

us. Examples of prophets without books are Elijah, Elisha and Nathan. We know about them because they appear in the books of Samuel and Kings. People like Elijah and Elisha speak to us through their actions. Their words mainly speak to their contemporaries. There is not much in their words that is still relevant for later generations. An exception is Nathan's prophecy to David in 2 Samuel 7, that is very important for later messianic expectations.

Isaiah is a prophet with a book. The implication of this is that his words are also meaningful and relevant beyond his own time for later generations. For prophets with books their words in those books are more important than their historical performance, about which we know almost nothing. When these words were written down, their context changed. The books were edited very carefully and thoughtfully.

Overall, scholars can be divided into two groups in how they think about the relationship of prophets and their books, for us: about Isaiah and his book. There are those that see Isaiah as the actual originator of the whole book and all prophecies therein. A special variant in the case of the Book of Isaiah is that Isaiah ben Amoz of the eighth century is responsible for the first part and that an exilic prophet, generally called Deutero-Isaiah is responsible for the second part.

Another group see Isaiah as the beginning of his prophecies, but not as the originator of them all. Isaiah is then more seen as the starter of a certain discourse. This discourse is taken up and continued in following generations. Isaiah remains the central authority behind this discourse, but all words go back to him. Anonymous authors and editors, scribes, copy and edit and actualise and add to this, until we get the Book of Isaiah as we have it.

These two options reflect different cultures. The first makes more sense when we think about writing and creativity, but also about inspiration as a personal and individual process. The second one assumes that the same can be done in a collective way, while still having its own style and character.

For us as believers it is important to realise that the Bible as we have it, in this case the Book of Isaiah as we have it, is the one that has authority for us and that we consider to be the inspired word of God. How this text came into being is not unimportant, but this importance is secondary and subordinated to reading and interpreting the text as we have now.

1.4 Three levels of interpretation

Historical context

Like other prophets Isaiah spoke against a specific historical context. His words had meaning for his contemporaries. Of this historical context only a few hints have been preserved for us. In the first twelve chapters, for example, the most important background is that of the so-called Syro-Ephraimite war: Jerusalem is attacked by a coalition of Aram and Ephraim during the reign of Ahaz. To this conflict is referred explicitly in chapter 7. To understand chapter 7,

but also chapter 8, we need to know something about that historical background, of what happened then.

The historical background of a large part of the Isaiah 1–39 is the rise of the Assyrian empire. This rise was an up and down process for some time after a period when there was no major power controlling the Ancient Near East. For Ephraim and Judah one of most important questions became: how to deal with this new power? Should we resist it, or should we make a deal with it? Ephraim was conquered by the Assyrian and Samaria was destroyed in 722 BC. Judah was also attacked and almost destroyed. At one point only Jerusalem was left and besieged. It was almost conquered, but had a narrow escape.

There are several prophecies in Isaiah that should be read against this background. The country was left destroyed, but still independent. Possibly the whole idea of a remnant that survives goes back to this narrow escape.

After this the power of the Assyrians waned, which gave Judah the space to recover. Then the Babylonians came and they conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, leading many into exile. Already in the first part we find references to and prophecies about the Babylonians, but they become more important in the second part of the book. There the historical context is the end of the exile and the time thereafter. We do not much about the time of the exile and thereafter. We can only speculate about the specific circumstances by reading Isaiah itself and receive a little help from Ezra-Nehemiah and other post-exilic books.

In Isaiah 40 and following the end of the exile is announced, the end of 'hard service'. This end comes when the Persian king Cyrus (mentioned twice in the following chapters) conquers the city of Babylon. He did so without much of a fight. The reason that it went so easy is probably that the last Babylonian king was a heretic. He favoured the worship of the moon god Sin, not that of the Babylonian main god Marduk (also named Bel). So the inhabitants of Babylon, the city of Marduk, and the priests of Marduk were not happy with this king, who lived at his residence in the desert. This is possibly the reason Cyrus met little resistance. After he had conquered Babylon he restored the worship of Marduk and thanks Marduk for this success.

When we read through Isaiah 40–48 we see that is some competition between YHWH and Marduk. Who is really the great god? Who has really put an end to the power of the Babylonians and to the exile? The Persian propaganda in Babylon said: Marduk. In Isaiah YHWH is said to be the true God. He was the one who called Cyrus. He is in control of history. He was responsible for the new opportunities the Jews now get because of the change in regime. This is possibly the background of part of the dialogues in Isaiah 40–48. The way the making and consecration of idols are described reflect what we know about customs in Babylon.

We know that for those who did return that the situation in Judah was not simple. There were tensions. There were different groups with different ideas. Maybe some of that tension was also present among the Jews in Babylon. If the servant in Isaiah 49–53 represents a group and not just an individual, then this tension must have been serious and the group

represented by the servant, must have felt oppressed. Still, they felt YHWH was on their side and that through all suffering he would help them to succeed.

When we read the last part, chapters 56–66, we see that in Judah the tension persisted. There was a gap between rich and poor, there was injustice, there was disagreement of how to relate to the foreigners, and there was probably some disagreement around the temple. It is likely that these chapters were written by a group that struggled with all this and that had an opinion here. They sketch their vision, inspired by earlier words of 'Isaiah', of the present and future.

This is, of course, speculation, but if the text reflects the historical situation, it is a speculation that makes sense. This is a background that can help us to read and interpret Isaiah in its own context, without burdening it too soon with christological readings. It helps us to read well.

Literary context

We know only very little about the historical context of most of the words in the Book of Isaiah. We do, however, have one of the biggest books in the Bible before us. This is what we can read.

Putting the prophets' words into books, into compilations, gave these words a literary context. Scribes have put these words very carefully together. The books were organised in different ways. Chronology could be used, but that was considered less important than a thematic approach. Some scholars have compared the book of Isaiah with theatre. Not that it was meant to be performed, but we can discern a certain dramatic development from beginning to end, a certain purposefulness, a plot.⁵

This means that to understand Old Testament prophets, we need to pay attention to the literary context, to how the book was composed. An example of the importance of the literary context is the so-called Servant Songs in Isaiah 42, 49, 50 and 53. They have often been read and interpreted isolated from their context. In that way it was easier to connect them with Jesus – or with Israel – but when we read through Isaiah 40–55 it is not hard to see that they are part of the larger context and that we should understand them in that way.

Canonical context

The Book of Isaiah is also part of the Bible, the canon. The addition of the New Testament to the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, has changed the way the whole Bible was read. Jesus Christ now became the centre of God's revelation, of who God is, and the centre of the Old Testament. The importance of Jesus for how we see the Messiah in the Old Testament, and in our case especially in the Book of Isaiah, is that it changes how we read. A canonical approach reads the Bible backwards. It starts with the finished whole, which includes Christ, and read back from the perspective of God having revealed himself in Jesus, with the cross at the centre. This is different from what many consider to be an obvious way of reading the Old Testament: from the beginning, which means that references to Christ, i.e. the Messiah

5 Ulrich Berges and Willem A. M. Beuken, *Das Buch Jesaja: Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 30ff.

needs to be explicit present. These references are present in the case of Isaiah when they refer to a future king who is the son of David. These references are less present than is often thought, which means that references to the Messiah are less often present than is commonly thought.

Reading Isaiah from a canonical context means that we take fulfilment seriously and in a way even literal. The promises we find in Isaiah are only really fulfilled, i.e. reflecting the full character of YHWH, in Jesus. This is true for a wider variety of texts than those that are explicitly messianic.

Two things need to be recalled here, that we have discussed earlier, to prevent that the canonical approach becomes a caricature. The first is that prophecies that can be related to the Messiah are not pure predictions that become true. The centre of prophecies in a book like that of Isaiah is the heart and plan of God. From there words are spoken also about the future. We need to keep this in mind. Prophets use their imagination, inspired by God, to sketch that future. This brings us to the second point: we need to continue paying attention to the words of Isaiah apart from Jesus, so that we learn from Isaiah more about Jesus. Who Jesus was, can only be understood against the background of the Old Testament.

Having these different levels may sound a bit strange to us. An example – with all its limitations – of European history may be of help here. The best example I can think of, is unfortunately a very negative one. Throughout European history Jews have been treated badly. Sometimes they were tolerated and considered useful, other times they were persecuted and driven out of their homes. Each moment has its own context and studying that context helps us to understand better what happened. But then we have the Holocaust of the Second World War. This event changes our perspective. The whole history of Jews in Europe somehow leads up to that holocaust. We now understand better and it shed a new, clearer light on all that hate and all those persecutions of the Jews throughout history. The combination of this all makes us realise how terrible this history is. And because of the Holocaust we are much more aware of this terrible history.

1.5 An example: Isaiah 7

To see how these different contexts and levels work together I would like to discuss an example. For that I have chosen Isaiah 7, which has a clear historical background and is referred to explicitly in the New Testament.

The first thing we do when we read a prophecy is reading it in its literary context. Isaiah 7 speaks about Isaiah in the third person, while both 6 and 8 are first person texts in which Isaiah himself is speaking. We suspect, therefore, that these chapter did not originally belong together, but now they are. We see that they have themes in common. In chapter 6 we read about Isaiah's commission: he is sent to preach to the people, but they will not listen. The effect of his preaching will only be a hardening of the heart of the people. In chapter 7 we see this happening: Ahaz is not responding positively to the words of YHWH through Isaiah. After chapter 6 we would not have expected a positive response.

In chapter 7 we also read about Immanuel, 'God with us', the coming of the Assyrians and the destruction of the land. These themes continue in chapter 8 (and also in following chapters). We see there how hope and despair are woven through one another. We can hear several messages that are also relevant for later readers, like us. One is that, like Ahaz, we are called to have faith in difficult circumstances. In the destruction brought by the king of Assyria there still is that reminder of Immanuel: God is with us. The ending of the first part of Isaiah, chapter 1–12, is a positive one of celebration, because YHWH is king.

We also can place this chapter in a wider context. Ahaz is rebuked for 'wearing out' God. In Hebrew the same word is used in 1:14, where YHWH has become tired of Judah's religious hypocrisy. Ahaz may sound pious, but he is basically a hypocrite. His religiousness is only outward and not supported by real trust and actions. How does Ahaz' hypocrisy show? In not bringing justice and righteousness to his reign, which in Isaiah refers to a rejection of idolatry and to making sure the legal system and the administration of justice work correctly and benefit the weak, represented by the widows and the poor. A similar rebuke against the religious use of fasting without righteousness and justice can be found in Isaiah 58.⁶

Isaiah 7 has a specific historical context. Jerusalem is threatened by an alliance of two nations in the north: Aram and Ephraim. We can read about this war also in 2 Kings 16. Most scholars think that the reason for this attack was that Aram and Ephraim has plans to resist the Assyrians and they wanted to have the support of Judah, so that Judah would not attack them in the back. Isaiah 7 does not say anything about a reason, which is interesting. From this we can deduce that for Isaiah this is not about alliances, but about faith.

Isaiah meets king Ahaz to encourage him, saying that Aram and Ephraim will not succeed in their plan and than within a generation nothing will be left of these two nations. Isaiah is sent to encourage Ahaz with the words: 'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart'.⁷ A comparison with Deuteronomy 20:3–4 makes it clear that we should not understand these words in such a way that Ahaz is advised to be passive and not to take action.⁸ He meets Ahaz at a place that is important for the defence of Jerusalem. Preparing for war is not exclusive of having confidence. Ahaz is advised here not to be afraid.

Isaiah ends his speech with the following words:

If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all.

The last words of v. 9, addressed to the house of David, remind us of 2 Samuel 7:16, where the Lord promised David: 'Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me.' The translation of the NIV sounds completely different, but in Hebrew 'endure' and 'stand' are the same. It reminds Ahaz and those around him that the promise to David requires faith. If faith is not there, the promise will not stand, at least not for Ahaz and his family.

6 Gordon Wong, 'Faith in the Present Form of Isaiah Vii 1–17', *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2001): 543–545.

7 Isaiah 6:4.

8 See for more detailed argument and other text examples: Wong, 'Faith in the Present Form of Isaiah Vii 1–17'.

According to 2 Kings 16 Ahaz made an appeal to the Assyrian king and this king came to his help. In Isaiah 7 there is no reference to this at all and would not be right to interpret this chapter in that light. Faith here does not mean avoiding seeking alliances with other nations. Faith here is about trusting YHWH.

We see that the wider historical background can give some depth to our understanding of the text, while it still fits the literary context.

Finally we turn to the canonical context. Isaiah 7:14 is quoted in Matthew 1:23. Matthew quotes from the Septuagint, which translated the word for 'young woman', found in Hebrew, with 'virgin'. A lot of attention has gone to this connection and other connections have been ignored. The Hebrew word used here indicates that this is the first child for this young woman, but not that she has become pregnant without having had sexual intercourse with a man. The sign in Isaiah 7 is not that a woman, who is a virgin, became pregnant. The sign is the name of the child: Immanuel. This name shows Ahaz that in this all God is with his people. It is a last effort to convince Ahaz to have faith. In this way the name is used in the following chapters.

In Matthew we do find a woman pregnant who is still a virgin, but for Matthew the name is just as important. But there is a wider connection. In Isaiah 7 the woman was probably known to Ahaz and it possible that the child that was born was a prince. It is not said explicitly, but the context of criticism of the royal house, the house of David, suggests that there is a connection. This would suggest that there is a relationship with Isaiah 9 and 11, both passages that are generally considered to be messianic. It is impossible to find a specific candidate for this prince, or maybe even candidates, plural, although suggestions have been put forward. At the moment we have these connection at a literary level: they are part of the same section. And as such we can tie them with Jesus: he is the child replacing the royal dynasty that is failing and who is bringing justice and righteousness. This background in Isaiah shows Jesus to be a man of faith, who has done more than healing people or dying for sins. There is the wider context of righteousness, of showing what it means that God is with us.

This example shows how fertile it can be to read a text from different perspectives. The different contexts work together in seeing different layers in the text that all speak to us in different ways. And it still comes together as a whole.

2. Main themes in Isaiah

2.1 Righteousness

Justice and righteousness are very important concepts in the Book of Isaiah, often used in combination. Throughout the whole book they are mentioned a lot of times. Religion in Judah and Jerusalem was important and apparently well observed, but Isaiah is very critical of this religiousness: it is not combined with righteousness. Justice is not done and the weak, the poor, the widows and the orphans, are not protected. Sacrifices and prayers are worthless when there is no righteousness.

Both in the beginning as in the end of the book the lack of righteousness is addressed. And it is impossible to misunderstand those words. In 1:10–17 and 20–23 this religiousness without righteousness is addressed. In v. 15 YHWH responds to all this as following:

When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.

Against this in Isaiah an alternative is presented in which justice and righteousness are done. Already in the first chapter we see that this is the big plan of God. Also in visions about a new king in ch. 9 and 11 we see the central place of righteousness. And the performance of the servant in Isaiah 42 is characterised by a compassionate righteousness. And in ch. 66 it is not the temple and the service that takes place there that is central, but the worship of YHWH. Righteousness is a very central concept in the Book of Isaiah.

The Old Testament shares its idea of righteousness with the Ancient Near East. This idea is different from how we think in the modern western world. Righteousness was given by the gods with creation. It was part of the fabric of the world. But it was also vulnerable and threatened, both by men and gods. It is was the responsibility of kings to maintain righteousness and to protect the right order. This righteousness included the protection of the poor, the widows and the orphans. It also included that justice was done in the right way and that corruption was not accepted. Righteousness would bring prosperity and make the lives of everyone better. It was also closely connected with the worship of the gods, especially those who were connected with righteousness and justice.

Of course, reality did not live up to the ideal. Still, the ideal was carefully watched and the illusion that the king promoted righteousness was cherished, even if reality was different.

The kings of Judah would also follow this example. Isaiah addressed this hypocrisy of worshipping YHWH but ignoring those who need help.

In western countries the laws in society have little to do with creation or nature. For non-westerners the near-eastern view may be more familiar, as the vow of the in 2019 crowned king of Thailand showed. He vowed to 'reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the people forever'.⁹ The Dutch king or American president would not take such a vow. They promise to uphold the law and subject themselves to the that, especially the constitution.

Also difficult for us to understand is that righteousness can have the meaning of deliverance or salvation. Righteousness is the opposite of oppression, so for those who are oppressed or imprisoned, both literally as figuratively, the coming of righteousness means liberation and salvation. For those who have sinned, righteousness can be more ambiguous. On the one hand they deserve punishment, but righteousness does not end there. There is a tendency towards reconciliation and compassion, to make a fresh start. That is also part of righteousness: to make things right again. This presupposes that sinners admit their sins and that can be a problem, as we also see in the passages we will discuss later.

2.2 For all nations

According to Isaiah the plan of YHWH is about righteousness, not only for Israel but for the whole world, for all nations. This vision is already present in 2:1–5, but it runs through the whole book, especially in the second part. This is an important theme also in the passages about the servant, so we will come back to this.

2.3 Overcoming stubborn resistance

In ch. 6 Isaiah receives his commission. He should go tell the people:

'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'
Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.¹⁰

9 Source: Reuters, 'Thailand's King Vajiralongkorn Crowned in Solemn Ceremony – Video', *The Guardian*, 4 May 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2019/may/04/king-vajiralongkorn-of-thailand-crowned-god-king-in-solemn-ceremony-video>.

10 Isaiah 6:9–10.

This commission comes after the inhabitants and leaders of Judah have already received numerous warnings. In ch. 1 we read about all the efforts made by YHWH to correct the behaviour of his people, but it has all failed. In ch. 5 we find a similar theme. So this commission comes to a people that is not listening. Now part of the punishment will be that they are not able to listen and understand so that they will repent and be healed.

This is a hard command, as is also indicated by Isaiah's response: 'For how long, Lord?'¹¹ From many other passages in Isaiah it is clear that it cannot end with this. YHWH will make every effort to convince his people to listen to him, so that they will turn to him and be healed. This is also a theme that runs through Isaiah 40 and following. So, also to this theme we will return.

There are other important theme in the Book of Isaiah, but those lie beyond the scope of this essay.

¹¹ Isaiah 6:11.

3. The servant

3.1 A new beginning

Isaiah 40 begins with a call. It is not clear who is speaking here,¹² only that God is quoted. It is also not clear who is addressed here, except that a group of people is addressed, because the second person plural is used. This group is called on to comfort God's people. They also must comfort Jerusalem, because she has received for her sins from the hand of YHWH double.

In v. 3 we read about a voice calling: a way must be prepared for YHWH. The glory of YHWH will be revealed and all people¹³ shall see it. The outlook is already universal here. YHWH will show his glory to all nations by delivering his people.

These words refer to the exile. It seems that both the exiled as the city Jerusalem are addressed here. The exile was God's punishment for the sins of the people. This exile is now coming to an end. The way will be made free for the exiled to return to Jerusalem and to Judah. At least part of the words in Isaiah 40–55 are spoken or written before the Persian king Cyrus wrote the edict allowing the Judahites to return. There is a promise of a new beginning here.

In v. 6 the words about a voice calling is repeated: 'A voice says: "Cry out!"' Then we hear a question, an objection: 'And it is said: "What shall I cry?"' Many translations follow here ancient version, like the Greek Septuagint, and a minority of Hebrew manuscripts by translating: 'And I said'. The reason for this is probably that they want to hear the voice of the prophet somewhere. However, it is better to follow here the Hebrew text and translate 'one said'. It is a voice that is here part of a discussion, a dialogue.

It is difficult to determine who is speaking in the following sentences. I think it is best to see vv. 6b–7 as a continuation of 'what shall I cry?' The words of hope, of a new beginning that God is making, meet a lack a faith, meet scepticism. The people are compared to grass. Their faithfulness does not endure. And when YHWH blows on them, they whither. There is no coming back from YHWH's punishment and ordeal.

¹² Many theories, of course, has been advanced, including angels and a prophet called Deutero-Isaiah, none of which can find ground in the text itself. The only candidate would be Isaiah. It is his book. But then not Isaiah in a historical sense, but as the authority behind the whole book. It may be a strange concept for us, but certainly possible. He would then be represented by a group of people who actually wrote these words, possibly with the intention to continue the mission of Isaiah.

¹³ Literally: 'all flesh'. It includes really everyone on the whole world. This expression is used in Genesis 6–9 for all people, but also in Isaiah 49:26; 66:16, 23–24.

The reference is here to 'all people'. This is about the human condition as told in Genesis 1–11: always turning against God, 'every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.'¹⁴ We find a similar sentiment in Psalm 103:14–16. There runs through the Old Testament a line that is not so optimistic about men's ability to worship God and do good. The voice of protest here can follow and use this line of thought. It also indicates a problem that must be overcome, similar like that of the people's blindness and deafness that has been spoken about in Isaiah's commission in 6:9–10.

In v. 8 part of the words of v. 7 are repeated, which I think suggests a change in speaker. It is admitted that 'The grass withers and the flowers fall,' but the conclusion that follows is the opposite: 'but the word of our God endures for ever.' This line does not only refer to the words just heard, but also to the words of the first part of the book. God has made promises and those promises stand, because YHWH is a faithful God. The ground for hope is not that the people have changed and are now better people, but that YHWH is faithful and compassionate.

In vv. 9–11 Zion/Jerusalem is called upon to be heralds of good news, because the Lord YHWH will come and gather his people.

With these words the introduction of 40–66 ends. In these verses we find many of the themes that are present in the following chapters. We will read about YHWH getting into action to liberate his people and leading them out of exile back to Judah. Images that remind of creation and exodus are used to make this clear and convince the audience. We also meet the lack of faith among many of the Judahites. They refuse to believe and to return. If we look at the contents of the following chapters, it seems that the people doubt the power of YHWH. The Persian propaganda about how they conquered Babylon and how Marduk blessed them, probably sounded very convincing. They could see the result. And their own God? He seemed to have abandoned them, if he could do anything. Against this Isaiah argues that YHWH is in control and that he is the one who called Cyrus.

3.2 Israel as the servant

It is in this context that we read about the servant. And the first time is in 41:8–9:

But you, 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.

These verses are not part of those sections often called the Songs of the Servant of the Lord. They are therefore not seen as messianic. However, they speak about the servant in very

¹⁴ Genesis 8:21.

similar ways as the Servant Songs do, so it is difficult to come to a different conclusion than that in 42:1 it is Israel that YHWH speaks about:

Here 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.

The first two lines are very close to what has been said in 41:8–9. Still, the words that follow go beyond what is said in the previous chapter. They remind us of what is said about the coming king in the first part of Isaiah. They speak about compassion for the weak and the vulnerable, about bringing forth justice and establishing righteousness, not only in Israel, but in the whole earth and among the islands. We find here a combination of words that reminds us of Israel and words that remind us of the role of the king as described in the beginning of Isaiah.

In 42:6–9 the servant is apparently addressed. The ‘you’ there is singular. We can understand this as referring to a single individual, the Messiah, but we can also understand it as referring to a collective. In 41:8–9 the servant was also singular, but a whole people was addressed. So singular or plural in themselves do not tell us much.

The next we hear about the servant is in 42:19:

Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
blind like the servant of the LORD?

There, again, it is clear that Israel is meant. We find also here the reference to the covenant, as in v. 6. And in 43:10 we again read about the servant. Here plural and singular are combined and it is clear that in both cases the same group is meant.

‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD,
‘and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.

Again and again in the following chapters the servant is Israel.¹⁵ We cannot draw another conclusion than that the servant is Israel. This means that even in ch. 42 Israel must be the servant, even if the imagery belongs more to a king than to a people. How should we understand that?

Before we answer that question, we should realise that the main reason for disagreeing that in Isaiah 42 Israel is the servant, is that the beginning of that chapter is quoted in the New Testament as referring to Jesus, in Matthew 12:18–20. As we saw earlier, it is not a

¹⁵ Isaiah 44:1, 2, 21, 26, 45:4.

problem that a text that is fulfilled in Jesus also can have another meaning or referring to another event. Fulfilment is not exhaustive. This gives us the freedom to read Isaiah 42 within the context of Isaiah itself and later ask for the fulfilment in Jesus.

In 40–48 there are two themes that are related to each other. On the one hand we read about YHWH's liberation of the Israelites who have been exiled to Babylonia. This is announced and set in motion. On the other hand we read about YHWH being the only true God, higher and more powerful than the Babylonian gods. Israel is called to worship YHWH. These two themes are then combined: YHWH is revealed as the highest God, who controls everything, through the salvation of his people. Israel is in this YHWH's means to show who he is, to show his righteousness and justice, not only to his own people, but to all nations. It is about the vision of 2:1–5 becoming true. Israel has learned who his God is and they can now teach the nations.

An understanding of the historical background can help us here. The last ruler of the Babylonian empire was not known for his faithfulness to Marduk, the main Babylonian god. His god was the moon god Sin, which he also promoted. It is possible that this is one of the reasons that the Persians could take over the Babylonian empire so easily, almost without a fight. Cyrus, the Persian king, restored the worship of Marduk again in Babylonia, with which he tried to gain the support of the Babylonians and with which he tried to say that his victory was given to him by Marduk. In Isaiah we read a different narrative. It is not Marduk who gave Cyrus his victory, but YHWH. The Jews in Babylon were probably not insensitive for Cyrus's propaganda. While they were exiled and their God apparently did nothing for them, Marduk, the god of a mighty empire, handed over this empire to the Persians, when the Babylonian king no longer worshipped him. This background explains the urgency of the argument in Isaiah.

That is Israel's calling as described in Isaiah 42:1–4. It is the plan of YHWH throughout the book: to show to all nations who he is and his righteousness.

There is a connection with the commission given to Isaiah in ch. 6:

Go and tell this people:
'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'
Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.¹⁶

This is a judgement because of Judah's sins. They are blind and deaf, unable to hear the word of YHWH so that can repent. The big plan of YHWH in the Book of Isaiah is to overcome this

¹⁶ Isaiah 6:9–10.

lack of faith. Judah (and Israel) is not able to overcome this himself, but YHWH will make this happen. We see this theme recurring in ch. 40ff. It begins in 40:27 with a lament of Israel:

Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God?'

This complaint is made in a context in which God's greatness is described. The answer to this complaint is to hope in YHWH, to wait for him. In other words: to have faith. In the next chapter YHWH tries to convince Israel that he will help them, that they do not have to be afraid. God will give them strength. This hope is continued in the beginning of ch. 42. But Israel is not a servant for whom faith comes easily. They do not hear.

Hear, you deaf;
look, you blind, and see!
Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
blind like the servant of the LORD?
You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;
your ears are open, but you do not listen.

It is quite a challenge for YHWH to have Israel listen and understand and repent. But it is as a blind servant and a deaf messenger that Israel is a witness for YHWH.¹⁷ Through this people, by saving them, by bringing them back to their country, YHWH will show his greatness, as the only God. In this way he will show his righteousness.

This themes continues in the following chapter, but in ch. 48 something changes. In this chapter we see Israel still presented as stubborn and as a rebel.¹⁸ Still, YHWH want to save them, not for their sake, but for the sake of his own name.¹⁹ But for that a new way has to be found. Because Israel does not listen, for his plan to succeed God needs to move into a new direction. A first hint of this can be seen in the mysterious 48:16b: 'And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, endowed with his Spirit.' This is the first time since the beginning of Isaiah 40 that we have a statement in the first person from someone who is not God. As readers we are forced to wait until chapter 49 before we get some insight in this person, but even there he remains anonymous.²⁰

¹⁷ Isaiah 43:8–9.

¹⁸ Isaiah 48:4, 8.

¹⁹ Isaiah 48:9.

²⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 377–378.

3.3 The ambiguous identity of the servant

The identity of the servant of the Lord has been much debated. There are indications that there was already a difference of opinion since before Christ. The two main options have always been: Israel and the Messiah. These are still the main options defended nowadays.

Until ch. 49 identifying the servant with Israel is obvious, I would say. The only problem is 42:1–4. The quote in Matthew presupposes a messianic understanding of that passage. And also the content goes beyond what is said about and to Israel in the surrounding chapters. We find there an imagination that is more at home with a king than with a people. On the other hand words like ‘whom I uphold’ and ‘my chosen one’ recall what has been said about Israel in the previous chapter. On the other hand the words ‘I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.’²¹ remind us of the passages about a future king in Isaiah 9 and 11. How should we understand this combination of language that reminds us of Israel and of the king?

Hugh Williamson has suggested that a shift takes place between the first and the second part of Isaiah. The overall plan YHWH has remains the same. He want to bring justice and righteousness. The first part focusses on Israel as a people. God there raises a king that will bring righteousness to his people. Isaiah 9:6 is a clear example of this plan. In the second part attention shifts to the wider arena of the nations. There the plan is to bring justice and righteousness to all nations and the way to do this is through Israel. Israel has taken over the role the king has in the first part of Isaiah. This explains why royal language is used here for Israel.²²

However, this nice solution is disrupted again in ch. 49. There the servant himself speaks. It is after 48:16b the first time we have a first person singular speech since the beginning of Isaiah 40. In 49:5–6 this servant is clearly distinguished from Israel:

And now the LORD says –
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength –
he says:
‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob

²¹ The translation of the NIV makes two choices. First, the word ‘Spirit’ is written with a capital. Not all translations do this and does not know capitals. Translations hides that in Hebrew the word ‘spirit’ has a wide variety of meaning, of which being God’s Spirit is only one. The other choice is that the future tense is used. In Hebrew a past tense is used. Translating with a future sense is not impossible, but it is less obvious and betrays a certain way of reading this passage. The second part about bringing justice is also in Hebrew a future tense. (And for those readers who know Biblical Hebrew, I am very much aware of the complexity of tenses in Hebrew).

²² Williamson, *Variations on a Theme*, 122–124.

and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.’

But in v. 3 the servant himself is addressed as Israel:

He said to me, ‘You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.’

Also in the verses before this we find expressions that remind us of how Israel was addressed in the previous chapters: called before he was born.²³ How should we understand this?

Before we discuss this question, we need to pay a closer look at v. 3. In the NIV Israel looks like the name of the servant, but this is not how we should understand this. ‘Israel’ is here not the name with which the servant is addressed, but it is a predicate, like ‘my servant’ of the previous line. These two predicates should be read in parallel: ‘You are my servant, you are Israel, in whom I will display my splendour.’ The meaning is that this servant is here *designated* as Israel.

There is a question of continuity here. Two lines of interpretation break the continuity. The first is the traditional one that sees in the four ‘Servant Songs’ a different servant than in the surrounding chapters. This Servant is the Messiah. We have already addressed the problems of this view. The other line sees a break in the end of ch. 48 and in this chapter. The idea is that Israel was called to be the servant, but that it failed, because it did not believe, did not respond positively and did not embark on a return to Judah after YHWH had made this possible. The end of ch. 48 speaks about this return. In ch. 49 YHWH has chosen therefore a new servant, a new Israel. It is not that YHWH has given up on Israel, but he chooses a different way to reach the same goal.²⁴

In this view it is not clear whether the servant is still a collective, like he was in the previous chapters, when Israel was a servant, or that the servant is now one person, an individual. After the previous chapters it is still possible that we need to think of a collective, but it is less explicit in the chapters that follow.

We can, of course, ask ourselves whether in ch. 40–48 there already was not some ambiguity around the identity of the servant. Israel was addressed as the servant, but we also saw there that the response of Israel was not great. We can say that already there those who were actually addressed, were the ones who responded positively to the call of YHWH to have faith and to be his witnesses. The shift between ch. 48 and 49 can then be seen as a shift in perspective, which moves from Babylon to Judah and Jerusalem. The servant is then those who follow this move. This does not mean that they yet go, but that return to Judah is imminent. From ch. 49 onwards we see that Zion and Jerusalem become more dominant, which confirms this change in perspective.

Not the whole of Israel follows this change in perspective, but a group does and they are in a way the forerunners. YHWH speaks out the hope that the rest of Israel will follow, but a

²³ Isaiah 44:2, 24.

²⁴ This interpretation can for example be found in Childs, *Isaiah*.

beginning is already made here.

In ch. 49 and following we also see the introduction of the suffering of the servant, a suffering that increases throughout this passage and reaches its climax in ch. 53. But it is not only the servant that is suffering, but also Zion (or Jerusalem). Her suffering ends in ch. 54 with the return of the exiles. It makes sense to see these two sufferings as connected with each other, which means they are also connected with the exile.

The identity of the servant never is completely clear. I suggest that this ambiguity is part of who he is and of the meaning of this servant. He is both Israel and not Israel. There is a fight going on here: who is Israel? This fight is connected with the question: and where is our God in this all? That question brings us to the next part.

3.4 Overcoming resistance and finding faith

The climax of Isaiah 40–54 is ch. 53. Two important events take place there. The first is at the beginning. The passage begins in 52:13 with some words of YHWH: ‘See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.’²⁵ This is said at the beginning of the passage and it changes everything. The servant that everyone looked down upon with disgust and contempt is the one exalted by YHWH. The second important moment is that this suffering servant is seen in a positive light. It is important that this is also done by the ‘we’ in 53:1–6. These ‘we’ admit the importance of the suffering of this servant and his meaning for themselves. They see now that a new beginning has been made. Chapters long this new beginning has been announced, but here it is realised and part of this new beginning is conversion.

To understand the importance of this conversion we need to go back to the beginning of the book, to the commission Isaiah received from YHWH in ch. 6, that we referred to earlier in this essay. As with many prophecies in Isaiah, the meaning of these words remained preserved for following generations. And throughout Isaiah we see that this punishment also refers to something that must be overcome. That the people are blind and deaf and that they lack understanding is not only punishment, it is also a fact of life for YHWH in his dealings with Israel. The punishment is repeated in 29:9, but that chapter also speaks about a time that they will hear and see again.

In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind will see.
Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.²⁶

In the prophecy that speaks about a new and bright future we see the same theme returning:

²⁵ NRSV. The NIV has a similar translation in a note, but in main text it translates differently. In my view the meaning ‘prosper’ fits the context better.

²⁶ Isaiah 29:18–19.

Strengthen the feeble hands,
 steady the knees that give way;
 say to those with fearful hearts,
 ‘Be strong, do not fear;
 your God will come,
 he will come with vengeance;
 with divine retribution
 he will come to save you.’
 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
 and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
 and the mute tongue shout for joy.
 Water will gush forth in the wilderness
 and streams in the desert.
 The burning sand will become a pool,
 the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
 In the haunts where jackals once lay,
 grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.²⁷

And also in ch. 42 the theme is repeated. The the Lord says:

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
 along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
 I will turn the darkness into light before them
 and make the rough places smooth.
 These are the things I will do;
 I will not forsake them.
 But those who trust in idols,
 who say to images, ‘You are our gods,’
 will be turned back in utter shame.
 ‘Hear, you deaf;
 look, you blind, and see!
 Who is blind but my servant,
 and deaf like the messenger I send?
 Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
 blind like the servant of the LORD?
 You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;
 your ears are open, but you do not listen.’²⁸

We see here the problem for Israel and for YHWH: for Israel to have a future, it needs to repent. It needs to see the reality of its own sins, but also the reality of YHWH’s power and

²⁷ Isaiah 35:3–7.

²⁸ Isaiah 42:16–20.

faithfulness. The lament of 40:27: 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God?' remains present throughout the following chapters.

Part of Israel's doubt is fed by its suffering: how should it be understood? Between the lines we get the impression that the dominant understanding among the Jews in Babylon is that the exile and the suffering this brought over the people shows that YHWH is a weak God and that the Babylonian gods are more powerful. Or that this suffering shows that YHWH has abandoned them, that he is no longer interested in his people. Nothing is to be expected from YHWH. YHWH presents them, however, another explanation, one in which he is still fully in control:

Which of you will listen to this
or pay close attention in time to come?
Who handed Jacob over to become loot,
and Israel to the plunderers?
Was it not the LORD,
against whom we have sinned?
For they would not follow his ways;
they did not obey his law.
So he poured out on them his burning anger,
the violence of war.
It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand;
it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.

The picture is more complicated than this, because the nations used by YHWH to punish Israel, overstepped their bounds and were too violent. So the story of suffering is more complicated than this, but this shows that YHWH was in control.

When we read on in ch. 43 we discover that this is not the end. We already knew this from the beginning: YHWH is making a change in Israel's fate and in this way he will be honoured as the only true God.

Remember these things, Jacob,
for you, Israel, are my servant.
I have made you, you are my servant;
Israel, I will not forget you.
I have swept away your offences like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me,
for I have redeemed you.'
Sing for joy, you heavens, for the LORD has done this;
shout aloud, you earth beneath.
Burst into song, you mountains,
you forests and all your trees,
for the LORD has redeemed Jacob,

he displays his glory in Israel.²⁹

We are used to connect this with God's love, and this theme is present in Isaiah, but it is not dominant. Righteousness and God's honour are more dominantly present as motivation. YHWH will be honoured if he saves his people. And part of righteousness is that he will be honoured by all people as the one true God. It is for his own sake that he delivers his people, even if it is a treacherous people:

You have neither heard nor understood;
from of old your ears have not been open.
Well do I know how treacherous you are;
you were called a rebel from birth.
For my own name's sake I delay my wrath;
for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,
so as not to destroy you completely.
See, I have refined you, though not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.
How can I let myself be defamed?
I will not yield my glory to another.³⁰

That is the drama that takes place in Isaiah 40 and following, a drama that leads to the climax of ch. 53, where it is recognised that through all this suffering YHWH saves.

The suffering of the servant in ch. 49, 50 and 53 reminds us of the suffering of Jeremiah. It is not a suffering that is the consequence of punishment for sin, at least not for his own sins. The servant is part of a new beginning, of time of forgiveness, of the time where the hard service has ended. He still suffers, because many resist the plans of YHWH, many lack faith or have different plans. If we want to tie this servant to a group of people, it is a group that returns to Judah and meets there a lot of resistance and suffering. Possibly many think of this group that they can never succeed, maybe they are jealous of the opportunities they receive. It all seems so little and unimportant, that is was difficult to see their efforts and dedication as something blessed by God himself. It is possible that many fellow Jews felt the same.

Isaiah 53 is a response to something done by God. It is not explained what it is, but this servant apparently has some success, unexpected by many. They begin to see that YHWH is with this servant.

But more is happening. The servant also functions as a mirror. We see this in the fact that 'we' now see that YHWH was with this servant and that this servant carried the sins of his people. The 'we' is Israel, who now admits their own sins, whose eyes have now opened for what YHWH has done, who now understand with their heart. The servant, in some way representing Israel, shared in this suffering, but it was not a suffering in which YHWH has

²⁹ Isaiah 44:21–23.

³⁰ Isaiah 48:8–11.

abandoned his people, but through which he showed them their sins and shows them forgiveness and righteousness.

The suffering of the servant is important. It is this suffering that changes the perspective of the bystanders. History is told by victors. Gods are associated with triumph. Victims are ignored and their stories are made subordinate to the stories of the heroes worshipped by the nations. When victims are seen as the ones with whom God is, it changes perspective, it changes history.³¹

The exile meant a traumatic experience for Israel. They were used to associate YHWH's support with blessing. They thought they could be religious and bring sacrifices and prayers and that YHWH would always protect them. They were blind for their sins, for the injustice they did. Without a change in perspective the exile would have been the end. Their god would become irrelevant, not able to be a force to be reckoned with in the world of gods. To continue worshipping YHWH, to begin to have new hope, for YHWH to continue to be their God, for his glory to be seen, their perspective needed to change. They needed to see that in their suffering YHWH was with them and through this suffering he made a new start with them.

That is the story Isaiah 40–54 tells. There is drama in it, a drama we need to recognise to appreciate the story.

³¹ For reading Isaiah 53 in this way see Ulrich Berges, 'The Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13–53:12): Reflections on the Current Debate on the Symbolism of the Cross from the Perspective of the Old Testament', *OTE* 25/3 (2012): 418–499.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Isaiah's main theme

In the Book of Isaiah the word 'faithfulness', 'justice' and 'righteousness' are very important. Being faithful to YHWH means that justice and righteousness are done. A religion without righteousness is not one in which YHWH is worshipped.

Righteousness is a rich and complex concept in the Bible. At a basic level it means the people receive what they deserve: the righteous are rewarded, the wicked are punished. We saw that in the society as described in the Book of Isaiah this righteousness was not present. YHWH is a God of righteousness, so he punished Jerusalem and Judah for their sins.

Righteousness, however, is more than reward and punishment, more than law and order. It is also about the *torah*, the law or instruction given by YHWH to Israel. A righteous society is also one in which there are equal opportunities and second chances, in which the weak and vulnerable, in the time of Isaiah the widows and the orphans, are protected. Righteousness is not only about demands, but also about what is given, about what is beneficial. When YHWH brings righteousness, everything that holds people prison or everything that oppresses, is removed. In that sense the meaning of righteousness can come close to deliverance or salvation.

In his *torah*, in his teaching of Israel YHWH has given his people this righteousness. But the horizon is not just the people of Israel. In the Book of Isaiah the horizon includes all nations. It is God's plan to show his righteousness, as described above, to the whole world.

YHWH has committed himself to this. He puts his own reputation at stake. This means that his righteousness will include a cleansing and forgiving of Israel, but also a convincing of his people to truly accept him as their God and to worship him, to repent and live righteously. That is the plan of YHWH in the Book of Isaiah.

This plan is complicated by the sins of Judah and Jerusalem. These sins lead to punishment. In his commission Isaiah is ordered to preach to the people, but the result is that they will not hear or see or understand, because they have been made blind and deaf and their heart has been made hard. The punishment Israel receives is that they are incapable of repentance. Isaiah realises that this can not be the end, so he asks: 'How long, Lord?' YHWH's reputation does indeed demand that this will change.

But for the time being this is not the case and in the next chapter we meet king Ahaz, who is an example of a king who does not have faith and responds to the offer of YHWH to give him a sign in a negative way. But YHWH has not totally abandoned his people, so he gives the sign of Immanuel, showing that he is with them, also in the midst of the disaster and

destruction that will follow in the war with the Assyrians. This theme of hope in the midst of disaster continues. A new king is promised who will establish righteousness. This is YHWH's work. And the first section of Isaiah (1–12) finishes with a song of thanksgiving for the salvation YHWH has brought.

In the following parts we found similar themes, but we have made the leap to the second part of Isaiah. In ch. 40ff. a new beginning is made and this new beginning includes plans YHWH has for his people. YHWH shows his power and tries to convince his people that he is the only true God. By saving his people they can be witnesses of YHWH, teaching other people who God is and about his righteousness. But Israel does not show faith. They do not respond positively to this new beginning. However, YHWH does not give up, so he makes a new beginning: instead of Israel he chooses another servant to be Israel, which is a part of Israel, the part that did listen, or an individual. And possibly this part of Israel that did listen was always in view as the servant. Through this new servant he hopes to convince Israel and to fulfil his plan of Israel worshipping him and teaching the nations about him and his righteousness.

Through this servant many are convinced. They realise that they are sinners who need to be healed. The servant in this way saves many and he is no longer a lone servant, but a group of people who responded in a positive way. Another call is made to respond, but also is Israel reminded of YHWH's faithfulness: his word will do what he sends it to do.³²

4.2 Jesus

This essay is on the Messiah in Isaiah. We have focussed on the context of Isaiah itself, especially on understanding Isaiah 40–54 and on the drama around the servant as the one through whom YHWH wanted to show his splendour. In the way we have read it, these chapters did not really speak about a Messiah, but we also saw that prophecy spoke to the people at the time of the prophets. The reference to Jesus is fulfilment: the ultimate meaning and the way in which God's plan becomes fully visible.

What the New Testament and the early church did, when they saw in the servant the Lord Jesus Christ, they used Isaiah to understand who Jesus was. If Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, then this not only means that we should read the Old Testament from the perspective of Christ, but we should also use the Old Testament to understand who Jesus is. And here again, we need to pay attention to context.

In the gospels we see a tension around Jesus identity: is he the Messiah or not? His contemporaries had expectations from the Messiah. He would bring a new time of prosperity, of freedom, also political, of healing, of reconciliation. All these expectations ended when Jesus died at the cross. That put an end to all claims that he was a man of God. God had apparently abandoned him. How could it be possible that a man who died a despicable death at the cross was a man of God, let alone the Messiah or Son of God? The numbers of times that the New Testament referred to Isaiah 53 shows that this chapter

³² See Isaiah 55.

helped them to understand. God was different than they thought. He was not a God of the powerful and the rich, he was the God of this suffering man. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul makes the step to the followers of Jesus: the cross showed that God's wisdom and God's power were different than men thought and expected, as could also be seen in the believers themselves, who were not important and influential.

In Isaiah it is through exalting this suffering servant and through delivering that lost people Israel, that YHWH built for himself a reputation. We can easily think that this exaltation is the point, but that is not how it works in Isaiah 53. The suffering is the point, It is through the suffering that many are saved. The exaltation only confirms that this despised man is truly his servant. The cross shows that God is with the failures and the godless of this world. If we feel like them, there is hope for us.

In history the cross has lost this significance. Early fourth century the Roman emperor changed this meaning of the cross and made it a symbol of military victory, a symbol of power. Since then Christianity has often been associated with power, especially in the West. That was not how Jesus was seen.

We have also seen how much the servant was tied with Israel. In a way he was Israel. He was the representative of his people, carrying everything of this people. Here also runs a line to Jesus. We can see Jesus as an individual. We can then see him as a perfect man and as a teacher. But this was not how the first Christians saw him. Both in the New Testament as in the Creed we read about the Son of God who in Jesus became flesh. In English the word 'incarnate' is used, but this word is pretty obscure. In later confession the expression 'he became man' is also used, but that is a later development, a development that values the individual more than in earlier times. 'Flesh' refers to us all. 'All flesh', an expression for example used in Isaiah 40, refers to all people. It emphasises what we all have in common, it emphasises our collective identity. That is what Jesus also shared. And he did this in such a way, that he became the representative of us all, a human being as human as us all, sharing that flesh that defines us. That is why he could bear our punishments, because in his flesh he shared our lives.

This way of thinking is also present in Isaiah when he speaks about the servant.

Finally we face the question what this means for us.

Let me first say something about the importance of righteousness in Isaiah. We saw that Isaiah is very critical of the religious practices as they take place in Jerusalem. Religion in itself is good, but it is bad if it is not accompanied by faithfulness, justice and righteousness. The relationship with God and with people around us, are connected. Loving God and loving our neighbour cannot be separated. For us this means that being a believer cannot be an individual matter. The church is an essential element in the plan of God and in that church God's righteousness and love and forgiveness should be visible for everything in church to have meaning. Celebrating communion, or worshipping the Lord, while hating out neighbour, cannot go together.

The other issue is our sins and our suffering. These two are not always clearly connected, but they are also not clearly separated. In Isaiah YHWH cares for his glory and he wants his splendour visible for all nations, the whole world. He has chosen Israel as his instrument, a treacherous, sinful, rebellious people. Not a great choice, we may think. But the flip side is that when Israel is saved, this is clearly the work of God, so he gets all honour. It is not in our successes that the greatness of God becomes visible, but in our failures. And no, this is not an excuse to go on sinning, as also Paul emphasises when he makes a similar point.³³ The 'we' in Isaiah 53 see the work of God in the servant in the midst of his suffering. It is through this they repent and find a new way. It is all grace. For us it is the same.

³³ Romans 5–6.

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