

are the tasks of those who must present the word of God to His people.

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THE PROBLEM OF THE SERVANT SONGS

In the second part of the book of Isaiah there appear four poems which by reason of their theme are commonly called the 'Songs of the Suffering Servant'. In these poems we meet a mysterious figure designated as 'the Suffering Servant' or the 'Servant of Yahweh'. The study of these four sections gives rise to some difficulties. First of all some critics do not agree as to the number and length of the passages. Others consider these poems of the Servant so different from the rest of the book, even if the latter part of it, i.e. chapters 40-66, that they regard them as being of independent origin. Secondly, and no doubt connected with this, there is the question of who this Servant is. What does the prophet mean by this term? What does the figure represent and what are the attributes and function associated with it?

Three of the Servant Songs are almost universally recognised as being 42:1-4; 49:1-6, and 52:13-53, 12. There are only a few critics who exclude the passage: 50:4-9. The reasons they give for this are that the word Servant does not occur in the poem, that the rhythm of the passage is different from that of the other three and that it is the only song that seems to have influenced the surrounding prophecies. But although the word Servant is not expressly mentioned, the resemblance of this passage to the other poems is so great as to make it practically certain that the speaker is the same personality described in the other songs. This third passage is almost a necessary link between the second and the fourth poems, thus connecting the Servant's mission in its further stage of persecution and suffering. A few scholars on the other hand would include a fifth Song, 61:1-3. It is true that the speaker of the fragment presents great similarities with the Servant: 'the spirit of the Lord is upon him' . . . He is 'anointed' . . . He is 'sent to preach to the meek'. But there are clear differences as well. Here there is a prophet who, as if in a soliloquy, gives a prophecy of salvation, but without appearing himself as the instrument of its realisation, as in the Songs of the Servant. Besides we cannot find here the universal mission of the Servant. The prophet is to proclaim

the 'day of vengeance', an idea which does not seem to conform to the humble and gentle character of the Servant, who is ready to suffer for the people and brings a personal message of salvation. There is some disagreement too on the length of the poems. A small minority of critics regard 42:5-7; 49:7-12; and 50:10-11, as closely connected with the Servant passages and as meaningless apart from them, but the majority of authors exclude them. The ordinary length of the Servant Songs is commonly taken to be: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53, 12.

Some critics see such a striking difference between the four Songs and the rest of the book that they conclude they were inserted by a later editor and were not therefore the work of Second Isaiah. In their view the passages are introduced in rather an abrupt fashion and can therefore be removed without breaking the continuity of the narrative. But this is not a sufficient reason, for there are other works from which a passage can be lifted without any detriment to the context. They also see in the rest of the book no signs of dependence on the Songs. But there is some connection; a very striking one is that between 51:6-8, 'for the worm shall eat them up as a garment and the moth shall consume them as wool', and 50:9, 'they shall all be destroyed as a garment: the moth shall eat them up'. Their argument on the difference of metre and rhythm is not sufficiently sound either, for the third song is entirely different in rhythm from the other three, both metres being found in Deutero-Isaiah. They urge that in the Songs, the Servant is described as an ideal personality who offers a great contrast to the 'blind and deaf' Servant of the Second Isaiah; that the quiet and gentle manners of the Servant in these poems present a marked difference when compared with the way in which II Isaiah loudly proclaims his message to the nations. But if we consider the four Songs in themselves, we cannot but notice a great difference in tone within them, for the quiet Servant who 'shall not cry' whose 'voice shall not be heard abroad' (42:2-3) does not seem to be the same as the one described in chapter 49 who has a 'mouth like a sharp sword' and has been made like a 'chosen arrow' destined to produce the work symbolised by these two descriptions. Even if there is a certain 'temperamental' difference between the Songs and Deutero-Isaiah as Duhm maintains, we cannot deny Isaiah's ability to use different metres to suit the different prophecies, especially as his teaching was spread over a considerable period of time.

Connected with the problem of interpolation is the question of whether the Songs were composed by the Second Isaiah at the same time

as the rest of the prophecies or before. Some scholars maintain that the differences are so marked that we must conclude the Songs are independent compositions or earlier in date than the rest of the book. They see a difference in the attitude towards the heathens in the two writings. The Songs seem to present a more 'sympathetic' outlook than the rest of the Second Isaiah who appears to show a certain animosity towards heathenism which is not only directed against the Babylonian oppressors of Israel, but against all kinds of idolaters. Yet all that the Songs say is that the Servant will be a 'light' to the whole world, and II Isaiah also envisages the conversion of the Gentiles after their crushing defeat by the Persians: 'Assemble yourselves, and come, and draw near together, ye that are saved of the Gentiles'. . . . 'Be converted to me, and you shall be saved, all the ends of the earth' (45:20-22). The idea of salvation in the Songs is seen as an internal regeneration brought about by the vicarious sacrifice of the Servant while in the rest of Deutero-Isaiah it is regarded as an external political event, the work of God alone, entirely theocentric. The contrasted roles of Cyrus and the Servant are considered almost incompatible. But there is no opposition between them since their function is quite different. Cyrus is God's instrument for the political liberation of the Israelite nation, and once his task is accomplished, he disappears from the stage. The Servant is the instrument of a spiritual restoration through his own suffering. The rounded completeness of the Songs as contrasted with the surrounding oracles, together with the absence of resentment against Babylon, are seen as signs of an earlier and independent composition. But these arguments do not seem sufficient to disprove the common tradition which maintains that the poems were written by the same author and at the same time as the rest of the Deutero-Isaiah. In spite of all the objections it is generally admitted that the phraseology of the Servant passage is Deutero-Isaianic. Besides, the idea of the Servant is found outside the four Servant Songs, being the conception of one and the same author.

Our study leads us on to the question: who is the Servant? If we consider the term 'Servant' in general, it seems to mean as defined by Driver, 'one who is God's agent or representative, and who is loyal and devoted, according to the knowledge possessed by him in the discharge of the work entrusted to him'. In this sense God spoke of Abraham as his servant (Gen. 26:24), of Moses (Num. 12:7), of David (2 Kg. 7:8) and even of Isaiah who in chapter 20:3 is called 'my servant Isaiah'. But the picture of the Suffering Servant is a somewhat more complicated one. The varied features of the description of him in the four Songs make it very difficult to specify who the Servant is.

He is one chosen and summoned by God from the first moment of his existence, 'the Lord hath called me from the womb' (49:1ff.; 42:1ff.; 53:10ff.), and he has been chosen to carry out a unique and glorious mission, for the discharge of which he has been endowed with the spirit of Yahweh. This mission is twofold: first 'to bring back Jacob to God', and secondly to be 'a light to the Gentiles' (49:5-6). The Servant possesses the qualities of a prophet, for besides being endowed with God's spirit, his 'mouth was like a sharp sword' (49:2); his manner of working was to be 'quiet and unobtrusive, gentle and kind' (42:2ff.). Even if for a time he did not realise the full extent of his task and laboured in obscurity and discouragement, even suffering contempt and reproach (49:4; 50:6), nevertheless at a certain period in his life he had a new revelation of his mission 'and now saith the Lord . . . that thou shouldst be my servant . . .', (49:5, 6), God's Servant was to be faithful even to death, a death of great ignominy and suffering though he was completely innocent, but offering a vicarious atonement for the sins of others (53:1ff.). And his career was to be crowned with success (52:13-15; 42, 4).

The difficulty lies in answering the question: can all these features be taken to represent a collectivity: Israel or part of it, or on the other hand one individual. According to some the *collective* interpretation appears perhaps as the simplest. It is considered the most natural since it extends to the Songs the sense attributed to the 'servant' in chapters 40-48. It is also the most ancient, for it is supposed to be the theory prevailing in post-Christian Jewish interpretation according to Origen. It was adopted by scholars like Rosenmuller, Reuss and Hitzig, and has the support of many modern writers including Giesebrecht, König and Peake. It identifies the Servant with the Israelite nation as it actually existed in history. The clue to this theory is found in chapter 49:3: 'Thou art my servant Israel, for in thee will I glory', where the Servant is clearly identified with Israel. This seems to be the meaning also of 41:8: 'But thou Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend'. Theologically this interpretation is considered to be conveniently adapted to the development of the Israelite nation: to the universal mission entrusted to her by God, to the fact of her being endowed with the spirit of prophecy, to her sufferings at the hands of her enemies which reached their climax with her extinction as a nation by the exile, and finally her expected rising again at the restoration.

If we compare the texts referring to the servant Israel and to the Servant, we can see that there are similarities between them, but there are also differences. Thus they are both chosen by God: 'Thou Israel art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen' (41:8) and in 42:1,

'Behold my servant . . . my elect'. Both were formed by God : 'Jacob, my Servant . . . the Lord that made and formed thee . . . from the womb' (44:1-2) and in 49:1.5 'the Lord hath called me from the womb'. Israel was endowed with the Spirit of God : 'I will pour out my spirit upon thy seed' (44:3), as well as the Servant : 'I have given my spirit upon him' (42:1). But there are differences too : Israel appears rebellious : 'thou art stubborn' (48:4), while the Servant is always faithful and submissive : 'I do not resist' (50:5) and is offered of 'his own free will' (53:7). The blind and deaf attitude of Israel : 'hear ye deaf and blind' (42:18) is contrasted with the Servant's attentive response : 'in the morning he wakeneth my ear, that I may hear . . . I do not resist' (50:4-5). Israel suffers for her own sins 'for your iniquities' (50:1) ; 'I will not remember thy sins' (43:24) ; the Servant suffers for no sins of his own, but for those of others : 'He was wounded for our iniquities : he was bruised for our sins' (53:5ff.). Finally Israel needed the redemption which was the object of her expectation all through the centuries of her history, but it was precisely the Servant's mission to redeem Israel. The differences are really great and seem to outweigh the similarities.

First of all, if the Servant is the Israelite nation then the speakers in chapter 53 cannot be the Israelites ; they must then be the heathens. But would the heathen nations be so deeply moved by the tragic fate of a race whom they had always regarded with contempt, and whom they now see innocently bearing the punishment which they themselves deserve on account of their sins ? It would seem rather strange that they should be concerned about the fate of the Israelites, for to them it was in no way extraordinary that this despised nation had been crushed by the rising power of Babylon. These speakers show a religious attitude which cannot be attributed to the heathens. Could the Gentiles see Israel in this unexpected character of a meek, blameless sufferer, entirely resigned to the will of God ? Again would the heathens understand this idea of Israel suffering for the sins of the rest of the world, a concept which is nowhere found in the Old Testament and is not considered to be included in the theology of Isaiah ? It is true that Israel's deliverance from exile is regarded as a source of blessing to the world since, after this process of purification, the saved remnant constituted the nucleus of God's people. But this is quite different from the entirely blameless vicarious sacrifice of the Servant. If Israel is the Servant, we cannot speak of her innocence. But the Servant 'hath done no iniquity' (53:9) which is precisely the essence of the Servant's vicarious sacrifice, whilst we know from chapter 40:2 that Israel had sinned, for she 'hath received of the hand of the Lord double for all her sins'. Again this theory cannot explain

chapter 49:5-6, where the Servant is said to be formed 'from the womb', that he might 'bring Jacob back'. If the Servant and Israel are identical this is impossible. How can the Servant Israel bring back Israel and labour and suffer for the good of Israel and the world? The defenders of this theory however maintain that this could have been done by a section of the people, the remnant perhaps, who undertook the redemption of the whole nation in the same way as we might say 'England must provide for her poorer members'.

Some critics, though recognising these insurmountable difficulties, still cannot conceive that the same title should have been applied by Isaiah to two different subjects without any indication that there was a double meaning in it. They see that the actual historical Israel cannot be the subject of personification, for the qualities attributed to the Servant are in some cases quite the opposite of those displayed by the mass of the people. But if the Servant cannot be taken in the literal sense as the historical nation, they consider him to be the *ideal Israel*. The Servant is conceived as a personification, not of the historical Israel but of the Israelite nation that conforms to the divine ideal, to God's concept of its vocation from the beginning, and which is being progressively realised in history. This ideal Israel is distinguished from the actual Israel in such a way that the former is conceived as exercising a ministry for the latter. But this is a very difficult distinction which can hardly be carried through in its application to the Servant. Though this theory is maintained by such leading critics as Dillman, there are great objections. If the Servant is the ideal Israel, he cannot have the experience and history attributed to him: 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength without cause and in vain' (49:4), and all the experience assigned to him in 53:1-9. But the main theological objection is that it does not seem natural to regard the ideal Israel as suffering for the sins of the historical Israel. How can this ideal Israel offer a sacrifice on behalf of the real Israel? Again how can the ideal Israel bring the actual Israel back to God?

The Songs also suggest that the Servant is an *individual*. This is clearly seen in chapter 49:1-2 and 4-6. The theory that the Servant is an individual takes two forms: first that he is a truly historical person, a contemporary or predecessor of Isaiah; or secondly that he is an ideal figure yet to come. Some suggest that the individual referred to in chapter 53 is Jeremiah or Ezechiel or even an unnamed martyr of the time of Manasses or of the exile. Duhm suggests that the Servant was a religious teacher who lived between the exile and the time of Ezra. His career is to be taken literally from the poems: he was disfigured by leprosy, despised by all and dying of his disease was buried in a dishonoured grave. He left the impression that God

would raise him from the dead to become a great light to the world. Sellin, whose view was approved by such authorities as Rothstein, Kittel, Staerck and Hoonacker, identifies the Servant with Jehoiachin who surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, was kept in prison in Babylon for thirty-six years, and was finally set free, and honoured by Evilmerodach. The sufferings attributed in the Songs to the Servant were endured by him at the hands of the Babylonian gaolers. In 49:1-9 he is supposed to express his disappointment at the uselessness of his sufferings. Jehoiachin is idealised in the light of the Messianic expectation.

But these interpretations do not find sufficient support in the Scriptures. Theologically they are impossible. The lofty mission of the Servant as conceived in the Old Testament is entirely beyond the role of a private individual. Sellin attributes to Jehoiachin motives which are not suggested in the Old Testament. He does not even appear as having acted rightly, for he is numbered among the kings that 'did evil before the Lord' (2 Kg. 24:9). There is no support for Sellin's idea that Jehoiachin spontaneously surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar as an act of self-sacrifice on behalf of his people: there was no such idea of vicarious sacrifice, and it would have been quite foreign to the Babylonian King. Nor can we accept that chapter 50:4-9 describes Jehoiachin's humble behaviour under the cruel treatment inflicted on him while in prison; and many other references from the Songs cannot apply to this king. Even a holy prophet like Jeremiah does not seem to fulfil the conditions required of the Servant, for he falls short of the meek and humble Servant. Instead of the 'sheep . . . that does not open its mouth . . .' or the 'dumb lamb before its shearers' (53:7) Jeremiah has his angry outburst against his persecutors.

The more common interpretation finds in the Songs a direct reference to the future Messiah. This is the Christian tradition and some critics think it was probably the Jewish belief also, before controversy induced them to abandon it, for it seems to have been accepted by the Jewish contemporaries of Justin and Tertullian: their objection to the Messiahship of Christ was not his suffering but his accursed death which could not be predicated of the Messiah, and also that Elias had to come first. But there are difficulties in this interpretation also. The expected Messiah is considered to be the ideal king who was envisaged as exercising royal authority and was to restore the earthly power of Israel as the centre of the universal kingdom of God. The Servant is a prophet and a victim who is supposed to rescue the world by the convincing force of his teaching, by his meekness and humility, by the appeal of his sufferings on their behalf and his final exaltation.

Gelin, the great French exegete, understood this very well and spoke of the phenomenon of 're-readings': certain important words went through a series of interpretations which gradually transformed their meaning, and it is the *last* of these interpretations which is the definitive one and which must decide our understanding of the word.

To take an example: the concept of wisdom runs all through the Old Testament, but an examination of the texts, especially in their chronological order, shows a gradual yet definite change in its meaning. Israel, like all ancient peoples, especially in the Orient, always had its 'wisdom', the expression usually in a popular, easily remembered form—the proverb—of something common to human experience. It deals with practical solutions to the problems of life and the prudence, skill and energy to 'make a go of things', to use 'common sense' as we would say today. Hence, in the earliest collections of sayings in the Book of Proverbs we find advice on subjects such as proper parental discipline, moderation in food and drink, honest dealings in business, marital fidelity. Examples of wisdom in other parts of the Bible deal with craftsmanship, administration, political foresight. The connection that has been established between Israel's wisdom and that of her neighbours in the world of the time bears out the basic earthiness of the whole concept. Nevertheless despite its profoundly human, universal and moral character Israelite wisdom is always centred on Yahweh, the transcendent, supreme, unique and just God. And this is apparent already in the earliest stage of the tradition: see for instance the constant reference to Yahweh in the sixteenth chapter of Proverbs. It was this characteristically religious outlook which, while going hand in hand with the purely human and practical one gradually transformed it, so that there is a constant progression towards the idea that God alone possesses wisdom which He communicates to men, especially in the form of piety, fidelity to religious practice, and in particular to the observance of the Law of God. In this way there is a twofold development of the religious concept of wisdom: first, it becomes a synonym for personal goodness of life and virtue, while sin is seen as the greatest foolishness, and secondly it is gradually identified, almost personally, with Yahweh Himself or His spirit, as the active principle of the creation and providential ruling of the world. In this second sense it provided the passage to the New Testament concept of the Word incarnating the wisdom of God's plan of salvation: Logos in St John, mystery in St Paul.

Now when our Lord and his apostles begin to use the concept of wisdom in their preaching of the Kingdom they do not refer to its

BOOK REVIEWS

between chapter 53 and the Passion of Our Lord. He alone, who was entirely free from sin could offer his vicarious suffering for the redemption of the world. He offered himself of his 'own free will', showing the gentleness and humility which Isaiah attributes to the Servant, and his sacrifice culminated in the greatest act of exaltation, his resurrection from the dead. Christ saw himself as the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Songs when he said that he came to 'give his life a redemption for many' (Mk. 10:45). In connection with his sufferings he said: 'For I say to you that this that is written must yet be fulfilled in me' (Lk. 22:37). To the disciples of Emmaus talking about his exaltation in rising from the dead, he said: 'Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so to enter into his glory?' and beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things that were concerning him' (Lk. 24:26-7).

MOTHER NIEVES ALONSO, A.C.I.

Beckenham

BOOK REVIEWS

Sister Romain, *Tell My People, A Handbook for Catechists*. Chapman, London-Dublin 1965. pp. 191. Paper, 10s 6d

Mother Jean Fletcher, *Bearing Witness to Christ, A Handbook for Catechists and other Teachers of Religion*. Chapman, London 1964. pp. 152. Cloth, 16s

The opening of the Corpus Christi College, Institute of Religious Education, in London earlier this autumn has added fresh impetus to the English Catechetical movement of which these two handbooks for catechists are products. The Institute's threefold division of studies is significant and indicates why *Scripture* reviews books on Catechetics: (1) the study of the good news of salvation; (2) the study of the man who receives the good news of salvation; (3) the study of the means of communicating the good news of salvation. Moreover the part played by the Bible and the Liturgy in Christian catechesis has been indicated in a previous review by Anthony Davies.¹

Having said this, it is well to remember that in perspective these two books are designed for Sunday School catechists and teachers in charge of religious education in our schools—and those of infants and

¹ *Scripture*, 1964, pp. 94-5.