

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, The Bible Use of the Bible, Session 4, A Case Study: Isaiah 49 in Galatians 1, 6-Min. Video Overview

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The Apostle Paul defends his authority in the early church, using language that creates an immediate theological problem. He appears to take a prophecy reserved strictly for the Messiah and apply it directly to himself. Looking at these two texts side by side, we see Paul's letter to the Galatians on the left and the prophet Isaiah on the right.

Notice how Paul's claim that God revealed his son in me closely mirrors God's declaration in Isaiah, in you I will be glorified. In this opening chapter of Galatians, Paul is actively fighting to establish his credentials as a legitimate apostle to the churches in that region. To make his case, he deliberately constructs his defense using vocabulary and phrasing drawn straight from the servant prophecies of Isaiah 49.

This raises a critical question for biblical interpretation. How do we lexically verify that a New Testament author is intentionally alluding to a specific Old Testament text rather than it just being a coincidence? We cannot rely on guesswork. Determining intentionality requires a strict four-step exegetical methodology.

Step one is identifying precise lexical allusions. We have to map the exact shared vocabulary between the later text, the receptor, and the earlier donor text. Steps two and three require analyzing the context of both passages.

This means looking at the horizontal context of the surrounding chapters as well as the vertical context, which tracks theological patterns across the entire biblical canon. Step four brings these findings together to determine the precise exegetical outcome, establishing the specific rationale for why the author made the allusion in the first place. By applying this framework, we can map the specific logic Paul uses to link his own ministry to the servant's mission through his relationship with Christ.

To execute step one, we must establish our parameters. Since Paul wrote in Greek, we need to compare his text in Galatians to the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. We start by isolating the Greek text of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Next, we bring the Greek text of Isaiah 49 from the Septuagint into view alongside it. This diagram maps the raw lexical overlaps linking the two passages. We see direct connections between phrases like from my mother's womb, the verb called, the mandate to be a light to the nations, and references to laboring in vain.

In both accounts, the speaker emphasizes that God set them apart for a specific task from the moment of their birth, invoking the mother's womb as the starting point of their call. Both figures also receive the same outward mission. They are sent to be a light to the Gentiles, carrying a message of salvation beyond the borders of Israel.

These thematic overlaps provide a solid baseline, but to prove intentionality, we need a linguistic signature unique to this passage. Looking closely at Galatians and Isaiah, we locate this unique signature in the Greek word *doulos*, meaning servant. Paul introduces his core identity as a *doulos* of Christ.

Strikingly, the famous suffering servant passage of Isaiah 53 uses an entirely different Greek word, *pais*. Out of all the servant passages in Isaiah, chapter 49 is the only place in the Greek Old Testament where *doulos* is used. This evidence removes the ambiguity.

Paul is intentionally anchoring his apostolic identity to the specific servant profiled in Isaiah 49. With the illusion identified, we move to step two, analyzing the horizontal context of our donor text. To understand who this servant is, we have to look at the architecture of Isaiah, mapping the narrative from chapter 40 through chapter 54.

Horizontal context tracks progression across chapters. Tracing the horizontal line, the first phase of the servant theme emerges in chapter 42. Here, the text designates the nation of Israel as God's servant.

Israel was given a mandate to be a light to the nations, but the nation failed. The timeline shifts in chapter 49, transferring the title of servant to a singular figure. This individual perfectly executes the mandate, succeeding where Israel fell short.

Finally, in chapter 54, the singular servant has accomplished his redemptive work, and the text branches to a plural group of servants. The success of the individual servant results in a new community of people who inherit his identity and his task. Within Isaiah's own horizontal logic, the individual servant is designed to reproduce his mission and his identity in others.

This brings us to step three, evaluating the immediate context of our receptor text in Galatians. We need to examine a precise grammatical decision Paul makes in Galatians 1:16, focusing on the Greek prepositional phrase *en emoi*. Most English Bibles translate this phrase as God revealing his son to me, but a strict reading of the Greek translates to in me.

Paul had standard ways to say a message was revealed to him. By choosing the preposition *in*, he focuses on location. He reinforces this in verse 24, noting that the churches in Judea glorified God in me.

This localized concept of glory connects straight back to Yahweh's declaration to the servant in Isaiah 49.3. In you, I will be glorified. The receptor context reveals Paul's perspective. He views his own life and ministry as the literal location where the servant's revelation occurs.

Now we arrive at step four, determining the exegetical outcome. We must resolve the tension we started with. If Isaiah 49 predicts a singular figure who succeeds where Israel failed, how does Paul justify claiming this role for himself? The answer lies in Galatians 2:20. Paul writes, I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Here, Paul merges the *doulos* of Isaiah 49 with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. We can identify this outcome as indirect fulfillment.

Paul operates as the servant of Isaiah 49 because Jesus, the ultimate suffering servant, dwells within him. He is not replacing Christ. Instead, Christ is utilizing the sphere of Paul's life to execute the ongoing mission to the nations.

This theological framework extends far beyond a single apostle in the first century. The logic of indirect fulfillment applies to the entire church. Because Christ dwells in the believer, the church itself becomes the instrument of the Isaianic mandate, tasked with bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.