

The IDENTITY of the Servant of the Lord Isaiah 40-53

CHAPTER SIX

Not long ago a young woman, a graduate student at a large mid-Western university, asked the writer for help on a problem related to the subject of this book. As she explained it, the problem was part of a story in which she herself was involved.

This is the story. In her classes she became friendly with a young man pursuing a course of study similar to hers. Being a sincere Christian believer, she sought to witness to the man and to present the gospel to him. He was a professed unbeliever in any "revealed" religion, no friend of Christianity. So she persuaded him to read the stories of our Lord's betrayal, suffering, and death in the Gospels and likewise the prophecy of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This young woman had no technical theological training; therefore, she tried to do no more than let the prophecies of Isaiah and their New Testament fulfillment tell their own story and do their own work in the young man's heart.

They did their work. He was quite convinced and was about to take steps to become a professing Christian.

But he decided to take the matter to one of the professors in the religion department of the university--a department which happens to be the theological seminary of a large Protestant denomination. By this professor he was told that the prophecies of Isaiah really refer to the people Israel, that their similarity to the events in the career of Jesus of Nazareth is quite coincidental.

At the time the young woman reported this to me, her friend had been diverted, at least temporarily, from his decision to become a Christian.

Now the lady wanted to know, was there something I could tell her which might help in dealing further with the man and was there some literature which they could read? Happily there was something to say and literature to read as well.

The story points up several pertinent facts. First, it exemplifies the sort of treatment that Isaiah's prophecy now receives at the hands of many modern Biblical scholars. Though now treated with more respect than a couple of generations ago, that it is a valid prediction of events in the career of Jesus is not allowed by many leading technical Biblical scholars. This is true in spite of the fact that for the first seventeen or eighteen centuries of Christian history hardly a voice was raised against it in all Christendom. Naturally, this was never the Jewish interpretation, though there are several varieties of Jewish Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53.

Second, it shows that the passage is valuable in strengthening the faith of

those truly born again, as well as quite convincing to unbelievers. The young woman's faith did not waver and the young man was at least brought further toward faith in Christ than he ever had been before.

Third, the story shows what really ought to be plain enough anyway--that faith and unbelief can never quite be made compatible. Either the professor or the girl is right. To accept the one conclusion leads to faith in Christ as Saviour of the world; to accept the other leads to rejection of Him. To say that Isaiah was uttering timeless truths about the redemptive power of innocent suffering, which the New Testament has applied to Christ, without at the same time recognizing, as Jesus did, that "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer" (Luke 24:46), may seem to be a good compromise. But such a message would never have convinced the young man in question that he ought to say as Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Nor would such a mild conviction have compelled the first evangelists to proclaim boldly and convincingly that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Finally, does this incident not suggest that some examination of this passage, in context, should be made to see what the contextual basis of a Messianic interpretation may be?

The New Testament has settled for believers the question of whether or not the prophecy of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 speaks of Christ. The larger question is: Does this passage speak exclusively of Him? And there is a still more important question: Do all the portions of Isaiah which describe the Lord's servant have Jesus Christ as their subject?

On account of the fact that the great prophecy of our Lord's career in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is broken apart by the chapter division, the designation "servant" for Christ at 52:13 is commonly unknown, though it reappears in 53:11. This is further complicated by the fact that New Testament references to this designation cite the Septuagint (early Greek) translation *pais*, which in turn is rendered "child" rather than "servant" in the Authorized Version. This is corrected in more recent versions. As a result, it is only in technical or semi-technical discussions, as a rule, that "the servant of Jehovah" is related to this passage.

The references to the Lord's Servant are numerous in Isaiah. The references to the servant in 52:13 and again in 53:11 happen to be the last two of a series, beginning at 41:8, of references to the servant of the Lord. All of the last major division of Isaiah (chapters 40-66) is devoted to a message of comfort to Israel in view of the coming captivities and other national disasters.¹

1 The scope of this book does not allow a discussion of the question of the date and authorship of this portion of Isaiah. With the advent of the "age of reason", criticism has progressively divided up the authorship of Isaiah into, first, two main writers and, since the publication of a commentary by a German named Bernhard Duhm (*Das Buch Jesaia* Goettingen, 1892, 1901, 1914, 1922) into three. Chapters 1-39 are said to be generally authentic, the work of Isaiah the son of Amoz in the eighth century B.C.; chapters 40-55 by a man of the sixth century B.C.; chapters 56-66 the work of a contemporary (perhaps a disciple) of the second but continuing on somewhat later. Mighty pens have been raised in defense of the unity and authenticity of the whole of Isaiah. Recent strong defenses in the English language and easily accessible are *The Unity of Isaiah*, O.T. Allis (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Col., Philadelphia) and *An*

Students of all persuasions have always marveled at the literary excellence of this latter portion of Isaiah, no less than at its spiritual depth. Into the portion lying in chapter 41 through chapter 53 is woven a series of mysterious references to the Servant of Jehovah. Among these are four portions often designated by scholars as "songs" of the Servant. In strange, even cryptic fashion, various speakers are introduced in the so-called songs. These songs are usually limited to 52:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12.

REFERENCES TO THE "SERVANT" IN ISAIAH 40-53

The reader is urged to trace carefully through the following survey of this section of Isaiah, wherein the idea of the Servant of the Lord is developed. The passages must be allowed to speak for themselves as to the identity of the Servant, the nature of His career, and His significance. Really one ought to read in his own Bible the whole of these chapters for himself for, several commentaries notwithstanding, the Servant references are an integral part of a lengthy context. For the sake of brevity, however, and more as an introductory survey of the subject than as a full discussion of it, the procedure will be to discuss mainly the actual verbal references to the Servant.

Having predicted the future salvation of Israel from all enemies by the coming of very God himself (40:10), the prophet first mentions the servant in these words: "But thou, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend, thou whom I have taken hold of from the ends of the earth, and called from the corners thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant, I have chosen thee and not cast thee away; fear not thou, for I am with thee" (Isaiah 41:8-10).

That the servant of the Lord in this passage is Jacob, or Israel, is a certainty. The plain sense of the words makes no other interpretation possible.

The next explicit reference to the servant is at 42:1-7. The first four verses constitute one of the so-called servant songs, which some recent critical scholarship discerns; the second paragraph seems clearly to refer to the servant, and it is difficult to tell where to end the paragraph. Inasmuch as this is a very important passage and a distinct step in the development of thought, it is now cited in full.

"Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the street. A bruised reed will he not break, and a dimly burning wick will he not quench; he will bring forth justice in truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set justice in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law.

"Thus saith God Jehovah, he that created the heavens, and stretched them

forth; he that spread abroad the earth and that which comes out of it; he that gives breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein, I Jehovah, have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thy hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison-house" (Isaiah 42:1-7).

Two facts stand out in the first paragraph. The first is that the servant of the Lord is to have a mission to "bring forth justice to the Gentiles." Opinion has somewhat divided as to whether this is as a prophet, as a priest, or as a ruler of some sort. But in any case, a second fact is plain--that the Lord's servant is a person. There is disagreement, but most recent criticism is agreed on this. Certainly the lay reader would hardly come to any other conclusion.

In the second paragraph a third fact, related to the first, is set forth--the servant is to provide salvation for the Gentiles. Whether this salvation is of some natural physical sort or spiritual is not absolutely clear, but the language is most naturally taken in a spiritual sense.

It should be emphasized that in this "song" the servant is a person. This is granted by leading advocates of most views. Delitzsch has said: "The servant of Jehovah who is presented to us here is distinct from Israel, and has so strong an individuality and such marked personal features, that the expression cannot possibly be merely a personified collective" (*Commentary* Vol. ii, p.174).

Now at 42:18-20 comes a startling variation in the theme: "Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. Who is blind but my servant? or deaf as my messenger that I send? who is blind as he that is at peace *with me*, and blind as Jehovah's servant? Thou seest many things, but thou observest not; his ears are open, but he hears not." Whoever the servant is, he is something of a failure, in this text. Evidently though closely allied with the Lord (he seems to be a prophetic messenger of God), he fails even to understand his message. This is quite in contrast to the previous predictions of a successful mission to the world (42:1-7).

At 43:10 it appears that there is a group of messengers called God's servant (singular) and that the essential knowledge which the blind servant should have imparted was the "Mosaic" monotheism of the burning-bush revelation (Exodus 3), viz. "Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he; before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me."

Next appear three clear references to the servant as Israel: "Yet now hear, O Jacob my servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen. Thus saith Jehovah that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, who will help thee. Fear not, O Jacob my servant; and thou Jeshurun, whom I have chosen" (Isaiah 44:1,2). These two references identifying the servant with Israel are immediately followed by promise of an outpouring of the divine Spirit upon the thirsty Israelites--obviously a great spiritual blessing of some kind (cf. 44:3-5).

There is a latent suggestion that the blessing is to extend to all mankind, much as in the promise of the outpouring at Joel 2:28ff, which in the New Testament is given application to the church's baptism in the Spirit of Pentecost (Acts 2:16ff). It is of interest that "Jeshurun," a poetical name for Israel first appearing at Deuteronomy 32:15, meaning "the upright one," is used here. In the context of the effusion of the Spirit, such a meaningful name is most appropriate. At verse 21 is the third of these references wherein it is affirmed that the servant, Israel, shall not be forgotten of God.

As a prophet (or prophets) the servant next appears in the famous Cyrus prophecy. This portion, wherein the name of Cyrus, king of Persia, is announced by a prophet who lived over a century before Cyrus was born (granting that it is unusual), presents no serious problem to those who believe in predictive prophecy. The enormous literature on this passage can only be noticed here. What is important to this discussion is that in connection with this Cyrus prediction, "the word of his (Jehovah's) servant" is presented in synonymous parallel with "the counsel of his messengers," and that in connection with poetic discourse on the validity of the predictive message of the Lord's prophets. The pertinent words are: "Thus says Jehovah...that confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers; that says of Jerusalem, She shall be inhabited...that says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd..." (44:24-28).

Before proceeding further in this recital, observe that the servant of the Lord has appeared first as Israel, then as a Saviour of the Gentiles, after that as an uncomprehending, inefficient messenger of God to the world, and now distinctly as a prophet foretelling the restoration of Jerusalem under the leadership and authority of Cyrus the king of Persia. This is the Cyrus known as "the Great" because he overcame the Babylonian Empire and replaced it with his own in and following the year 538 B.C.

The next three references to the servant are as "Jacob my servant" (45:4), "his servant Jacob" (48:20), and "my servant, O Israel" (49:3).

Now there comes a definite advance. The servant is no longer Israel, as such; no longer a saviour of the Gentiles, as such; nor is he a prophet, as such. He is set forth as the saviour of Israel. Here are the words: "And now says Jehovah that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, and that Israel be gathered unto him (for I am honorable in the eyes of Jehovah, and my God is become my strength); yea, he says, It is too light a thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation into the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:5,6). The reader will now have noticed that in the first of these two verses the servant claims that Jehovah has commissioned him "to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him." In the second, the servant elaborates the claim: "thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel."

These claims of the servant make it impossible to regard him simply as the people Israel. Rather, in the light of the previous context, he is an

Israelite who is to become the effective and successful restorer of his countrymen.

It is significantly added that the servant will not only restore and save Israel, but that he is to become "a light to the Gentiles, that my salvation may be unto the end of the earth."

The next pertinent portion of Isaiah is 50:4-9. By the nearly unanimous consent of recent commentators, these verses are to be regarded as a kind of song or poem recited in the first person by the Lord's servant, even though mention of the servant, as such, does not appear. The portion is immediately followed by an address of the prophet to the followers of the servant.

"The Lord Jehovah has given me the tongue of them that are taught, that I may know how to sustain with words him who is weary. He awakens morning by morning, he awakens my ear to hear as they who are taught. The Lord Jehovah has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away backward. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them who plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord Jehovah will help me; therefore have I not been confounded; therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He is near who justifies me; who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord Jehovah will help me; who is he that shall condemn me? behold, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.

"Who is among you that fears Jehovah, that obeys the voice of his servant? He who walks in darkness and has no light, let him trust in the name of Jehovah and rely upon his God" (Isaiah 50:4-10).

This passage is the closest parallel to 52:13-53:12 in these earlier servant portions. The servant is one who is fully obedient to the Lord's will and commission and, seemingly as a consequence of such obedience, must submit also to smiting, plucking off of hair, shame, and spitting by wicked men (see especially verse 6).

Next, and finally, there comes the most lengthy section of all, Isaiah 52:13-53:12, wherein details of the servant's coming career are set forth with special reference to his suffering in his people's stead and his subsequent exaltation and final glory. No further attention will be devoted to this final portion at this point, inasmuch as it is the subject of the main body of this book.

CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

Since the very earliest times of which there is record (and our record happens to go back to the very day of the foundation of the Christian church), there has been one uniform Christian interpretation of the 53rd chapter of Isaiah: The servant is Jesus Christ, the man of sorrows who gave His life at Calvary for the sins of the world. Naturally, opinions have

differed as to the precise identity of the servant in the earlier passages noted above. And there have been many varieties of interpretation of the minutiae. The general "Christological" frame of interpretation, however, has always prevailed in Christian circles. Even in the earlier passages (Isaiah 42:1ff, for example), it has always been the usual Christian view that these verses attain complete fulfillment only in our Lord.

It is probable that the Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was not new when Jesus and the early Christians expounded it, for among the Aramaic paraphrases of the Old Testament called targums is one (Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel) which identifies the servant in Isaiah 42:1, 43:10, and 52:13-53:12 as Messiah. Scholars think these targums were first oral only and underwent revision from time to time. But they received most of their present bulk in the last five centuries B.C. Jonathan ben Uzziel, who is said to have reduced this oral targum to writing, was a disciple of Hillel of the first century B.C. Even if a third or fourth century A.D. date for the final editing of this targum is correct, as certain scholars assert, it is hardly conceivable that the Jews would have first begun to use this interpretation after the Christians had used it to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. The "personal Messiah" interpretation has, however, survived among Jews till the present. One form of their interpretation reported in the Babylonian Talmud supposes that there will be two messiahs, one to suffer and die, a second to resurrect the first. There is evidence also that the Jewish sect of Qumran, now known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls and other recent finds, gave Isaiah 53 a Messianic interpretation.

A survey of Christian opinion certainly ought to begin with the New Testament. It is exceedingly probable that the first witness in importance therein is that of the Father God. At Jesus' baptism His voice was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Mark reports the saying as, "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). These words are a conflation of Psalm 2:7, "Thou art my son" and Isaiah 42:1, "in whom I am well pleased," or as the version has it, "in whom my soul delights." These words of the Father Himself constitute the first New Testament testimony that the servant of Isaiah's prophecies is Jesus Christ. One could hardly ask for a greater. C. R. North has written that these words were probably heard by Jesus only, and at a later time communicated by Him to the disciples. He thinks it inconceivable that the disciples or the evangelists had the insight to invent these words (*The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 25).

Probably the aged Simeon, whose blessing on the infant Jesus is reported by Luke, should also be mentioned. He quite evidently interpreted the prophecy of the servant at Isaiah 49:6 as relating to Jesus (see Luke 2:29-32).

John the Baptist is a third witness. When Jesus came to him, he exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). There is not strict verbal correspondence, but scholars of many persuasions agree that the author of these words was thinking of Isaiah 53:4,11. Some will claim that the author of the fourth Gospel put these words in John's mouth. But even if that be granted (which we certainly do not grant), it

clearly represents a very early Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53.

That Jesus Himself so interpreted the servant passages is likewise clear. There is specific proof of this at Luke 22:37, where Jesus is reported to have said: "For I say to you, that this which is written must be fulfilled in me, and he was reckoned with transgressors. For that which concerns me has fulfillment." The Scripture to which He refers is Isaiah 53:12. On another occasion, when Peter, James, and John were questioning about his death and resurrection, Jesus asked them: "How is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be set at nought?" (Mark 9:12). Isaiah 50:6, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off my hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting" as well as the whole of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 must have been the writings to which he referred--not to say that the similar prophecies at Zechariah 12:10 and even others (Psalm 22) may not also have been in His thought. Incidentally, some early Christians accepted the crucifixion of Jesus between two thieves as fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12, for somehow Mark 15:28 came into the text of the New Testament at a very early time. "And the scripture was fulfilled, which says, And he was numbered with the transgressors" is the way this verse reads. Though now properly rejected as a spurious text, not present in the original manuscript, it was added at a very early time, for several uncial manuscripts as well as several ancient versions contain it. The consciousness of Jesus that He was to die for the sins of "many" (Mark 10:45; 14:24; cf. Isaiah 53:11) must certainly have been shaped by Isaiah's prophecies, as well as His firm conviction that the time of His death by crucifixion was to be his "hour" (Mark 10:41; Luke 12:50; John 12:23,27; 13:1). One of the leading recent authorities in Old Testament theology, not a conservative, has written that Jesus Himself must have shaped His mission in the light of these passages and that the disciples found in them the only unquestionable and sufficient basis for the faith that Christ died for our sins "according to the Scriptures" (H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament*, p. 101).

The New Testament writers and evangelists received Isaiah's servant prophecies as predictions of Jesus Christ. Matthew reports Jesus' kindly healing ministry and self-effacing public approach and then claims these as fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1ff (Matthew 12:17-21). A better-known example is the case of Philip, who preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch by way of explanation of Isaiah 53:7ff (Acts 8:27-39). Repeatedly the sermons and prayers of the early chapters of Acts refer to Jesus as the Servant. This is obscured by the Authorized Version (1611) which erroneously translates this word as "child." The Greek word is *pais*, used regularly by the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament used in our Lord's time) to translate עֶבֶד the Hebrew word for servant in Isaiah. *Pais* does sometimes mean child, but it obviously cannot be so meant in these passages in Acts. These references in Acts are 3:13,26; 4:27,30. Note that in the same context (Acts 4:25), David as a prophet is called God's *pais* (servant). It is close to certain that Paul is alluding to Isaiah 53:11 in his statement that "through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Finally, Peter's description of the suffering Jesus (1 Peter 2:22-25) is a paraphrastic application of Isaiah 53 to the passion of our Lord, showing how Peter felt about this matter.

The New Testament teaches, then, that "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3), and that among the most prominent of these Scriptures are the predictions of the Lord's servant in Isaiah 41-53.

As far as Christian interpretation of the servant prophecy of Isaiah 53 is concerned, it can be stated that no other interpretation than this Messianic one was ever seriously entertained during the first seventeen centuries of the Christian era. A number of extensive studies of the history of interpretation on this point have been conducted in the last several decades, and none known to this writer reaches a conclusion different from this. One of the most thorough and authoritative works reports that during the sub-apostolic and patristic periods, the Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was unchallenged. Occasionally someone might apply a Servant portion to a prophet (e.g., Chrysostom's view of 50:4-9), but on chapter 53 opinion was united on the Messianic interpretation. Reformation days did not develop any change, adds Dr. North, and when the heretic Servitus maintained that Isaiah 53 referred to Cyrus, it only showed that he was truly a mischievous person (North, *op.cit.* p. 26).

ALTERNATIVES TO THE CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

As suggested above, while Christian interpretation of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 has been uniformly Messianic, there has been some variety of interpretation of other servant portions of Isaiah. Non-Christian interpretation, however, has been far from uniform. These statements reflect our point of view that any interpretation which rejects the clear testimony of the New Testament is not a Christian interpretation, whatever the personal faith of the man advocating it may be. This is not simply pronouncing *anathema* on those who disagree. It is simply to recognize that rejection of the New Testament and uniform Christian concensus is to reject Christianity itself. It is, of course, possible to set forth a new religion in which reason is substituted for revelation and ethical teaching for salvation, and to call that religion Christianity, but any informed Christian ought to protest against such unfair manipulation.

It should be pointed out that once the historical and doctrinal witness of the New Testament is laid aside and the unity of Scripture denied or ignored, there really is no way of knowing who the servant of Isaiah is. If we cannot know for sure that the events ascribed by the New Testament to the career of Jesus of Nazareth really occurred, or that the words ascribed to Him were really spoken, then how can any correlation be made between prediction of Christ and fulfillment? The New Testament is the only reliable source we have for the life and words of Christ. It should not surprise the reader, therefore, to learn that alternatives have generally been proposed by those who take low views of the New Testament. It is somewhat reassuring to learn that even the most advanced radical criticism is having a hard time these days justifying second-century second-hand sources for the New Testament.

The first alternative view to be noted is that

(1) ***The servant is the people Israel.*** This is the most common Jewish interpretation. Let the world-renowned aged Dr. Joseph Klausner, Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Literature and Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, furnish his opinion. He claims that

"Just as the prophet suffers without having committed a fault, suffers from the transgressors among his own people whom he is seeking to benefit, that is to say, *takes upon himself the iniquity of others*, so suffers also the people Israel from other peoples more sinful than Israel, because Israel seeks to benefit them. In other words, *the people Israel takes upon itself the iniquity of all the rest of the peoples, the iniquity of the whole world.* What the prophet is to Israel, Israel becomes to all the world: the servant of the LORD, holding up the standard of the Highest righteousness in the world and suffering for his pursuit of good. This is the profound conception that lies hidden in 42:1-7; 49:1-9; 50:4-9; 52:13-15 plus 53:1-12" (*The Messianic Idea in Israel*, pp. 161,162).

Klausner claims that some of the career of Jesus did resemble that described in Isaiah 53 and that "the rest of his career is *intentionally* portrayed in the Gospels in such a manner that the events appear to have happened in fulfillment of the words in this chapter" (*Ibid*).

Klausner's further remarks indicate that he believes that the passage is messianic in the sense that the "elect of the nation gradually became the Messiah of the world, the redeemer of mankind" (*Ibid*, p. 163).

This comprehensive view regards the servant then as progressively inclusive of the entire nation of Israel, the prophet and his associates, and finally the spiritual (elect) of the nation.

This view may be found in whole or in part in Jewish circles throughout most of the Christian era. Since the coming into Christian circles of anti-supernatural higher criticism of the Bible, this view in almost all particulars has been the most common "higher critical" interpretation.

Actually, it must be recognized that there is some truth in it, for any fair view will have to recognize a place for Israel and the prophets. The tragic aspect of it is the categorical rejection of Jesus Christ and of the historical value of the New Testament.

That the servant has certain prophet characteristics and a prophetic mission, in part, is quite certain. But no prophet fits even a major portion of the particulars. The exaggeration involved when the magnitude of the servant's mission to save both Jews and Gentiles--to die for "all" etc.--is viewed, is simply too enormous to be granted. This would be beyond hyperbole. If the servant were the prophet-author of the prophecy, he would even be guilty in certain portions of having God describe him as the saviour of the world. It is inconceivable that any Hebrew prophet could ever have done that.

(2) ***The Servant is a prophet.*** This theory is suggested by several expressions in the servant passages, and at least once the servant is a

messenger (or messengers, 44:26). Since the 17th century, there have been a few interpreters who thought the servant to be Jeremiah, who in chapter 53 is typical of Messiah. In the late 18th century and in the 19th century, before ideas of a second Isaiah became widespread, Isaiah himself was sometimes suggested. An unknown prophet or even the whole order of prophets was likewise suggested. It was inevitable that when Isaiah 40-66 became regarded as a separate work (or works) from chapters 1-39 and treated as the work of an author (or authors) of the late sixth (and fifth) century, a century and a half later than Isaiah the son of Amoz, [that] the so-called "Deutero Isaiah" himself should be claimed as the servant. This "autobiographical" interpretation has the support of several recent authors.

This view also fails to meet the requirements of the context of Isaiah. To avoid these difficulties, it has assumed many forms. Yet to the present moment, even in the "collective interpretation" form of Eichrodt, Robinson, and other contemporary and near contemporary writers, satisfactory adjustment to the requirements of context has not been made.

The chief contextual objections to the Israel and prophet interpretations follow in summary form.

(a) Israel appears as the cause of the Servant's sufferings. In 53:4-6 Israel confesses that it is "our griefs...our sorrows" that He bears. This excludes the possibility that the *nation* as a whole is the servant.

(b) In chapter 53 the Servant suffers in order that the "many," presumably the confessing Israelites, go free from that suffering. Now if the nation as a whole be the servant, this creates the impossible situation of Israel's being both the sufferer and the ones free from suffering--in the same sense. If it be said that the servant is the elite (elect spiritual minority), then there is another problem, *viz.*, historically, the spiritual minority of Israel and the carnal majority both suffered alike in the nation's calamities. Ezekiel and Daniel go into captivity to suffer. Jeremiah stays at home to suffer. All three minister to disobedient Jews who likewise suffer.

(c) There are several passages where the servant's characteristics and activities are so distinctly personal that only an individual single man could hardly be intended. These distinctly personal features are especially prominent in the four servant songs: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12. In the first song the gentleness and patience ascribed to the servant are characteristics of a person, rather than of a group. In the second the inner subjective reaction to apparent failures is "personal reassertion of a challenged faith" (H. Wheeler Robinson). He cries, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain; yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work is with my God." What could be more personal than this and more unlikely as a group reaction? In the third there are both outer and inner characteristics of a single person. As to the outer, he speaks of his tongue, his ear, his cheeks, and of his hair--and that all in the first person. As to the inner, he speaks of personal communion with God, of his willing response to God's will, and of his own submissive reaction to mistreatment by fellowmen. In the fourth

song (and here the reader is referred to the many details set forth in the five main chapters of this book) we have the distinct sketch of the career of one man.

When one reflects on the details of the "portrait" painted by these four songs, observing their coherence, harmony, and complementary force, he must admit that they most naturally fit the face of only one man--a man whom one might recognize if one were to meet him and become acquainted with him. Christians have always seen that face in the Gospel portrait of Jesus of Nazareth.

(d) There is no suggestion anywhere in the prophecies of the servant that Isaiah means anything but the nation as a nation when he refers to Israel. It is pure assumption to identify him with the disciples of a prophet or the pious minority.

(e) The servant has a mission to Israel which is certainly hard to explain if the servant is the community of Israel. That he is the spiritual minority who saves the community is eliminated on the above grounds.

The scholarly reader will do well to examine North's arguments against the collective theory of the "corporate personality" school (*op.cit.* 205-207).

North's penetrating comment on the intrinsic difficulties of all forms of this view is appropriate here.

"If, however, it is difficult to affirm that the whole of Israel was the Servant, it is attractive, on a *a priori* grounds, to suppose that the Servant was the godly Minority within Israel. No theory appears antecedently so reasonable, and the beginner is apt to accept it at once. It seems to make the best of both worlds. But when we come to delimit or qualify, where are we to stop? It would seem that we are at once on an inclined slope, and that there is no arresting the process of being carried down until we touch bottom with the admission that what we have in the Songs 'is essentially an individual experience'" (*op.cit.* pp. 202,203).

(3) That *the servant is a historical person* of civic, religious, or even of supposed messianic importance has been suggested by various and numerous writers. The recent survey by C. R. North (*op.cit.*), pronounced "masterly" and praised for "completeness of detail" by H. H. Rowley (*The Servant of the Lord*, p. 3), presents no less than nine such interpretations besides the different prophets suggested. Hezekiah and Uzziah, two contemporaries of Isaiah, have been proposed. A supposed Meshullam was suggested not long ago by an author who equates an obscure word translated "he that is at peace" (42:19) with the proper name of the servant. This author further identifies the servant with the Meshullam who is the elder son of Zerubbabel (1 Chronicles 3:19). Zerubbabel, Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, and Cyrus are contemporaries and near contemporaries of the supposed "Second Isaiah" who have been proposed. Even the name of Moses has been seriously advocated. Actually, as most will agree, the very variety of historical identifications shows how tentative and unsatisfactory all of them really are.

Occasionally someone has proposed that

(4) ***The servant is a personified ideal.*** He is (or it is) an ideal kind of man drawn after the pattern of some noble historic or contemporary sufferer. This theory is entirely wanting in evidence of context.

Finally, mention must be made that since the beginning of the 20th century there has been a view that

(5) ***The servant is a mythological figure*** whose pattern has been imported from some of Israel's neighbors. At an earlier stage of this line of interpretation, certain radical critics supposed him to be a Hebraized sort of nature god that in Babylonian mythology is Tammuz, who died and rises again like the cycle of life and death in the seasons of the year. More recently it has been suggested that the suffering servant is a Hebrew reconstruction of a similar dying Baal in the mythology of Canaan, as seen in the Ugaritic literature (Ras Shamra tablets).

Besides these many distinct varieties of interpretation, there have been many ingenious efforts at synthesis of several views. Indeed, the nature of the facts almost precludes any simple explanation relating all the data to some one single person or idea.

It is interesting to note that one scholar, Ernest Sellin, successively advocated in scholarly writings four different theories--identifying the servant with Zerubbabel, with Jehoiachin, with Moses, and with "Third Isaiah."

For those acquainted with the literature of the subject of Biblical prophecy, there is no necessity to demonstrate that there really are only two important bases for rejection of the Christian interpretation: in the case of the Jewish interpreters, rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as the Jewish Messiah; and in the case of the others, rejection of or doubt of the possibility of supernatural, divinely imparted knowledge of remote future events. It is no accident that the non-Jewish objections to the Christian view have arisen in the modern period. The same period of history in Christendom and the same forces which produced deism and other denials of the possibility of the supernatural have produced these naturalistic interpretations of Scripture. Even writers who show evidence of sincere personal faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Saviour of the world are to be found raising thoroughly naturalistic objections to the traditional Christian Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. This seems to be the case with Dr. North, whose valuable work has been several times cited herein. It is beyond the scope of this little book to discuss the philosophical and apologetical issues involved. This has been very adequately done by Dr. O. T. Allis in his book *The Unity of Isaiah* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1950. The title is slightly misleading, for it is really a systematic defense of the valid predictive nature of important sections of Bible prophecy, and should be read by every person seriously interested in this subject.

It should be added that if one's presuppositions do not allow him to accept

predictive prophecy as a possibility, then evidence is useless. However, if his mind is open on the subject, this writer is confident that he will be greatly impressed by the facts of which this book is an exposition, and God willing he will be convinced and converted.

CHRISTIAN MESSIANIC INTERPRETATION

No apology is necessary for boldly advocating a Christian Messianic interpretation. It has been sufficiently demonstrated to be the New Testament view of the major servant prophecies of Isaiah. The further duty remains of explaining this view and of adjusting it to clear statements in the Isaiahan context to the effect that the servant is Israel, a prophet, or some other entity.

I would remind the reader that, as seen earlier, two major portions of the servant prophecies are specifically said in the New Testament to be prophecies of Jesus Christ. These are the long section of Isaiah 53 and an important portion of chapter 42. This is not to say that no reference to some other person or to a group of persons may not likewise be encompassed in some parts of the servant prophecies. That would be to ignore the comprehensive, organic character of many Old Testament predictions. It does mean that these prophecies point ultimately and *of divine intention* to Christ--that these are real predictions. And in the case of the 53rd chapter at least, I think it can be safely claimed that we have prediction that points directly and exclusively to Him.

Many students have observed that there is a comprehensive grasp of the future--sometimes also of the past--in some prophecies that includes many events of a similar or related kind, which are nevertheless widely separated in time. Many names have been given to this feature--the most objectionable being "double fulfillment." Franz Delitzsch, a renowned Jewish-Christian German scholar of the second half of the 19th century, spoke of it as the "apotelesmatic" character of prophecy.

J. A. Alexander, a somewhat earlier 19th century American scholar, without naming this feature spoke of it somewhat obliquely as follows: "All prediction, or prophecies in the restricted sense, are not specific and exclusive, i.e., limited to one occasion or emergency, but many are descriptive of a sequence of events which has often been realized" (*Isaiah Translated and Explained*, vol. 1, p. 14).

Albert Barnes, a contemporary of Alexander, whose scholarly works on the original text of Isaiah, Daniel, and Job deserve fuller study than has ever been given them, wrote very clearly and most satisfactorily on this subject. His extensive introduction to Isaiah (*Notes on Isaiah*, vol. I) will reward the industrious reader. Of this feature he states: "This is not double sense; it is *rapid transition* under the laws of *prophetic suggestion*" (*Ibid.*, p. xlix).

Much recent scholarship, given as it is to textual emendation and to solving problems of exegesis and interpretation by source criticism, has badly neglected this feature.

It will help to understand this characteristic of Biblical prediction to observe a clear case of it in the New Testament. Our Lord's great predictive discourse known as the Olivet discourse, recorded in Luke 21, Mark 13, and in Matthew 24 and 25, was given in answer to essentially two questions of the disciples: what would be the sign of the Lord's second coming, and when would the predicted destruction of Jerusalem occur? That the disciples may have supposed the two to be really one event does not alter this. The Lord's answer does not distinguish the two. Rather, since destructive judgments are prominent aspects of both events, much of the discourse appears to be equally applicable to both. Some portions of the address may be applied only to one or to the other.

A clear Old Testament case is the Emmanuel prophecy of Isaiah 7:1-9:7. Practically every commentator agrees that all of this section is part of one oracle. At 7:14 a prophecy is made of the birth of a baby boy. The immediate context following applies the prophecy to the birth of Isaiah's son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz. (The reader is challenged to read Isaiah 7:14 through 8:4 and 8:18 to see if this is not true.) Yet the section closes at 9:6,7 with a prediction which, evangelically handled, applies to Messiah Himself and to Him alone. The prophecy of 7:14, speaking in context so clearly of the birth of Isaiah's son as a sign to Ahaz and yet as we know from Matthew 1:23 speaking also of Messiah, is a case of this comprehensive grasp of the future wherein more than one event is involved in a single prediction.

The Babylon prophecy of Isaiah 13 and 14 abounds with this peculiar feature. Indeed, this is especially, though certainly not exclusively, an Isaiah characteristic.

Before proceeding, let me succinctly state this principle. In presenting their messages, the prophets, without presenting a key to distinctions, frequently associated in one oracle items which though similar in some important particular are widely separated in time, and which may also be greatly different in other particulars. The prophets were essentially "seers"--men who saw truth in visual form as God granted them revelatory visions, and who wrote or told what they saw. Just as the dimension of depth cannot be incorporated into a two-dimensional picture except by illusion, so the element of depth (precise temporal relation) is often left out of the visions. Occasionally, as in the case of Jeremiah's prediction of the seventy years of captivity (Jeremiah 25) or Daniel's prediction of the seventy weeks (Daniel 7 [sic; Daniel 9]), this dimension is specially supplied. The fact remains that usually it was not. As will be seen shortly, this has an important bearing on a proper solution to the prophecies of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah.

A second important fact to be noted is that the entire book of Isaiah is a significant contribution to the development of the "promise doctrine" of the Old Testament. The promise to Abraham, "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3), supplies the very foundation for the existence of Israel as the special people of God--namely, in the process of time through Israel the whole world would be saved from the loss incurred by the fall of man. I have in my library a book containing the L.

P. Stone lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary for 1902-1903. This work of 427 pages by Willis Judson Beecher is devoted to a thorough analysis of the Bible in relation to the promise to Abraham and is hence appropriately entitled, "The Prophets and the Promise." Beecher demonstrates that the servant prophecies of Isaiah 40-53 are a part of a connected development and shows that it is quite natural that the servant idea should contain both the nation and the personal Messiah who would come out of that nation. He also demonstrates that the connection of the servant with the promise to Abraham concerning his "seed" is certain, and that that seed is the personal Messiah. A similar connection with the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) is demonstrated. Beecher's pages cannot be summarized here; I must be satisfied to report his conclusions and to refer the interested reader to his work.

I have written of the comprehensive grasp of the future in Old Testament prediction and of the relation of Israel's prophecies to the Abrahamic promise as being significantly connected with the interpretation of the "servant." A third fact remains to be noted before spelling out my own statement of the Christian Messianic Interpretation. It is that the New Testament clearly teaches (here read carefully 1 Peter 1:1-12) that some Old Testament prophets, Isaiah in particular, made predictions of the future that neither they themselves nor their contemporaries were expected by God to understand--prophecies that were to be unraveled only after the coming of Christ and the effusion of the Spirit. Peter clearly states that these prophets who wrote by the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ searched their own writings to learn "what *time* or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them." Then he goes on to say that these prophecies of "the suffering and the glory" were not intended for the age of the prophets to understand but for the age of the New Testament church to understand (see 1 Peter 1:12).

This fact flies squarely in the face of the entire higher critical rejection of the possibility of true predictive prophecy. It likewise directly contradicts the higher critical contention that all prophecy is controlled by the historical background (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Prophecy. According to this latter notion, the prophet's message is restricted to the issues and problems of his own age, any reference to the remote future being typological or ideological only. The prophet might utter timeless truths, that is, applicable in many ages, but he could not foresee or predict an age in the future essentially different from his own. That Dr. North sees this issue is evident when he writes near the end of his book:

"The fundamental objection to the traditional Messianic interpretation is that it is wedded to a too mechanical doctrine of inspiration. This seems to put it out of court as unworthy of serious consideration. The prophet is a mere amanuensis, and what he writes has no relevance to the circumstances of his own time. Moreover, if this implies that he 'sees' in advance One who was not to come for another five or six centuries, it raises the difficult philosophical problem whether there can be an actual prevision of history" (*op.cit.* p. 207).

It is interesting to observe that as a Christian (a most inconsistent one, I think) he must find some reference to Christ in the prophecies, but he does it on the basis of a kind of Platonic parable rather than of true prediction.

Christians may sometimes make great concessions to unbelief and still retain their faith in Jesus Christ as the very Son of God, but the Bible itself never makes such concessions. And let us all remember that there is not any evidence at all that Jesus ever subscribed to the "*Sitz im Leben*" (historical setting) limitations on Biblical interpretation. Quite to the contrary, it was He who said, "All things must be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44). There is an issue involved here too important to be ignored, too crucial to brush lightly over. It is the issue of faith versus unbelief, of deism versus supernaturalism, of Christianity versus anti-Christianity. If God be God, then let him be God; if not, then let Baal be God! If God is the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent personal being the Bible and Christianity say He is, then He can know the future, He can determine the future. He can tell His prophets about it, and they can write it down for future generations to read. This is the persistent claim of Isaiah's God in the latter half of Isaiah. Says He: "I am Jehovah, that is my name; and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise unto graven images. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isaiah 42:8,9). The entire 41st chapter is devoted to this proof of God's existence--that is, that He is able to predict the future.

It is certain that prophecies usually can be related to some historical situation. Revelation is given *into* culture and does not originate in it. Context sometimes (e.g., the virgin and her child, Isaiah 7:14) supplies the main data of the historical setting. As historical, linguistic, and archaeological studies enlarge knowledge of the historical setting of a prophecy, understanding of it is frequently enhanced. But the fact remains that extensive knowledge of the historical setting is often not supplied in context and is frequently incapable of recovery. Yet those prophecies were written "for our admonition." Furthermore, in the case of true prediction of the remote future, the age of the prophet cannot, in the very nature of the case, "control" the prophecy. Furnish the categories, terms, symbols, etc., it must. Language itself belongs to some period and changes with the passage of time. Any language is likewise obviously best qualified to express the ideas of the age in which it is in common use. But to say that God cannot bring foreign ideas before the eyes of a prophet's mind, ideas of which without a miracle he would never have thought, is to deny God's power. It cannot be done, of course, in a vacuum. It must be in terms of the prophet's own mind and culture. But its content can be totally foreign to both the mind of the prophet and his culture. That is to say, the events predicted may have no direct application at all to the prophet's age.

It should be clear, whether we like it or not, that to reject the possibility that predictive prophecy can take place is to reject Christianity. It should be equally clear that the fulfillment of predictive prophecy is one of the strongest divine testimonies to the truth

of Christianity.

This excursion into the necessity for and importance of predictive prophecy to a Christian interpretation has interrupted exposition of the Christian Messianic interpretation. The topic may now be resumed.

The servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-53 is several times specifically declared to be the nation Israel. About this no doubt can be entertained. At least once he is the "messengers" of the Lord, evidently referring to the prophetic order. This is at 44:26, which reads, "that confirms the word of his servant, and performs the counsel of his messengers." It is possible that the first clause should be translated, "that confirms the word *about* his servant" in a manner parallel with the second clause. This would empty the passage of any identification of the servant with the prophetic order. Inasmuch, however, as the usual translation makes good sense and is capable of adjustment with the whole context, it probably should be retained. In 42:18-20 the servant is a somewhat unsuccessful messenger. The servant is also a saviour--both of Israel and of the Gentiles (49:5,6). Finally, he is a patient sufferer who suffers (50:4-9) and dies (Isaiah 53) for the sins of "many" or "all."

There is a natural interpretation of all these facts which incorporates all into one synthetic view--the Christian Messianic Interpretation. Christ as the promised "seed of Abraham" is the one through whom Israel as God's servant blesses the world. As the consummation of the line of prophets, God's final messenger (Hebrews 1:1,2), he executes the requirements of the servant as a prophet. As Son of God, He obediently becomes the Lamb who "takes away the sin of the world," thus carrying out the predictions of the servant's suffering and substitutionary death. The nation Israel as a messianic nation, their spiritual "elite" as the special bearers of the messianic consciousness of the nation, their prophets as the special witnesses of the messianic prospects, their kings and priests as administrators in their respective realms of the day-to-day functions of the messianic people--all have their consummation in Christ. This is what is meant in the traditional expositions of Jesus' work as "prophet, priest, and king."

Different scholars have described this concept in different ways while agreeing on the idea itself. Delitzsch has said it well:

"The idea of 'the servant of Jehovah' assumed, to speak figuratively, the form of a pyramid. The base was Israel as a whole; the central section was that Israel, which was not merely Israel according to the flesh but according to the spirit also; the apex is the person of the Mediator of salvation springing out of Israel. And the last of the three is regarded (1) as the center of the circle of the promised kingdom--the *second* David; (2) the center of the circle of the people of salvation--the *second* Israel; (3) the center of the circle of the human race--the *second* Adam. Throughout the whole of these prophecies in ch. 40-66, the knowledge of salvation is still in its second stage and about to pass into the third. Israel's true nature as a servant of God, which had its roots in the election and calling of Jehovah, and manifested itself in conduct and action in harmony

with this calling, is all concentrated in Him, the One, its ripest fruit. The gracious purposes of God towards the whole human race, which were manifested even in the election of Israel, are all brought by Him to their full completion" (*Commentary on Isaiah*, vol. II, pp. 174,175).

Alexander suggests the figure of a body (Israel) and its head (Messiah) as an illustration of the organic connection of the elements of the servant prophecies (*Isaiah Translated and Explained*, vol. II, pp. 101-106, 279-282), but the interpretation is essentially the same. There have been others who use the figure of concentric circles. What the figure used for illustration may be is not important. The idea is the important thing.

The practice of referring to a group or nation as if they were a single person was more perfectly natural in ancient Israel and among her neighbors than it is for us. (It is not so uncommon now as might be supposed. In fact, it has already happened in this paragraph.) The ancient Hebrews frequently applied personal names to nations and tribes. Examples are Ashur (Assyria), Mitzraim (Egypt), and Israel (the Hebrews), as well as all twelve tribes of Israel (Simeon, Benjamin, Levi, Ephraim, etc.). This is carried out so thoroughly that frequently only the context and inflection of a proper name will tell, in the the case of names of founders of nations especially, if the founder himself, the country which bears his name, or the persons who compose it are meant. If the word is used with masculine plural verbal inflections agreeing, then the people of the country are meant. If the agreeing words are feminine singular, then the country is meant. If they are masculine singular, then either the country or its founder is probably meant. This is not to say that the Hebrews did not think of making distinctions between the tribe or nation and its founder, or between the nation and various individual members (as extreme statements of these features occasionally seem to imply).

It follows, therefore, that the comprehensive, Christian, Messianic interpretation of evangelical scholarship is the natural interpretation of Isaiah's prophecies of the Lord's servant.

Christians may rejoice that the most extensive studies of this subject published in recent generations, recognized even by rationalistic critics as superb scholarly productions, have been made by Christian advocates of a Christian Messianic Interpretation.

This chapter cannot present all the rational arguments and evidence confirming the Messianic view. Neither is this the place to present at length further reasons for rejecting other views. Even if this could be done, it would not produce final results. One cannot prove Christianity true aside from the divinely accredited messengers of the New Testament (Jesus and the apostles) and of the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets). Inductive procedures, however objective and well conducted, do not produce certainty in the social and physical sciences and cannot do so in matters of religion and faith. Men have not often become Christians because of inductively established convictions, but because of the testimony of messengers who for some reason or other they felt were trustworthy. Likewise, Christian faith rests for its object not upon propositions proved

true by science, but upon revelation delivered by God Almighty--and of course upon Christ Himself.

Nevertheless, when the Old Testament predictions of Christ are seen in relation to His career, Christian faith is strengthened immeasurably. This is true today just as it was in apostolic times. Likewise, the same thing will, when the Spirit of God illuminates the heart, frequently bring unbelievers to conviction and to faith.

Therefore, we cannot say to the reader, "Read these pages of exposition of Isaiah and if convinced become a Christian." No, God "now commands all men everywhere to repent; because he has appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he has ordained (Jesus Christ); whereof he has given assurance unto all men, in that he has raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30,31). Since Jesus arose from the dead, there is not one good reason for continuing in disbelief. But we can say, "Read and see if the Scriptures do not likewise show these things to be true."