

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 15

Servant of the Lord Theme Continued

2. Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1-7) & Questions

We are in Isaiah 42:1-7. You have a rather lengthy description of the work of the servant, particularly in verse 4 where you read, “He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he has set justice in the earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.” Then down to verse 6, “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness: I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you to be a covenant for the people, and a light for the Gentiles, to open the blind eyes, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

When we have already read in 41:8 that “You, O Israel, my servant,” questions can arise. How is it possible that Israel is going to accomplish the things that are attributed here to the work of the servant? That question might not only occur to the reader or hearer, but it’s a question which is addressed in the text itself because when you go down to chapter 42, verse 19, you read, “Who is blind, but my servant, or deaf, like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, like the servant of the LORD? You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.” Verse 22 continues, “But this is a people plundered and looted; all of them trapped in pits or hidden away in prisons. They have become plunder with no one to rescue them.” How is Israel going to bring out prisoners from the prison house when they themselves are in prison? How are they going to be a light to the nations when they are blind and robbed and spoiled? And there seems to be a real question there, and you wonder what the answer might be.

Isaiah 24:24

But chapter 42, verse 24, picks up and introduces another idea: “Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers?” Why is Israel in the situation

she is in--in exile? “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 the reason Israel is in the condition she finds herself is she has sinned against God, and God gave his people into exile and suffering. So the situation as it developed at this point is: Israel is God’s servant, and Israel is to be a light to the nations, to bring justice to the ends of the earth, and deliver prisoners from the prison house, yet Israel herself is in bondage and in darkness. Israel herself needs a deliverer.

I think the issue that is brought in here, although somewhat indirectly, is this sin question. Deliverance from exile is important, but more important is the deliverance from sin, because sin has caused the exile. So the real problem needs to be faced. I think what is hinted at here is that the exile cannot be their problem. The real problem is sin. “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.” At this point there is no resolution to these questions that arise. How is Israel to perform this task or this function? How is this sin question to be addressed? The aspects of the problem need to be taken into account, but there is no resolution.

So there are a number of things in this passage about the servant. If you glance back to the early part of the chapter, the servant is the Lord’s elect in verse 1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect.” The servant has the Spirit of the Lord: “I put my Spirit upon him,” You have in verses 2 and 3 the meekness of his character: “A bruised reed shall he not break, a smoking flax shall he not quench.” Verse 4, “He’ll bring justice to the nations, set justice in the earth; the coastlands shall wait for his law.” Verse 6, “He will be a light to the Gentiles.” Verse 7, “To free captives from prison.” But then you get down to verses 19 and 20, you get this problem: the Lord’s servant, who should be doing these things, is blind: “Who is blind but my servant?”

3. Isaiah 43:10

Let's go on to the next servant passage, that would be the third one, which is Isaiah 43:10. There you read, "'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.'" Now that verse appears subsequent to the very well known passage at the beginning of chapter 43. In fact 43:1-4 are beautiful verses. You read there, "But now, this is what the LORD says-- he who created you, O Jacob; he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.'" God says, despite Israel's sin, he will deliver her; when she passes through the waters, he will be with her. It doesn't mean she won't go through difficulties, but she will not be utterly destroyed or consumed.

Verse 10 then says that the Israelites are his witnesses: "'You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'and my servant whom I have chosen.'" So in spite of everything that has happened, Israel is God's servant. Israel is the medium through whom that worldwide work of chapter 42, say verse 4 and verse 6, is to be accomplished. "You are my witnesses." So you just have that one verse that touches on the servant theme: verse 10.

Isaiah 43:22-25 God's Disappointment over the Sin of His People

But when you get down to Isaiah 43:22 and following, you have a very similar idea to the end of chapter 42--the end of the previous chapter. Here you get a statement of God's disappointment over the sin of his people. They were to be his witnesses, yet they were a sinful people. Chapter 43, verse 22 says, "You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant

calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.” So here’s the same sort of idea found at the end of chapter 42—the hopelessness of the situation. Israel was to be God’s witnesses; Israel was to bring light to the Gentiles, but “You have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”

But then chapter 43, verse 25, makes a remarkable statement: “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” So in spite of their sin, God says he’s going to blot out their transgressions, put an end to the sins that are really responsible for the suffering into which they have come. So that introduces another idea, and the question here might be raised: “How is that possible? How can God simply say, ‘I will blot out your transgressions, I will not remember your sins’”? There is no answer for it at this point, but it’s a question that arises. But here you see the servant was chosen of the Lord, if you go back to verse 10, that he might know and believe God. “My servant, whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.” Yet Israel has rebelled against the Lord, and has not been faithful to the Lord, but rather burdened the Lord with their sins. But then verse 25 says, “I am he who blots out transgressions for my own sake.”

The extent of the passage is somewhat difficult to define. The term “servant” is mentioned in 43:10, and if you go down through the context, it seems quite clear that in 43:10 the servant is Israel, as it was in chapter 41. Most of what follows is talking about Israel who is here identified as God’s servant. So, from verse 10 to the rest of the chapter, the servant theme flows on into the rest of the chapter.

The servant in verses 22 to 25 were speaking about Israel. In this context Israel is the servant. That’s another question that arises: who is the servant—is it Israel or is it somebody distinguished from Israel, who is part of Israel, but who is yet to be determined? That becomes clear as we go along. At this point, there is no resolution to this question.

Chapter 43, verse 23: “You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor

honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings, nor wearied you with demands for incense.” That is, “I have not burdened you with grain offerings,” compared to, “Thou has burdened me with thy sins, thou has wearied me with thine iniquities.” Who has an NASB? It says, “I have not burdened you with offerings, nor wearied you with incense.” But the NASB and the NIV both agree there, and there’s probably good reason for it. That would remove that explicit statement in verse 23; but when you go on in 24, it is clear that Israel here is being condemned for her lack of living up to its obligations—“You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, nor lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.” See, the King James says in 23b, “I have not caused thee to serve with an offering, nor wearied thee with incense.” And the NIV says, “I have not burdened you with grain offerings, nor wearied you with demands for incense.” It’s just the difference between “offering” and “grain offering”; very little difference. Verse 24b is what really brings the issue into focus: “You have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.” Yet, the Lord says, “I will blot out your transgressions.”

4. Isaiah 44:1-2

Let’s go on to the fourth servant passage, which is Isaiah 44:1-2. Here you get again into the question of how far you extend this passage. You may go down to verse 8, at least, but certainly 1 and 2. In chapter 44 you read, “But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. This is what the LORD says-- he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.” This seems to be a declaration of the certainty of the fulfillment of the work that God has committed to his servant. That work has been described in chapter 42 in what he did. But in the first five verses, the servant is just mentioned explicitly in verse 2.

In the first five verses you read that Jacob need not fear, for God is going to pour out his Spirit upon the seed of Israel. You read that in chapter 44, verse 3: “For I will

pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.” So God will pour his Spirit upon the seed of Israel and bring into existence a great multitude of descendents. They are said to spring up as willows by the water courses. “I will pour my Spirit on your seed,” the end of verse 3, “and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams. One will say, ‘I belong to the LORD’; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’ and will take the name Israel. This is what the LORD says-- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: ‘I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.’”

God’s Promise (Isa. 44:3-4) Gentile Engrafting (cf. Joel 2:28f Pentecost)

Isaiah 44:3-4 is God’s promise: “I will pour water on the thirsty land,” which he then explains, “I will pour my Spirit on your offspring.” The fulfillment of this prophecy is in Isaiah 32:15. Remember, that was in the context of that expression of turning the fruitful field into the forest, and the forest into a fruitful field, which Payne interprets as the effect of the Assyrian advance. But here it says the fulfillment of this prophecy is later than that of 32:15 in the coming of God’s Spirit to bring hope in lieu of Sennacherib’s arrival. Yet it is earlier than that of 59:21b on the millennial outpouring of the spirit. So what Payne sees is this: when it says, “I will pour my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow,” it is referring to the Gentile engrafting. That follows in the next verse, 44:5. He suggests that 44:3-4 parallels Joel 2:28-29, predicting Pentecost. You see, when you read verses 4 and 5 about the offspring springing up like poplars by the flowing streams, and “One will say, 'I belong to the LORD'; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and will take the name Israel”; all these people will come to identify themselves with the people of God as the Gospel spreads. So, that’s possibly in view in those verses. There’s not a lot here said about the

servant, as far as additional information that would fit with 42:6, where the servant will be a light of the nations, a light to the Gentiles.

5. Isaiah 44:21 Servant & Futility of Idolatry

Let's go on to the next servant passage, Isaiah 44:21. Again, this is not a major passage, but it is a reference to the servant. Again, it's hard to put a precise limit on the passage. But 44:21 says, "'Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you; you are my servant, O Israel; I will not forget you.'" Now, that verse should be seen again in context because there is an intended contrast between the statement of 44:21 and what precedes it. Notice the way it starts: "Remember these"—and "these" refers to what goes before. What goes before is a passage that talks about the futility of idolatry, the foolishness of worshipping idols. So, "these things"; "remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel." What "these things" is, is that idolatry is foolishness.

What precedes is one of the classic passages. Remember, that was one of the major themes in the second section of Isaiah--the futility of idolatry. This is one of the classic passages on that. Look at chapter 45, verse 9 and following: "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for

burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.' They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, 'Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?' He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?'"

Then you see you get to verse 21, "Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel." So that contrasts with what proceeds: idolatry is foolishness. "Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you." God will fulfill his promise to the servant. The work of the servant will be done. God will not forget his servant. Then there is another statement, much like 43:25: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions." Here in 44:22, "I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

Isaiah 44:24-28 God's Great Deliverance via Cyrus

What follows at that point, after that brief statement about the servant, is a long sentence, verses 24-28, that shows the Lord's greatness in that he will deliver from exile. God will rebuild Jerusalem, destroy the Mesopotamian power, and raise up Cyrus as his instrument to deliver Israel from exile. So you have in the next passage, 24-28, an amazing prediction. Remember the context here in the time probably of Manasseh, a century and a half before Cyrus, but here's what you read in 24-28: "This is what the LORD says-- your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has

made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be built,’ and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them,’ who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,’ who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’ This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.”

So those early verses of chapter 45 and the ones at the end of 44 say that Cyrus is commissioned by God to conquer many nations, and to even conquer Babylon. You read that the riches of the Babylonian king will be given to him: verse 3, “I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places.” So that when all that occurs, those who have read Isaiah’s prediction will have proof of the power of the God of Israel. So verse 4 says, where the servant is mentioned, that all the victories of Cyrus are brought about for the sake of Jacob “my servant.” So the servant is the one for whose benefit Cyrus was raised up, and for whose benefit this prophecy was made.

There’s a prediction referred to by Josephus in Young’s commentary, which is Volume III, page 197. He says, in verse 3, “‘I will give you the treasures of darkness, and riches of secret places, that you may know.’ The language does not necessarily suggest a true conversion on Cyrus’s part, but simply that he will be able to identify the one who has used him in the accomplishments. There’s an interesting statement in Josephus, in the fact that the prophecy of Isaiah did actually have influence upon Cyrus.” Young took

that from Josephus, where Josephus says Cyrus knew these things since he had read the book of this prophecy, which Isaiah had left behind two hundred and ten years earlier. That's in *Antiquities* 1, paragraph 2.

Now, Young comments on that reference in Josephus. He says that such a case is not as impossible as some would have believed. Cyrus gave his proclamation of emancipation for the Jews. It's interesting, if you look at Ezra, chapter 1, where you get the proclamation of Cyrus, notice verse 2, "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.'" You see, there he recognizes the God of Israel. "The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth." It fits very well with Isaiah: "That you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel." The implication is that some of you don't know. There is a new book out by Edwin Yamauchi on the *History of Persia*. It would be interesting to see if he mentions anything on this.

7. Isaiah 48:16-49:3

The seventh servant passage is Isaiah 48:16. Now, when you read 48:16, you don't see the term "servant"—it doesn't occur there. But I think the servant is clearly in view, even though you don't see the word. More about that in a minute. Well, let's read verse 16, "'Come near me and listen to this: From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there.' And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit." Now, 48:16 is an interesting verse, and it presents a rather serious problem of interpretation when it's put into its immediate context. It seems clearly, in the context, to be spoken by the one who calls the people to listen to him earlier in the chapter. Go back to the first verse and see what precedes verse 16. Chapter 48, verse 1: "Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the LORD and invoke the God of Israel-- but not in truth or righteousness." "Listen to this, O house of

Jacob.”

Then verse 3, (keep in mind who is speaking): “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze.” Verse 5: “Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, ‘My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.’” Verse 9: “For my own name's sake I delay my wrath.” Verse 12: “Listen to me, O Jacob; Israel, whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together.”

You see, if you go down, the first person, “I,” that is speaking all through the chapter, seems clearly to be God; and when you go on from verses 12 and 13 into 15, “I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission.” Seems clearly that God is speaking in the first part of verse 16; there doesn't seem to be any question about it. But, when you get to the second part of the verse, you read, “And now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit, has sent me.”

The first part of the verse can hardly be spoken by anyone other than God, but the latter part says the speaker is sent by God, speaking of God in the third person. So the question of interpretation is: how can the speaker at the same time be God and also be sent by God? How can the speaker be God and yet be sent by God? I don't think there is any other satisfactory explanation to that question other than to suggest that it is spoken by the servant of the Lord, and that the servant of the Lord is himself God. Now that's why I think Isaiah 48:16 is also to be included as a servant passage. It's spoken by the servant of the Lord, and the servant is himself God.

You say, “Where do you get the idea of the servant in the context?” If you go further with the context, I think that becomes quite clear. You see in chapter 48:16b, “The Lord God and his Spirit has sent me”—you have “me.” Go down to 49:1, “Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from

my birth he has made mention of my name.” Who is the “me” in 49:1? Look at verse 3: “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel.’” See, when this passage flows on into chapter 49, the “me” of verse 1, 49:1, and the “me” of 49:3, “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’” The speaker is clearly identified as the servant. So it seems that in 48:16b, when it says, “and now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit have sent me,” that is the servant speaking, but the servant is himself God. Now, if that’s the case, you have a remarkable idea being suggested: namely, the deity of the servant. I don’t think there is any other explanation that really does justice to the wording of the passage. So you have a profound truth that’s suggested, and it’s kind of oblique. It’s not clearly explained. It’s not worked out. In fact, you wonder how to fit everything together. But I think that’s what the conclusion is, where all those considerations will lead you trying to fit that verse together in its context with what precedes and what follows. The servant is speaking and the servant himself is deity.

Isaiah is speaking for God. The preceding context is where you have the first person, God, speaking. Often the prophets speak in the first person for God. So you could say that’s the kind of form that this prophet is speaking for God in the first person. But the “me” of the second phrase, as it goes to the following context, is clearly identified as the servant. Now, of course, some might say that Isaiah is the servant. I think you would be hard pressed to make a convincing case to say that Isaiah is the servant. Sometimes people say Isaiah is the servant, sometimes people say Israel is the servant, sometimes people say the Messiah is the servant, and others say he is distinct from Israel. But then what do you do with 49:1, “The Lord God has called me from the womb”—is that Isaiah? See the “me” there—you’re still in that first person? “The Lord has called me from the womb.” If you go on to verse 3, “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’” Seems that the “me” is identified as the servant in 49:1-3, and the servant is further identified in verse 3 as being Israel.

Alright, then you have to go down to chapter 49, verses 5 and 6. It gets more complex getting into the next passage. But it seems that when we get down to verses 5

and 6, that the servant is Israel in verse 3, but the function of the servant, you see, in verse 5, now says the Lord has formed me from the womb to be a servant—the function of the servant is to bring Jacob again to him, “To bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself.” Seems clear when you get to verse 5, that even though the servant in some sense is Israel, the servant’s going to be distinguished from Israel. That raises another point we’ll discuss in more detail when we get there.

Well, I think it becomes clear when you get to verses 5 and 6, that even though the servant is Israel, there is a sense in which the servant can be distinguished from Israel. Let’s hold that because I want to discuss chapters 49-50. That’s in the next major servant passage.

Let’s hold that till we look at chapter 49. Isaiah 49 is a major passage and that goes from verse 1 all the way down, perhaps down as far as verse 12, the next major servant passage. Let’s take a ten minute break and then come back to that.

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