



Isaiah – Faithful Servant Background Notes 3

Use in conjunction with published notes.

The two passages for study in this section have been adopted by the church to refer to Jesus, but for the writers, the first refers to the Messiah and the second to a servant, which some scholars interpret as a personification of Israel or the post- Exilic Jews.

Passage 1 Isaiah 9. 2-7

(JG) Surprisingly, at this point (Is 9:2-7), there comes a declaration that light has dawned. Darkness is a figure for a situation where one does not understand what is going on, for an experience of trouble, for deception and plotting, and for death itself (a tomb is a dark place). It thus suggests a realm from which Yahweh is absent or in which he is inactive. Light is a figure for a situation where one can see and understand, for a place where one doesn't mind being seen, for an experience of deliverance and blessing, for a realm where Yahweh is present and active. In Isaiah's day, Israel experienced both darkness and light. The collage here juxtaposes the community's experience of darkness and the prospect of deeper gloom, and also the experience of dawning light and the prospect of full brightness. Perhaps darkness is deepening, and light is dawning at the same time, or perhaps the deepening and the dawning belong in different contexts. The collage holds both before its readers to offer them challenge and hope.

(WB1) This familiar and beloved oracle offers to Judah, driven as it is to distress, darkness, gloom, and anguish, yet another chance in the world. The poetic oracle beginning in 9:2 is introduced by what seems to be a prose transition in 9:1. In the Hebrew text, this verse 1 is the final verse of chapter 8, so that it looks back to the ominous judgment of 8:22 as well as forward to the promised well-being of the oracle.

Verse 1 is organized around the contrast between "former time" and "latter time." In the context of chapters 6–8, the "former time" is apparently the time of failure and oppression under the rule of Ahaz. The "latter time" apparently is the time after Ahaz when new royal leadership (Hezekiah) makes new "peace and prosperity" possible. Thus, the oracle articulates a radical and decisive break in the fortunes of Judah, when all that is "dark" will be overcome by "a great light," namely, a new David. When this contrast of "former/latter" is read in the larger context of the book of Isaiah (as in 43:18-19), then the "former time" is apparently the entire pre-exilic and exilic experience of abuse and suffering, and the "latter time" is the time of homecoming and restoration in the land. Because this oracle has been taken over by the church and read Christologically, this same contrast can be understood as "B.C.E." (B.C.) and "C.E." (A.D.), so that it is the coming of Christ that marks the decisive turn toward well-being.

Passage 2 Isaiah 52.13 – 53.13

This is the fourth of the 'Servant Songs' in Isaiah 40-55, the later writer. It is not clear whether these refer to an individual or a community.

(JG) The picture of the servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 has Davidic resonances, including exalted majesty and a spectacular anointing, though in general, the picture contrasts with the kingly ideal of someone handsome like David, for whom all the girls would fall. No one falls for this servant. Here Yahweh's purpose is achieved through someone who is nothing like David. Then Yahweh promises that Israel as a whole is to have a David-like role in the world (Is 54:17b-55:5). Whereas David had been the means of manifesting Yahweh's power in the world, now Israel will be the means of drawing the world to acknowledge Yahweh, in accordance with the promise to Abraham. In keeping with this reformulation, Isaiah 56-66 develops the emphasis on the way Israel will draw people to itself, to Jerusalem and to Yahweh, and ignores David.

(WB2) Because the servant is one who serves only Yahweh, we take the verse as an utterance of Yahweh, who speaks of "my servant." This thematic verse voices the ultimate resolve of Yahweh that the servant (whoever that may be) will succeed in every way will be honored and exalted. This motif at the beginning of the poem is matched by a concluding affirmative assertion about the exaltation of the servant (53:10-12).

The double theme of humiliation and exaltation that constitutes the plot line of the poem is well exhibited in these two verses. Verse 14 portrays the servant as a marked, distorted figure. The assumption is that this was a physical distortion. The servant is not one of the "beautiful people." He is rather the kind of disfigured person toward whom one can hardly bear to look and yet is one who is so mesmerizing that one will hardly look away. The servant is distinguished by being exceptionally unattractive, and so no doubt avoided and excluded a genuine outcast.

This sorry portrayal, however, is abruptly countered in verse 15 by the assertion that nations and kings—in keeping with the large geopolitical horizon of the Isaiah tradition—are awed by the servant and assume a respectful silence before one who is so compelling in majesty and dignity. Indeed, the exalted appearance of the servant in this verse is something utterly new, unexpected, and inexplicable. We may suggest that the decisive theme of this entire poem is epitomized by the odd relation between the marred figure of verse 14 and the awesome figure of verse 15. We do not know how to move from marred to awesome, except by the powerful resolve of Yahweh, who transposes this figure with an inexplicable firmness. Thus, the theme is not simply humiliation and exaltation, but rather that it is the humiliated one who becomes the exalted one by the intention of Yahweh. It is the will of Yahweh, moreover, nothing else, that transforms and transposes.