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The Commission and Call of the Servant of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-7 & 49:1-7

Introduction

Depending on which interpreter you read, there are anywhere from four to ten of these so-called servant songs in Isaiah beginning with the first one in chapter 42. The songs are not really songs, as such, because they were never set to music until portions of them appeared in Handel's *Messiah*, written in London in 1741, and first performed in Dublin, Ireland in April 1742. While not songs, they are Hebrew poetry. They present in beautiful prophetic language the future coming of God's Servant the Messiah. The first two poems also have been compared to the calling of Israel to be a priest to the nations found in Exodus 19:1-8. But even in the first of the poems, there clearly are elements that go beyond application to the nation, and clearly look for their fulfillment of the coming of Messiah in a person. This dichotomy led some to incorrectly conclude that the nation itself was the Messiah.

The first two songs or poems celebrate the commission and the call of the Messiah. The *Believer's Study Bible* has excellent notes on 42:1; 42:5-7; 4:6; 49:1; 49:3; and 49:6.

The Commission of the Servant, 42:1-9

The prelude to these songs, found in Isaiah 41:8-20, clearly identifies one of the roles of the nation was that of "Servant." But, the servant role for Israel was primarily to be the means of bringing the Messiah into the world. The nation of Israel was the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, reaffirmed in Genesis 15:1-21 and 17:-19, and confirmed in Deuteronomy 8:1-20 and 10:1-13. The promise of Abraham clearly was generational, but in each generation it focused on an individual, e.g. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, . . . until the coming of the Messiah, *Yeshua*. Isaiah 42:1-7 clearly moves to the personal dimension where the "Servant" is a person, not a nation. This first song-poem has three parts 42:1-4, 5-7, and 8-9.

1. The Introduction of the Servant, 42:1

Yahweh gives His personal introduction of His Servant to His people and to the world! The English translation does not capture all that is displayed in the Hebrew text. It should be translated, "Behold My Servant, I am upholding Him whom I Myself have chosen."

- a. The Servant is God's representative in a much more personal way than that of either Abraham, Moses, or any of the prophets. He is called "My [Yahweh's] Servant."
- b. The Servant will be one "whom I [Yahweh] will 'uphold,' or 'support.'" This word is the Hebrew *ethmak*, which contains the idea of holding someone by hand to give them support.
- c. The Servant will be "My Elect One in whom My Soul delights." Interestingly, the word "soul" is *nephish* and it refers to the whole person, body, mind, spirit. In this way God pledges His full delight in His Servant.
- d. The Servant will be endowed with "My Spirit upon Him," a reminder of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:17 when the Spirit of God visibly descended to empower Jesus for His ministry, as in Isaiah 11:2 where the sevenfold endowment of the Spirit on the Messiah is presented.
- e. The Servant will "bring forth justice to the Gentiles," *goyyim*, which literally means "nations," an amazing affirmation! Israel failed to do this in that they did not fulfill their missionary mandate (Exod 19:6).

In addition to the reference in Matthew 12:15-21, the words of Isaiah 42:1 are also echoed in Jesus' baptism by John in Matthew 3:16-17 and again at the transfiguration in Matthew 17:5.

2. The Conduct of the Servant, 42:2-4

- a. The Messiah will not be a rebel rouser, but will be gentle, not lifting up calamity, [the word voice is not in the text] but the next line does say not raising his voice in the street, 42:2.
- b. Verses 2-4 contain seven "not's" or "no's", He will (1) not cry out, (2) not lift up, or be calamitous, (3) not cause his voice to be heard in the street, (4) not break a bruised reed, (5) not quench a smoking flax, (6) not fail, and (7) not oppress or mistreat anyone. These are not the signs of weakness but of power, strength, and self control, which come from deep faith and confidence in God.
- c. In verse 3, the "bruised reed" and "smoldering wick" are metaphors or proverbs that complement Isaiah 40:8. The proverb reveals that the Messiah will not hurt the weakest of His subjects, but as in the latter part of verse 3, "He will bring forth justice or righteousness for truth." So, the bruised reed is bent but not broken; the smoldering wick burns dimly, but nevertheless burns. The Messiah will protect the weak and nurse the spark of faith so that it is tested but it is not extinguished. He brings justice with truth and loving care to all. He will sustain the faithful in the crushing weight of life's

burdens, and fan the embers of wavering, smoldering faith so that it is not extinguished, see Matt 11:28-30.

- d. Verse 4 parallels verse 3 and presents the same ideas in inverted order. Line 1 of verse 3 parallels line 2 of verse 4; line 2 of verse 3 parallels line 1 of verse 4, all for the purpose of emphasis. The same verbs are used in both verses, "bruised" and "discouraged" are the same word as are "smoldering" and "falter." The Messiah gives sustenance to those who trust Him. He brings "justice," which is truth and equity to all who trust in Him.

3. The Mission of the Servant, 42:5-7

- a. Power - The Messiah is not only God's representative but has participated in the work of God as creator, v. 5a (Col 1: 15-17); as the giver and sustainer of life, 5b; as the provider of spirit and power, 5c.
- b. Security - Note the re-enforcement of verses 1 and 4 in verse 6a, "I Yahweh, I Myself [personally, emphatic], have called you to righteousness, and I will hold Your hand." If Jesus is "holding our hand," and Yahweh is holding His hand, we are secure!
- c. Liberty - The phrase "I will keep your," literally means "to keep watch over," or "to guard from danger," "to protect and preserve." God promises that He will "hold" [same word as verse 1] the Messiah to His people by a covenant and as a "light to the Gentiles" [nations].
- d. Light - Verse 7 notes the result of the works of Yahweh and Messiah, "to open blind eyes," "to bring prisoners out of prison" [spiritual bondage], "to release those who sit in darkness, imprisoned" by the evil one. NOTE: the blind eyes and unhearing ears of Israel, the other servant, must be opened by the Messiah, 42:18-20.

4. The Message of the Servant, 42:8-9

- a. "I am Yahweh, that is My name," which is synonymous with His character and power, see Exod 34:5-7. In the larger context, this statement also re-enforces Isaiah 41:13. God will protect His people, and He will protect the Messiah so that He will accomplish His mission.
- b. God does share His glory with the Messiah, but not with any other, especially not with idols, v. 8. The Messiah will not work for His own glory, but for the Father's, see Eph 1:3-14; Phil 2:5-11.
- c. The "former things" refer to earlier prophecies that validated the ministry of the prophets, including Isaiah. The "new things" refer to messages yet to come. The Gospel and the New Covenant are in view here, see Isa 9:1-7, esp. vv. 6-7; Jer 31:31-40.

The Call of the Servant, 49:1-7

The call of the Servant specifically expands the mission and message of the Servant. Those who argue for a national interpretation cannot sustain it because of the message of verses 5-7.

1. Ordained before Birth and Created for God's Mission, 49:1-2
 - a. The Servant, Messiah is the speaker in verse 1. Like Jeremiah, He was called to His mission before He was born and named before birth, see Luke 1:26-34, esp. v. 31. In the "matrix" means in the womb.
 - b. The mouth of Messiah will speak the "sharp edged sword" of the Word of God, see Heb 4:12; Rev 1:16. God protected Him and made Him a "polished shaft" or "sharpened arrow," v. 2.

2. Created to Bring Glory to God, 49:3-4
 - a. "You are my Servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified. Here we see how many have incorrectly concluded that the Servant is the nation of Israel. But here, the Messiah is called "Israel" but is clearly a person, as already established in 49:1. Jesus embodied all that Israel was called to do. While Israel, the nation, was a servant with a small "s," the Messiah, Jesus, is God's perfect Servant [capital "S"], Who was hidden in the "shadow of His hand," as verse 2 states.
 - b. The first servant, the nation, was unsuccessful having "labored in vain," "spent my strength," "sought a just reward from God." The first servant failed to be a kingdom "of" priests and therefore developed a narrow Jewish nationalist spirit of spiritual isolation, see Jonah 1:1ff.

3. Created for Ministry to Jews and Gentiles, 49:5-7
 - a. Servant for Israel - So, based on the failure of the national servant, Israel, we read, "And now the Lord says, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring back Jacob to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him, for I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and My God shall be My strength," v. 5. One can easily see the contrast of the failure of the first servant and the divine ministry of the second Servant, as also is stated in Isaiah 55:3-9.
 - b. Salvation for Israel - Jesus was sent to the lost house of Israel, v. 6, who were to be a light to the nations, but they rejected Him. So, He saved the Gentiles that they could witness to and bring salvation to the Jews, v. 6, and see Rom 10:14-21, esp. v. 19; 11:1-36, esp. v. 11-19.
 - c. Servant and Salvation for All - God's redeeming grace is made available to Jews and Gentiles. This presentation of the Gospel to both Jew and Gentile is celebrated in Ephesians 2:1-22, especially note vv. 14-18.