

# Sufferings and Glories

A Commentary on Isaiah 53



Paul Hocking

Cover Page: **Ecce homo!**

Depiction of Pontius Pilate presenting a scourged Christ to the people ***Ecce homo!***  
(Behold the man!), by Antonio Ciseri (1821-91)

Bible translation used - acknowledgements

Dedication...

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# Sufferings and Glories

## Introduction

View the scene: A high ranking official, a finance minister of Ethiopia, around 40CE, sitting reading from a scroll, whilst riding in his luxury chariot. He was travelling south with his entourage on the wilderness road from the capital city of Israel, Jerusalem, down towards the town of Gaza, on his way back to North Africa, the area today known as Sudan.<sup>1</sup>

He was reading from a scroll that he had purchased, a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, hand-scribed on vellum, the whole of the long book of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup> He may well have been reading this particular passage, as it was one of the passages read during the Feast of Tabernacles, and he may well have been returning from attending that festal week. Or maybe he was just reading the whole of the scroll, and had read over three quarters of the way through, and had reached a passage that spoke of 'the Servant of the LORD. He was reading the words aloud, as was the custom in those days: 'He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he does not open his mouth. In humiliation his judgment was taken away; who will relate his generation? For his life is removed from the earth.'<sup>3</sup>

As he read, all of a sudden, his eye noticed a man running beside his chariot! The runner obviously heard him reading, and boldly asked him: Do you understand what you are reading?

The minister replied: How can I, unless someone guides me through it? Philip, the runner, seemed to be a local and have a knowing look in his eye, so the government minister invited him to get up into the chariot, to sit beside him and to explain the passage to him.

The big question in the minister's mind was 'Who?' About whom was the prophet writing, about himself, or about someone else?

This question is the same question being asked of this passage in Isaiah's prophecy, two millennia later! About whom is the prophet speaking, about himself or about someone else?

Theologians who don't believe in prophecy, assume it must be someone the writer knew, Isaiah himself, or maybe another prophet, such as Jeremiah, who certainly was a suffering servant of the LORD.

Jewish theologians believe that the Servant in the scroll of Isaiah is Israel itself, the nation, here described corporately, as an individual, a suffering servant.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also interesting to realise that, about 50miles east of this, on the other side of the Dead Sea, a Jewish Community called the Essenes also loved studying the Hebrew scripture scrolls, and their 'Great Isaiah Scroll' dating way back to 100BCE, was unearthed as part of the Dead Sea Scroll finds in 1947.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Sea\\_scrolls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea_scrolls)

<sup>2</sup> The minister may have just purchased this scroll in Jerusalem, but equally, as the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures (the Septuagint, or LXX, after the seventy or so scholars who were believed to have done the translating) were originally translated in Alexandria in Egypt, he may well have obtained a copy in his own country. There is a tradition that goes back to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, that this region had some people that still looked to Jerusalem for the Messiah to come. And, if the minister, a 'eunuch', knew the scriptures and Isaiah well, he may well have known the passage in Isaiah 56.3-7, which tells of the blessing that the nations, and even eunuchs, will receive in the future kingdom. The passage is the one that prophesies that 'my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations' v7. Maybe this was why he had come to Jerusalem, and maybe to the Feast of Tabernacles in the first place?

<sup>3</sup> Acts 8.32-33 (NASV)

But clearly, Philip, an evangelist, believed otherwise! The story reads: ‘Commencing at this same passage (in Isaiah 53), Philip preached to the minister about Jesus!’

The language here is very concrete – literally, ‘he preached to him Jesus’. Philip based his explanation on the words of this prophecy of Isaiah, seven hundred years before, and yet used them to explain to the minister the good news about Jesus. From the ensuing story, when the minister asks to be baptized, it is clear that he fully accepted the good news presented by Philip, and wanted to become, there and then, a disciple-follower of Jesus (Acts 8.26-39). It is amazing to realize that in the North African region of Ethiopia, there has been a Christian church ever since, for 2000 years!<sup>4</sup>

As we turn to meditate on this amazing prophecy in Isaiah 52 and 53, we too will be exploring the question asked by the Ethiopian minister – ‘Of whom is the prophet speaking?’ – not immediately obvious – and by the end, we will no doubt be challenged by the question asked in the prophecy itself: ‘Who has believed what we have just heard, and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?’

### **Suffering and Glory**

The apostle Peter, in his first letter, talked of the Messianic salvation revealed in the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. He spoke of a strange mystery about this salvation:

As to this salvation, the prophets, who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you, made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven-- things into which angels long to look.<sup>5</sup>

This salvation was not revealed to the prophets in black and white statements. The Spirit of the Messiah within them revealed to them about a Person who would come, at some unknown time in the future. But the really strange thing about this revelation, and this coming Messiah, was the association of sufferings and glories! Clearly, this salvation was not the one hoped for by the down-trodden nation of Israel, or indeed by any over-run nation, a victorious salvation brought by a conquering king. The prophetic message revealed to and through the apostles, was one of a Messiah, initially suffering, but afterwards to exalted to glory!

What a paradox! What a mystery. Sufferings and glories!

And so we come to the prophecy itself, where we see set out very clearly the mystery Peter was talking about...

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<sup>4</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian\\_Orthodox](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopian_Orthodox)

<sup>5</sup> 1Peter 1.10-12 (NASV)

## Overview

The Hebrew scriptures are often set out in a poetic form, characteristic of ancient Hebrew writing. Not a poetic form like traditional English poetry, but characteristic of the Hebrew scriptures, and maybe other ancient languages.

Traditional English poetry is defined by rhyme and metre. So, for instance, Wordsworth's famous poem entitled 'Daffodils' (1804) goes like this:

I wander'd lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the Milky Way,  
They stretch'd in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed -- and gazed -- but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

By William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Each verse is identical in form – both in rhyme and in metre.

The **rhyme** of line 1 matches line 3, and the rhyme of line 2 matches line 4, and the line of line 5 matches line 6. This would be labelled as a A-B-A'-B'-C-C' rhyming form.

And similarly, the **metre** of each verse is identical, with 6 lines each and 8 syllables, or beats, per line.

Hebrew poetry also has 'symmetry'. Not symmetry of rhyme and metre, but symmetry of rhythm and content. This symmetry is rarely visible in the English translation, and it does not help that in English translations it is normally set out in continuous prose.

It helps when those who know Hebrew, identify the rhythm for us, and set it out in poetic form, so making the structure visible, as in manuscripts written before the adoption of punctuation.

The structure I have used has been adapted from that given by Alec Motyer in his commentary on Isaiah.<sup>6</sup>

This poetic structure in many places adds to the meaning of the text<sup>7</sup>. For instance, in Jonah 1:3, the author uses this Hebrew poetic style to stress how Jonah's action is a fleeing from the Lord that takes him

...to Tarshish, away from the face of the Lord

down...

...to Tarshish

down...

...to Tarshish, away from the face of the Lord.

The 'inverted parallelism', an arrangement that folds back on itself, is called a 'chiasma' (from the Greek letter  $\chi$  or 'chi'), and in this passage it communicates the rebellious nature of Jonah's flight in a very vivid sense. Because English is usually set out in prose, and because the graphic words in Hebrew are often translated in English idiom, we rarely notice this symmetry in the text.

In this study, we will set out the text in a poetic form, and then meditate on it closely to discover its glorious message.

### **The Literary Structure of the Servant Song**

Numbers of writers have identified the overall pattern in this moving song, structured by who is doing the speaking. So, notice:

1. The Opening Section – God's opening testimony about His Servant – It is clear in the opening verses that Yahweh is speaking about His Servant. The whole poem starts with: 'Behold my Servant will prosper...'. It even slips into a touching moment, where it appears Yahweh is talking to His Servant personally: 'Just as many were appalled at you...', but elsewhere, God seems to be talking about him, rather than to him. This opening section seems to cover 52.13-15.
2. The Closing Section – God's concluding testimony about His Servant – In the closing verses, the LORD testifies again about His Servant: 'My righteous Servant will make many righteous, when he shoulders their iniquities. Therefore, I will apportion to Him an inheritance among the many...'. This section seems to cover at least 53.11b-12, but it could start earlier.
3. The Middle Section – The Testimony of the surprised 'We' – the middle section has a strong emphasis on 'we', 'our' and 'us', certainly from 53.1 to 6. So it says:

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<sup>6</sup> The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary. J. Alec Motyer. (IVP. 1993. ISBN: 0-8308-1593-7)

<sup>7</sup> See 'The Rhythms of Hebrew', by Ben Merkle <http://www.credenda.org/images/stories/pdf/11-5.pdf> Page 19

'Who has believed our message...there was no beauty or majesty that we should be attracted to him, and no appearance that we should desire him...he was despised and we did not esteem him...Surely he took up our infirmities and shouldered our sorrows...yet we (emphatic) esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was being pierced for our transgressions, he was being crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,, and by his wounds we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each one has turned to his own way, and the LORD laid on him the iniquity of all of us.'

This whole section finishes with the repeating phrase 'all of us', at the beginning and end of verse 6.

But what of the remainder of the poem (v7-11a)? Here there is no reference to the surprised 'we', though they still could be the speakers. This section continues the testimony about 'he' and 'him', but with no reference to the 'we'.

The only small indication of who is speaking arises in verse 8, where it says 'on account of the transgression of my people was he stricken'. This seems to suggest that, again, God is speaking at this point. And if so, maybe the closing speech by God includes everything from verse 7 to 12?

### **The Poetic Structure of the Servant Song**

Another way to see this literary masterpiece is to see it, as we have said, as a Hebrew poem. Motyer<sup>8</sup> sets the song out into 5 stanzas, with an overall poetic pattern of A – B – C – B' – A', highlighting the parallelism between the stanzas A and A'; B and B'; and making the central stanza, C, the focus of the whole poem!

See the poem could be set out as below.

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<sup>8</sup> Motyer, J. Alex. The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary (IVP. 1993. ISBN: 0-8308-1593-7)

**A:** <sup>13</sup> Behold! My Servant will act wisely/will prosper;  
he will be raised and he will be lifted up and he will be exalted highly.  
<sup>14</sup> Just as many were appalled over him —  
so disfigured beyond man his appearance  
and his form beyond mortals —  
<sup>15</sup> so he will startle many nations.  
over him, kings will shut their mouths,  
for what was not told to them, they will see,  
and what they did not hear, they will understand.

**B:** **53:1** Who would have believed what we (just) heard  
and the arm of the LORD over whom has it been revealed/uncovered?  
<sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no form and no majesty that we should be attracted to him,  
and nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and one being familiar with suffering.  
and like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we did not esteem him.

**C:** <sup>4</sup> Surely our infirmities/suffering — **he** took up  
and our sorrows — he shouldered,  
yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
one being smitten by God and being humbled.  
<sup>5</sup> But **he** was being pierced for our transgressions,  
he was being crushed/humbled for our iniquities;  
the punishment of our peace/wholeness was over him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup> **All of us**, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each to his own way we turned;  
yet **the LORD** laid (made to meet) on him  
the iniquity of **all of us**.

**B':** <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and **he** humbled himself  
and was not opening his mouth;  
like the lamb to the slaughtering was led,  
& like a ewe before the ones shearing her is silent,  
so he was not opening his mouth.  
<sup>8</sup> From restraint/oppression and from judgment he was taken away,  
and of his generation/contemporaries, who complained/spoke out  
that he was cut off from the land of the living,  
on account of the transgression of my people, a stroke for them.  
<sup>9</sup> And he was assigned with wicked ones his grave  
and with a rich one in his deaths,  
though no violence he did,  
or no deceit in his mouth.

**A':** <sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand.  
<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.  
He will make righteous, the Righteous One, my Servant, the many,  
for their iniquities **he** shouldered  
<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will apportion to him (an inheritance) among the many/great ones,  
and he will apportion the spoil with the mighty multitude,  
in return for (the fact) that he poured out unto death his soul,  
& with the transgressors he was numbered  
& **he** the sin of many he took up/carried away  
& for the transgressors he made entreaty/interposed

This layout illuminates the passage immensely, and aids interpretation of the details.

Taken as a whole, following Motyer, the stanza A seems to lay out the enigma of the Servant of Yahweh, who is both exalted and humiliated! How is that possible? Then the last stanza, A', in parallel with this, sets out the solution very directly – that Yahweh's Righteous Servant went through such suffering according to the plan of the LORD, becoming an expiation for the sins of His people, and so enjoying the exaltation and reward of God.

The middle three stanzas then fill in the details, like a revelation of who this Servant is. So, the overall outline is:

A – The Enigma – Exaltation yet Humiliation?

B – The Revelation

A' – The Solution – Exaltation via Expiation

The central portion follows a similar poetic pattern. The two outer stanzas (B and B') give details of the Revelation of the Servant. Stanza B describes his early life, using botanical metaphors, and setting out our rejection of him, based on his outward appearance and external characteristics.

Then stanza B' describes his later life, using zoological metaphors, and setting out the people's physical oppression of him, despite His humble and harmless behaviour through it all.

So, the outline of the B stanzas looks like this:

B – The Revelation – The Early Story

- An unattractive shoot and root
- Our Reaction to His Person – Rejection

B' – The Revelation – The Later Story

- The silent lamb and sheep
- Their Action despite His behaviour – Oppression

And then we come to the remaining, central stanza C. In Hebrew poetry, the centre of a chiasm is the focus of the whole, the fulcrum on which it all turns. It explains the core answer to the enigma – that this exalted Servant of Yahweh was also the humiliated One, because He voluntarily and purposely took upon Himself our sins, and became our substitute, suffering the judgement of God, instead of us! So, the C stanza could be summarised like this:

C – The Explanation – Substitution – 'for our iniquities'

Setting out the whole structure, it looks like this:

A – Enigma – Exaltation yet Humiliation?

B – Revelation – The Early Story

C – Explanation – ‘for our iniquities’

B’ – Revelation – The Later Story

A’ – Solution – Exaltation via Expiation

So, a beautiful symmetry and a helpful interpretive framework!

Let’s take each stanza one at a time, and try to plumb the depths of each.

## Stanza A

### The Enigma – Exaltation yet Humiliation?

If the stanza is translated into English literally, in the order of the Hebrew text, and also to highlight the parallelisms, it looks like this:

13	Behold!	he	will act wisely/will prosper	my Servant		
		he	will be raised			
		& he	will be lifted up			
		& he	will be exalted highly.			
14	Just as	they were appalled	over you	many ones		
					so disfigured	beyond man his appearance
					&	his form beyond mortals
15	so	he will startle	nations	many ones		
		over him	they will shut	kings	their mouths	
				for	what was not told to them,	they will see,
				&	what they did not hear,	they will understand.

This opening stanza is complex, and would be difficult to interpret, if not taken in the context of the whole poem. It seems to set out two contradictory points about Yahweh’s Servant – that he is both highly exalted and appallingly disfigured! The paradox raises questions in the reader’s mind – how can this be? And how are people reacting to such a mystery? Let us explore the details.

52.13

### *See, my servant*

With these words, the writer bursts into a new section in the whole scroll of Isaiah, and words that resonate with the other references to ‘the servant’ in this scroll.

The word ‘servant’ is used in Isaiah of single servants of God, such as Eliakim (22.20) and King David (37.35), of the prophets in Israel (44.26) and also of Isaiah himself (20.3).

It is also used significantly of the nation of Israel as God’s servant. The first reference, in 41.8-10, is a good example:

But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham, My friend; you whom I have taken hold of from the ends of the earth, and called you from the uttermost parts thereof, and said unto you: ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not cast you away’; Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I strengthen you, yes, I help you; yes, I uphold you with My victorious right hand.

This is a powerful affirmation that Israel, God’s chosen people, the seed of Abraham, is God’s Servant in the world, and God has committed Himself to support them in this ministry!

The reference in 43.10 is also particularly relevant:

Ye are My witnesses, says 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 any be after Me.

Israel's unique role in the world was intended to be as God's witnesses and God's servant, primarily by knowing Him, believing Him and understanding who He is, as the unique and only God! Israel's presence in the world was intended to be a manifestation of God's glory!<sup>9</sup>

Then a more obscure reference occurs in 42.19, where God calls on the blind and deaf to look at Israel, and says:

Who is blind, but My servant? Or deaf, as My messenger that I send? Who is blind as he that is wholehearted, and blind as the LORD'S servant?

Israel was intended to be the nation that listened and obeyed God's message, and then brought it to others, but they were blind to His revelation and deaf to His message. They had failed in their assignment, and were soon to suffer the judgement of God.

References to a special Servant, an individual, not corporate Israel, seem to start at the beginning of chapter 42:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom my soul delights. I have put my Spirit on Him and he will bring forth justice to the nations (42.1).

Here is a Servant who delights the heart of God, and who God can entrust with bringing justice to the nations of the world! See how this contrasts with other so-called gods in the previous verse (49.21), where God says of them: 'Behold, all of them are false; their works are worthless, their molten images are wind and emptiness!'

The next reference, in 49.5-7, shows clearly that this is an individual being referred to, and not to the nation of Israel, as His ministry is about bringing the nation of Israel back to God and, amazingly, also about being a light to the nations and bringing salvation 'to the ends of the earth'! The passage is like a window into the mind of this special Servant, as He reflects on what the LORD Himself is saying about His global significance:

And now, says the LORD that formed me from the womb to be His servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, and that Israel be gathered unto Him - for I am honourable in the eyes of the LORD, and my God is become my strength - Yes, He says: 'It is too light a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the offspring of Israel; I will also give you for a light of the nations, that My salvation may be to the end of the earth.'

This Servant of the LORD is clearly human, 'formed from the womb', but is also 'honourable in the eyes of the Lord' and great enough, not only to restore Israel, but also to be 'a light of the nations', to bring God's salvation to the whole world! What kind of individual is this?!

And, notice, as the monologue continues, to our surprise, it describes this Servant, though destined to bring salvation to Israel and the nations, as being 'despised by men and abhorred by the nations':

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, to him who is despised of men, to him who is abhorred of the nation, to a servant of rulers: Kings shall see and arise, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD that is faithful, even the Holy One of Israel, who hath chosen you (singular).

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<sup>9</sup> The same truth occurs often in the second part of Isaiah: 44.1,2,21; 45.4; 48.20; 49.3; 54.17; 63.17; 65.8, 9, 13-15; 66.14; and even foreign nations, who join with God's people Israel, gain the same privilege: 56.6

The writer is highlighting a strange paradox – that men will despise this Servant of the Lord, and the nation (the singular implies it is talking about Israel, not the Gentile nations) abhors him, but, nevertheless, eventually, the LORD says to his Servant, that kings and princes will rise and prostrate themselves, because He is the LORD's chosen One! Would God allow kings and princes to bow in homage, not just to Himself as God, but also before a human being?

This strange message of a 'suffering servant' occurs again in the next chapter, where the LORD asks the question:

Is my hand so short that it cannot ransom: Or have I no power to deliver? (50.2b)

Then we hear the voice of this Servant:

<sup>4</sup> The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of the learned, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens *Me* morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient, nor did I turn back.

<sup>6</sup> I gave My back to those who strike *Me*, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

<sup>7</sup> For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.

<sup>8</sup> He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me.

<sup>9</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.

<sup>10</sup> Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His Servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

(Isa 50:4-10 NASV)

Strange words these! God's Servant, obediently doing God's will in the world, and yet submitting Himself to beating and humiliation by others! But clearly, the LORD God is on His Servant's side, and will ultimately vindicate Him and destroy His opponents! And then, in striking parallelism, the Servant equates himself with the LORD by saying: 'Who is among you that fears the LORD, that obeys the voice of His Servant' – this one needs to trust in the name of the LORD and to rely on his God! Would an ordinary human, even a great prophet, have the audacity to claim equality with the LORD and allegiance to his own voice?

This same paradox is picked up a few chapters later, in our passage, where the servant title is used as an inclusio, to encompass a long song about Him from 52.13 to 53.12:

Behold, My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.  
(52:13)

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it and* be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. (53:11 NAU)

But let's not rush ahead!

In the context here in Isaiah, Israel has sinned against God, turning away from Him to other 'gods', committing adultery, spiritual adultery, and God has judged them, with humiliation and suffering and exile.

But God is going to bring them back, and their release and return is going to be similar in spirit to their first salvation from Egypt.

And it is in this context that this Servant Song from 52.13 emerges. 'Behold my servant...', says the LORD. God points His people away from themselves and their own failure, to the One who is going to save them! He picks up here the same words of 42.1, 'Behold, my servant...', the first 'Servant Song' in Isaiah, and now, comes to a crescendo here, in this fourth Servant Song.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The references for the four songs are: 42.1-9; 49.1-7; 50.4-9; and this passage: 52.13-53.12

'Behold, my Servant...', says the LORD. Here is the One who has been chosen by God Himself to be the perfect Servant. As we have seen, Israel, corporately, was intended to play this role in the world, but their continuous sin and spiritual adultery have brought upon them their Divine Husband's judgment, after His unbelievable long-suffering over countless centuries!

Now God brings onto the world's stage His unique and perfect Servant, who will obediently fulfil His divine will in the world, and will save His people completely and finally.

But how will this happen, and at what cost? Let's discover this amazing revelation of God's way....!

### ***Behold, my servant will act wisely***

This Servant is being presented by Yahweh as One with great dignity and honour. 'My Servant will act wisely...'

The verb used here (*šākal*) has two main senses; to act wisely, and to prosper, or to succeed.

It refers to an intelligent knowledge of the reason for something. It assumes there is a process of thinking through a complex arrangement of thoughts, resulting in a wise dealing and use of good practical common sense (TWOT). Of course, the end result of such wise thinking and prudent acting is success in what one does.

Here, we are called to consider God's Servant, who acted prudently in fulfilling the work assigned to him. And because He acted prudently, and so perfectly fulfilled the plan of Yahweh, He was successful in His mission, and God ensured that He ultimately prospered.

Set in the context of the whole verse, the sense could either mean: 'Behold my Servant will act prudently and so he will be highly exalted', or it could mean: 'Behold my Servant will succeed – He will be highly exalted'.

Given the following parallel sentence, with its triple escalating exaltation, the emphasis in this first sentence may be on the prospering and succeeding, rather than on the prudence and wise action. But, of course, in the author's mind is the sense that this One will so prosper because He has acted wisely in the mission to which God has sent Him!

### ***He will be raised, He will be lifted up, He will be exalted highly***

What a stunning way to commence this poem. Like a racing car, going from nought to sixty miles per hour in 5 seconds, God calls us to look at His Servant, and goes from ground zero to the stars in describing His Servant's exaltation – 'Behold my Servant will prosper – He will be raised, He will be lifted up, He will be exalted highly.' The ending of the parallelism with 'highly' drives home the point! It commences 'Behold, he will prosper...' and ends '...highly'!

Who is this Servant? Clearly, not Israel, who has failed as God's Servant, as we have seen. Surely, this is the same Servant alluded to in the previous poems, that is, 'My chosen One, in whom my soul delights' (42.1).

And how strongly God declares His unique exaltation, with a triple parallelism – 'He will be raised and lifted up and exalted highly'. This is pure poetry, and in an unusual way, piles praise upon praise of this One, like a pathway to glory – raised, lifted, exalted!

But for those of us who believe the words of Philip, that this passage presents to us the good news about Jesus, then these words are not just poetry, but have become personified in a Person! He was raised in his resurrection from the dead, and he was lifted up in his ascension to heaven, in full view of all his disciples and, finally, he was exalted highly with his exaltation at God's right hand in glory! Behold, my Servant!

What a way to commence this song of the Servant! God delighting in His Servant and declaring His sure purpose for His Son!

But...

52.14

### **Just as many were appalled over you**

In abrupt, dramatic reversal, the poetry switches from glory and investiture to surprise and humiliation! How can this be? Are we reading the text correctly? Is the writer talking of the same person? Many questions come tumbling into our minds as we read on.

Many appalled over you! The word 'appalled' is intentionally vivid. It is used of desolate landscape, either like wilderness (particularly that around the Dead Sea), or like that devastated from warfare or wasting judgments. When one sees the barren moonscape of the area around the Dead Sea, it makes this vivid description come alive. And it is also used of the human horror and shock over the suffering or punishment being experienced by someone else. 'To be appalled over you' is a common expression, with the impression being given of one looking on at the devastation in another's life. There is the sense of mutual damage – being horrified or devastated in one's heart, over the horror and devastation in the life of another!

Here, this sense of being appalled is experienced by many over the One! A whole company of people stand back in amazement and shock at the suffering being experienced by this One! The One described as the LORD's Servant is now causing shock and awe in the hearts of the on-looking multitude.

### **So disfigured beyond man his appearance and his form beyond mortals**

This is a clear parallelism, expressing the cause of the shock in the many. The parallelism can be shown like this:

So disfigured    beyond a man    his appearance  
&                    his form                    beyond sons of man

The cause for the deep sense of devastation in the many comes from the degree of disfigurement in the Servant. 'So disfigured...' is another vivid word, expressing the appalling physical suffering being experienced by him. One form of this word is used for 'the pit' or 'destruction', giving the sense here of the depth of damage being experienced by this one.

And the inverted parallel following, extends the extremity of his experience: 'beyond...beyond' or 'beyond man...beyond sons of man'. The two words for 'man' here are different – the first word (ish), means an individual man and is in contrast to the second word (adam), which emphasizes more the general 'humanness'. The second expression is really a phrase: 'sons of man', emphasizing the category to which one belongs, 'human-kind', human beings. So this one has been disfigured beyond any individual man one has ever known, and beyond human beings or humanity generally!

The other element of the chiasma emphasizes that the disfigurement is physical: 'his appearance... his form'. This probably refers to his face and his body. The appalling punishment this Servant has experienced has disfigured his face and marred his body.

The New English Translation captures the idiom clearly: 'he was so disfigured he no longer looked like a man' or the New Living Translation: 'his face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance one would scarcely know he was a man'.

As H. C. Leupold puts it<sup>11</sup>: "Little wonder that many of the fathers of the church of days of old claim that the account reads as though Isaiah had sat at the foot of the cross" (see Mk 14:65; Mk 15:15-20).

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<sup>11</sup> Leupold, H.C. Exposition of Isaiah, chapter 11, p. 224 (Evangelical Press 1977)

### So he will startle many nations

This seems difficult to follow, when read as continuous prose, but if seen in the context of the poetic parallelism, the flow of meaning is more obvious.

Literally, verses 14 and 15 can be presented like this:

14	Just as	they were appalled	over you	many ones —		
				so disfigured	beyond a man	his appearance
				&	his form	beyond sons of man —
15	so	he will startle	nations	many ones		
		over him	they will shut	kings	their mouths	

Set out like this, it can be seen that the parallel description about the disfigurement is in parenthesis, describing in graphic detail the cause of the appalling reaction on others.

The connecting words at the beginning of verse 14 are 'Just as...' and in verse 15 '...so...'. The writer is saying 'Just as many will be appalled at you (because of your physical disfigurement), so he will startle many nations (one day). They were appalled, but he will startle.

Notice also the repeating use of 'many ones', both times at the end of the clause, if translated word for word:

Just as	they were appalled	over you	<b>the many ones,</b>
so	he will startle	nations	<b>the many ones.</b>

In the first clause, the many are the subject, the 'they' who are appalled over the Servant's disfigurement, but in the second clause, the many are the object, the many nations who will be startled by the Servant in some kind of dramatic reversal!

Now, as an aside, we need to discuss the translation of the word 'startle' here. In the some translations<sup>12</sup>, the clause is translated: 'So he will sprinkle many nations'. But other translations<sup>13</sup> use 'startle' or 'astonish' here.

The verb here can be derived from either root, the one, sprinkle, giving the import of sprinkling with blood, and so referring to atonement, and the other from the idea of 'causing to leap' maybe with joy and maybe with surprise. Given the immediate context, and the following words, it is probable that sprinkling many nations is not in the writer's mind, but rather the startling of many nations, dramatically reversing the appalling reaction caused by his disfigurement!

Many nations are going to be surprised by the truth they discover concerning this Servant of the Lord.

Given what we now know of the significance of the gospel for the many nations (the 'Gentiles'), this 'leaping' here may be because of surprise or shock, but may also be referring to leaping for joy, at the discovery that this suffering One has suffered for them! 'When the Gentiles heard this (the gospel), they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.' (Act 13:48 NASB)

And this theme of the effect on 'the many' is key in this first stanza of the poem, as it is to become a repeating theme also in the last stanza of the poem, highlighting the parallelism intended between the first and the last stanzas (A and A'). Here, a subtle pointing forward is probably occurring – just as there were many who were appalled over you, so too, in the future, the nations will be startled in surprise, as they discover who He really is, and maybe, hinted here, they will leap for joy over Him, now they know who He really is and the glorious kingdom He is bringing in!

<sup>12</sup> King James Version, New American Standard Version, New International Version, English Standard Version

<sup>13</sup> Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation, John Nelson Darby, New English Translation, Revised Standard Version

## **Kings will shut their mouths because of Him**

And the parallelism continues. Literally:

<sup>15</sup> so he will startle nations many ones  
over him they will shut kings their mouths

Or to show it more clearly in English:

So he will startle many nations  
kings will shut their mouths over Him

In the first line, 'He' is the subject, and 'many nations' is the object. Then in the second line, there is an inversion, where 'kings' of the many nations are the subject, and 'over him' is the object. The kings will join their subjects in being startled and surprised at the revelation concerning this Servant of Yahweh, and, using a common colloquialism, they will be 'gob-smacked', not being able to speak out because of absolute amazement, stunned to silence, that the One who was so appallingly disfigured, should now strike such awe into the hearts of their many nations!

## **What was not told them...they will understand**

For what was not told to them, they will see,  
And what they did not hear, they will understand

The penny will suddenly drop with the kings and their many nations! Up to that moment, they had not been told the reality, they had not heard the real truth, concerning this 'Servant of the LORD'. But now, all of a sudden, the light will dawn. They will see and they will understand, and the truth revealed to them will startle everyone and will stun the kings to silence.

How challenging this is. There is the 'truth' about God's Servant 'out there' but we may not 'see' it, and we may not 'understand' it! Our inner eyes are blind and our inner understanding is dulled concerning Him. Oh, how much we need a revelation!

## B: The Revelation – The Early Story

53.1

### Who would have believed our message...?

Who would have believed our message,  
and the arm of the LORD, over whom has it been revealed?

And so the writer begins the revelation. A revelation concerning the life of this Servant, but not a revelation that many seemed to get or understand!

He asks a parallel pair of questions: 'Who...?...over whom?' The first question is active and the second question is passive: 'Who would have believed...over whom has it been revealed?'

The translation of the first question is normally rendered 'Who would have believed our message/report?' But the word 'message' here is from the root 'sh'ma', meaning to hear or to listen. This noun can be translated message or report, but can also be translated with its root meaning, that is, 'what is heard'. So, in this context, where the second stanza of this song is moving out of the first stanza, which describes the enigma concerning the exalted Servant who is also humiliated, it is best to translate this first question like this: 'Who has believed what we (just) heard?' The news concerning God's exalted Servant, being so appallingly disfigured, is not the kind of news people would normally believe.

Sometimes, this word (sh'mua) is used of the message a prophet hears from God. And, in this context, this is certainly true. So: 'Who would have believed our prophetic message' concerning this One, who though God's glorious Servant, is to go through such shocking suffering, worse than any other man!

Now, let's notice the parallels. There are three:

1. The questions: 'Who?' matched with '...over whom?' or 'to whom' – the questions challenging the reader to face up to the enigma just described in the first stanza. The first pronoun is the subject of the sentence, but the second pronoun is the object of the sentence. The reader is the subject in the first, and the object in the second.
2. The verbs: 'has believed' parallel with 'has been revealed' – the first verb is active, requiring a response from the heart of the hearers, to believe the message that is being spoken about God's Servant. We are called to act, to believe. The second verb is passive, and shows that another must do the revealing! On the one hand, we are to believe. It is our responsibility. But, on the other hand, how can we believe, unless the mystery is revealed to us?
3. The third element of the parallelism: 'the message' or 'what we've just heard' over against 'the arm of the LORD'.

So, the first line refers to our human responsibility 'who has believed what we've just heard?' We are responsible to hear the message concerning God's Servant, and to believe it. But the second line shows the parallel truth, that of divine sovereignty: 'To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?' God needs to reveal his message to us, if we are to believe it!

This 'message' only comes to us meaningfully if 'the arm of the LORD' is revealed. The reason so many do not believe the message is because they have not received the revelation. The 'LORD's arm' has not been revealed to them. This phrase is a graphic metaphor of judgment and salvation, describing Yahweh as at work in our world for the honour of His name and for the good of His people. In anthropomorphic language, God is seen as rolling up His sleeves, and energetically working for the salvation of blinded unbelievers!

Look at the range of contexts where 'the arm' of the LORD is at work:

- Redeemed by God's arm<sup>14</sup>
- Saved by His arm<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ex 6.6; Ps 77.15

- As a metaphor of God's Might <sup>16</sup>
- As a metaphor of God's Care <sup>17</sup>

And, here in this passage, the arm of the Lord is almost an 'anthropomorphism' for the Servant Himself – He is coming into the world to do the work of God and to bring about the salvation of His people. The question is – who has recognised Him? To whom has God revealed Him, who this mysterious figure is?

53.2

### He grew up...

For he grew up like the tender shoot before him,  
 & like the root out of dry ground.  
 No form to him & no majesty that we should be attracted to him,  
 & no appearance that we should desire him.

*NB Refer to Branch – Zech 6.12*

The opening questions in this stanza have called us to wonder about the enigma, the mystery of the Servant of Yahweh, the exalted One and yet the humiliated One. And the stanza then begins to reveal to us something of the life of this figure. This stanza clearly deals with the early life of this One – 'he grew up before him' immediately pointing us to his humanity and the reality of his life lived in the world.

The growing up is illustrated with two botanical similes – 'like the tender shoot' and 'like the root', and the tender shoot grows up 'before him' whereas the root grows 'out of dry ground'.

Firstly, 'he grew up like a tender shoot before him'. This word for 'tender shoot' is from a root 'to suck', and in a human context, it would be referring to a nursing child, sucking milk from his mother's breast. But here, in the context of a plant, it is referring to a 'sucker', a shoot coming out of a stump.

In the wider context in Isaiah, the cut-down stump is probably referring to Israel, as the 'servant of Yahweh' that has failed to live up to God's intentions, and who is now subject to God's judgment. And this prophetic revelation is calling us to 'behold my Servant', the One that God is raising up like a tender shoot, shooting up from the cut-down tree of God's people. The One who was going to work out fully God's purpose in the world.

And this Servant grew up like a tender shoot 'before him'. This seems to be referring to God Himself. God's Servant has emerged in this world, and is growing up as a child and as a man, but doing so in the full sight of God Himself! 'He grew up ...before Him'. Literally 'towards his face'. What beautiful words! What an amazing way to live. Indeed, this is the only way to live! The only way to live in a way that pleases God. To grow up before God. To live every moment before His face. To live every moment in full view of God and with a view to pleasing Him with every action!

God is pointing us to gaze with amazement at his Servant, the only One who ever lived every moment of every day in perfect relationship with His God. A life lived as worship to God!

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<sup>15</sup> Ps 44.3; 98.1; Is 52.10 (the LORD has laid bare His holy arm...); 59.16 (parallel with righteousness)

<sup>16</sup> Ex 15.16; Ps 79.11; 89.11, 13, 21; Is 33.2; 44.12; and His 'glorious arm' seen as marching at Moses' right hand Is 63.12

- Contrast 'the arm of flesh' describing human weakness 2Chron 32.8; and the question to Job: 'do you have an arm like God's?' Job 40.9
- As a 'stretched out' arm, actively working Dt 4.34; 5.15; 7.19; 9.29; 11.2; 26.8; 1Kgs 8.42; 2Kgs 17.36; 2Chron 6.32; Ps 136.12
- Conquering enemies and bringing judgment of God's enemies Is 30.30; 48.14; 51.5, 9 (arm of the LORD)
- Bringing victory for God's people Is 40.10; 51.5

<sup>17</sup> 'Underneath are the everlasting arms' Dt 33.27; and carrying the vulnerable as lambs Is 40.11

And also 'like a root out of dry ground'. God's Servant grew up like a root out of dry ground. All around Him was barrenness. God had intended that His people would be verdant and fruitful for Him in the world – witnesses to the His righteousness. But instead, they followed gods who are not God, and their lives, though busy with carnal and earth-bound pursuits, and maybe even 'successful' in the eyes of their peers, were barren spiritually. All around the Incarnate Servant was spiritual barrenness, generally speaking, and He grew up in that context, like the only green tree in a devastated landscape.

We may wonder today whether it is possible to 'be spiritual', in this secular, godless, carnal, deviant society. And when we look into our own hearts, we find we are 'tarred with the same brush', and society has shaped our thinking and mindset in so many deep ways. Here we see the Servant's example to us. It IS possible to live for God in the most wicked generation. It IS possible to 'grow up before God like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground'! The key is found in those beautiful words 'before Him'. To live each moment in God's presence and before God's face. Walking in fellowship with Him, with His smile always visible.

And such a lifestyle is not necessarily attractive to the world. Notice the next two rows:

No form to him & no majesty	that we should	be attracted to him,
& no appearance	that we should	desire him.

There was nothing about his external appearance that drew us to him. No...no...no...! Three times no! No form and no majesty and no appearance. A pretty strong emphasis on his outward, physical appearance.

'No form' – his outline, his shape, his figure, was not attractive.

'No majesty' – he was Yahweh's glorious Servant and yet there was nothing about him that suggested glory or honour. A plain, ordinary man!

'No appearance' – the two nouns in the first line are paralleled with one in the second line that emphasizes the external, the visible, what one sees on the outside. There was nothing anyone could see outwardly that would draw an on-looker to want to respect him, to think he was a somebody.

You may remember that two of these nouns were used in 52.14. There they were emphasizing the effect of the later sufferings on his 'form' and 'appearance'. In his later life (see stanza B' below – verses 7-9), he was physically oppressed, and his form and appearance would be in-humanly marred, but, for now, the writer is focusing on the early years, the description of his human appearance, to tell us that when he appeared on the public scene, he came across as a plain, ordinary man, in no way bearing the outward characteristics of majesty!

We looked, and we made a judgment about Him. He was not the kind of person we were drawn to.<sup>18</sup>

This was part of the mystery, the enigma concerning Him. God's Servant purposely came into our world in a manner, and taking a form, that hid His true nature. It would only be those who 'believed the message', only those 'to whom the arm of the Lord was revealed', who would be able to see beyond the outward form, and see and hear the inner message being declared, and see the manifestation being revealed. The inner, true glory was hidden within a plain, ordinary human appearance. But more of that later!

53.3

### Rejected by men

He was despised	& rejected by men,			
	man of sorrows,	& one	being familiar with	suffering
		& like one	hiding faces from him	
he was despised	& not we esteemed him.			

<sup>18</sup> Notice, this is the first reference to the 'we', and it continues down to verse 6

And so this stanza B draws to a conclusion. It summarizes the general response of people to this one who came among them: Rejection.

Notice again the strong parallels:

He was despised	& rejected by men,
he was despised	& not we esteemed him.

He was despised and he was rejected by men...He was despised and we did not esteem him. He appeared on the public scene and was despised by people. He failed to draw the honour or respect you would have expected for Yahweh's Servant. We were blind to his majesty. We cared only for outward appearance, and we were looking for a conquering, powerful Messiah, and so we were blind to his true glory.

The identical stem in both sentences, 'he was despised', is followed by non-identical branches. So, the despising has two sides: The first action was a general reaction – he was rejected by men, in the passive mood, rejected by people in general, but the second action was taken by 'we' in particular, the 'we' who should have known Him, in the active mood, we did not honour him, as was his obvious right.

And sandwiched between these two kinds of despising, is a description of the person:

a man of sorrows,	& one	being familiar with	suffering
	& like one	hiding	faces from him

The Hebrew text reads with a strong switch from the people generally to this single person. It says: 'He was despised and rejected by by MEN, a MAN of sorrows...' All around were the populace, the people, and their ire was focused on a single person! A Man. The Hebrew word in both cases is 'ish', in the plural first, 'men', and then in the singular, 'man'. The Hebrew word 'ish' views 'man' as an individual, in contrast to the word 'adam', which views people generically, as 'humankind'. So, the switch is very strong, from the people generally, as a multitude of individuals, to a person specifically, a single man!

So we focus on this Man. And he is a man of sorrows. And one being familiar with suffering. Again, here emphasizing his early years, we are considering the sorrows and suffering that he experienced in his life, not simply in his death. Clearly, this would apply to his passion and death, as in stanza B', but here, in stanza B, the focus is on his plain humanity.

Later, we will consider the very next verse that shows that he took up our suffering and carried our sorrows, but the fact that this one is described as a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, shows that this was characteristic of his life, and not just of his death. As we look at his life as described in the Gospels, it gives us new understanding of his years of ministry, both before his public manifestation, and after. When he was growing up and when he was serving as an artisan in his home village, he experienced all the vicissitudes of life that a normal Galilean would have experienced.

Just imagine. He would have experienced the poverty of his family home as a child and as an adult. He would have known tiredness from long hours of physical labour, growing food and tending the animals and learning the trade of his father, carpentry and building work. He would have known the personal loss and grief of his human father dying and all that that would have meant for a poor village family. He would have been familiar with the burden of taking on the family responsibilities and his father's business, of the long hours, of the pressures of delivering to expectations, of dealing with business affairs in the close relational context of that culture. Of being the head of the home and caring for his bereaved mother and his brothers and his sisters and his wider relatives.

And, not only his own experiences of suffering and sorrows, but also those of his family and relatives and the villagers around him. How it must have grieved him, to see their struggles, and to watch the sufferings of others around him. And, it would have been the more intense, because of his unique inner knowledge, and his sympathy and empathy. His was a unique suffering-with and suffering-in the sufferings of the villagers around him. Suffering from watching sickness and sorrows and death and grief and bereavement – and not being able to heal because 'his time had not yet come' to do so! Can you imagine the heart-ache it must have been to sit at his presumed father's bedside, and watch him die? Or to sit with a relative, as they nursed their daughter with a fever? Or to help bury an only son of a neighbour?

And not just being familiar with the sorrows and the griefs, but also knowing deeply the cause of all this in a sin-struck world, and agonizing over the impact of sin in the lives of everyone he knew and loved!

## Stanza B'

We now jump to the parallel stanza to B (52.1-3), which is B' (53.7-9), as set out below.

**B':**     <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed though **he** humbled himself  
and was not opening his mouth;  
like the lamb to the slaughtering was led,  
& like a ewe before the ones shearing her is silent,  
so he was not opening his mouth.  
<sup>8</sup> From restraint/oppression and from judgment he was taken away,  
and of his generation/contemporaries, who complained/spoke out  
that he was cut off from the land of the living,  
on account of the transgression of my people, a stroke for them.  
<sup>9</sup> And he was assigned with wicked ones his grave  
and with a rich one in his deaths,  
though no violence he did,  
or no deceit in his mouth.

This stanza also deals with the life of Yahweh's Servant, but not his earlier life (growing up and as a despised man), but his later life, his sufferings and death.

In the early life, his experience was one of rejection by men, being despised, but here, in his later life, the rejection becomes physical, and his experience is one of abuse and oppression. People did not just reject him socially, but ultimately, they rejected him physically. They removed him physically and personally from their presence.

Notice that the three verses are also an inverted parallelism:

**B':**     <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and **he** humbled himself  
and was not opening his mouth;  
like the lamb to the slaughtering was led,  
& like a ewe before the ones shearing her is silent,  
so he was not opening his mouth.  
<sup>8</sup> From restraint/oppression and from judgment he was taken away,  
and of his generation/contemporaries, who complained/spoke out  
that he was cut off from the land of the living,  
on account of the transgression of my people, a stroke for them.  
<sup>9</sup> And he was assigned with wicked ones his grave  
and with a rich one in his deaths,  
though no violence he did,  
or no deceit in his mouth.

The first and last verses, verses 7 and 9, emphasise his humble, non-violent behaviour, and his non-defensive and pure use of his mouth, even despite the undeserved, physical abuse he suffered, and all in the spirit of voluntary submission to death.

And then the central verse, though difficult to translate with certainty, seems to cry out regarding the wickedness of his contemporary generation, who knew his beautiful life and inoffensive speech, and yet they did not speak out on his behalf. They should have realised that his punishment was because of their own wickedness, and spoken out in his defence, but they did not!

Let's look at the details.

### 53.7

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed	and	<b>he</b> humbled himself	
	&	he was not opening his mouth;	
like	the lamb	to the slaughtering	was led,

& like a ewe before the ones shearing her is silent,  
so he was not opening his mouth.

The dominant clause in this verse is 'he was oppressed'. The word means demanding, oppressive pressure. Israel had experienced this kind of suffering and oppression when they were slaves in Egypt, under the exacting hands of their task-masters (Exodus 1.11-14, 3.7; 5.1-21). The LORD saw their plight and said to Moses:

*"I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters (or 'oppressors'), for I am aware of their sufferings. (Exo 3:7)*

Now God's Servant was experiencing the same under the hands of sinful men.

The shocking thing was that he was being oppressed even though he did not deserve it. Both his behaviour and his speech were inoffensive. Yet despite such submissive behaviour and silent lips, they still oppressed him. They bound him and imprisoned him and mocked him and beat him and punched him in the face, and flogged him with barbed whips! Selah (pause for a moment and think).

The second clause in the first sentence could be translated either as 'humbled' or as 'afflicted', but the use of the conjunction 'and **he**', with an emphatic use of the pronoun 'he', suggests it is describing the Servant's response to the oppression – they oppressed him and **he** humbled himself, and was not opening his mouth'. It is reflexive in form – he chose to do this to himself! He did not resist his oppressors, but voluntarily submitted himself to them.

And he did not defend himself with words either, in fact, he did not even open his mouth in his defence. Though the oppressors oppressed him, the emphasised response from him was 'he was not opening his mouth'. Repeated twice, at the beginning and end of the sentence, to make sure we notice.

The silence of this suffering Servant is described in graphic language. 'Like the lamb to the slaughtering...and like a ewe sheep before the ones shearing her...' This double metaphor regarding animals in this B' stanza is directly parallel to the double metaphor regarding plants in the B stanza. The botanical metaphors in the former stanza emphasised His verdant growth for God, despite barrenness all around him. And now, in this stanza, these zoological metaphors emphasise his silence and willing submission to suffering, even though undeserved and innocent as a lamb.

Now, the lamb was used in the sacrificial offerings, but never the ewe sheep. This indicates that the author is not thinking of sacrifice as such, but of the silence of these animals as they go to slaughter or to shearing. The lamb is seen as silent as it goes towards an impending fate, whereas the sheep is seen as silent during the current experience of shearing. For God's Servant, he also was silent as he went towards his death and through the experience of oppression, but he did it all knowingly and voluntarily, so different from the unknowing animals!

53.8

<sup>8</sup> From restraint/oppression and from judgment he was taken away,  
and of his generation/contemporaries, who complained/spoke out  
that he was cut off from the land of the living,  
on account of the transgression of my people, a stroke for them.

This verse is complicated, and also can be translated in different ways. I have used a literal translation here, and an interpretive one, to try to make clear what could well be the intended meaning, in keeping with the context.

The previous verse has emphasised his submissive, voluntary behaviour and his silence under abusive oppression. Now, the author moves from general abuse, to specific abuse, leading up to his death. It says: 'From oppression/restraint and from judgment he was taken away...' Another word for oppression is used here, probably with the meaning of restraint or imprisonment. We know that the Messiah was both bound and imprisoned on that fateful night before his death, and not just bound and imprisoned, but also he was tried and judgement was passed. The tone of the whole song, which is basically a lament about the injustice of what this Servant of the LORD endured, intimates that the 'judgment' being referred to here is

an unjust one. In historical fact, we know that Christ suffered numbers of false and unjust trials, before the High Priest, before the whole Sanhedrin, before Pilate, before Herod, and before Pilate again, and all with no crime established. Quite the contrary, Pilate declared: 'I find no fault in this man' (Luke 23.4; John 19.6). So, looking back from our historical perspective, we can paraphrase these words here as: 'from chains and imprisonment and from false trials and unjust judgments, he was taken away to his death'.

At this point, the writer cries out about the hardness of heart of those who knew this Servant, those who watched the abuse, those who observed the injustice. It says: 'and from amongst the people of his generation, those who were his contemporaries, his peers, where were the ones who complained, or who spoke out about the mockery of a trial'. Basically, the writer is amazed that someone who was so submissive and gentle, should be treated so violently, and yet no-one who knew him, no-one who observed the whole charade, spoke up on his behalf! How could that possibly be? How hard are the hearts of men and women?

And notice the play on words. Twice in the previous verse it has emphasised that 'he was not opening his mouth'. So, you would have expected others to open their mouths on his behalf, to speak up about his innocence, to complain about the injustice. But no! They should have complained vehemently that he was being unjustly 'cut off from the land of the living'. This is a poetic, Hebraic way of saying he was killed. And for what crime? He was so gentle and uncomplaining. Even if, in the eyes of the authorities, for some reason, he deserved to be punished for something he had done wrong, surely he never deserved to be executed? His behaviour never deserved such an extreme punishment. Those who knew him should have complained bitterly at such an extreme injustice.

The final line in this verse is probably connected directly to the previous clauses. The author objects: 'who spoke out on his behalf, that he was cut off and killed for the transgression of my people, he took the stroke for them'. If only the people of his generation had realised that this One was God's Servant, and had come purposely to die.

The preposition 'from, out of' (*min*) occurs four times in this verse, and this is surely important in its meaning and interpretation. The words are highlighted below in literal translation:

<sup>8</sup> From restraint/oppression and from judgment he was taken away,  
and of his generation/contemporaries, who complained/spoke out  
that he was cut off from the land of the living,  
from the transgression of my people, a stroke for them.

The first three uses are all with verbs of motion, describing men's wicked actions of that fateful night:  
'he was taken away – '...from bonds and from judgment'  
'he was cut off – from the land of the living'

And so the fourth use surprises us: 'From/out from the transgression of my people'. Without a verb of motion this has the sense of 'on the basis of' or 'on account of' the transgression of my people.

The three statements could be set out to show the parallels like this:

he was taken away	from bonds and from judgment
he was cut off	from the land of the living
he was struck	from (on account of) the transgressions of my people

The first two and the last lines show a surprising contrast. Really, says the writer, this is not simply unjust punishment by wicked men, chains, false trials and judgment and finally being killed, but something deeper was taking place at the same time – the wickedness of my people was being punished: 'on account of the transgression of my people, a stroke for them'.

Men thought they were doing away with this man, this thorn in their side, but what was going on here really was something very different. In fact, He was being 'struck' for our transgressions, not by men but by God!

Now, 'transgression' is essentially a breach in relationships, and when seen in reference to one's Lord or King, it is rebellion or revolt against due allegiance.

The book of Isaiah starts with this shocking statement about the transgression of God's people:

Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks, "Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted (transgressed) against Me. An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand. Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him. Where will you be stricken again, as you continue in *your* rebellion? The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is nothing sound in it, *only* bruises, welts and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. (Isaiah 1:2-6)

And further on, God states that 'transgressors and sinners will be crushed together, and those who forsake the Lord will come to an end' (1.28), and of His people He says: 'you have been called a transgressor from the womb' (48.8).

But hope is also declared in the book of Isaiah: 'I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins'. (Isaiah 43:25) and: 'I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud and your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.' (Isaiah 44:22)

So, this song about the Servant, here in chapter 53, shows us how God can 'wipe out our transgressions' – it is because he has struck his own Servant for our transgressions. The Servant has taken our transgressions and the punishment because of them.

The words 'a stroke for them' are vivid – 'a stroke...for them', that is, for my people. Divinely meted out punishment, a deadly blow, is what is commonly understood by this word 'stroke'. It is used of the final 'plague' against the Pharaoh, the striking down of all the first born sons (Exodus 11.1), and frequently of the 'plague' (usually called 'leprosy') in Leviticus 13 and 14.

In this chapter, in the central stanza (53.4), we will see the terrible affliction of the 'man of sorrows', where we assumed that he was being struck, smitten by God and afflicted. We were right in thinking that, but for the wrong reason! This stanza corrects our understanding – the deadly blow that was meted out by God against his Servant was, in fact, 'for the transgression of my people'!

Notice also that this reference to being cut off and being struck for the transgression of God's people, is central in this stanza. So again, this is considered the crescendo – the oppression by wicked men was not the full truth about his suffering – it was, in fact, God's striking!

Notice, too, the oppression described in this stanza covers the whole of the closing stages in his life.

- Physical abuse
- Led like a lamb to the slaughter
- Not opening his mouth through his suffering
- Bonds and imprisonment
- False judgment in mock trials
- Being killed – 'cut off from the land of the living'
- Buried in a rich man's grave

And, interestingly, the clause 'on account of the transgression of my people – a stroke for them' occurs immediately after the clause 'cut off from the land of the living' and before being buried in a rich man's grave. It was prophetically revealed to this ancient author that it was the death of the Servant that was also the punishment. God struck him in and through death, because of the transgressions of his people. Clearly, this death was a sacrifice, and the meaning of all the ancient sacrifices begins to manifest itself. To quote the words of the apostle Paul: 'Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures' (1Cor 15.3). And here was one scripture that was fulfilled in his death.

<sup>9</sup> And he was assigned with wicked ones his grave  
 & with a rich one in his deaths,  
 though no violence he did,  
 or no deceit in his mouth.

And so we come to the close of the Servant's life, naturally speaking. Having been 'cut off from the land of the living', he was then 'assigned a grave with the wicked, and with a rich one in his death'.

Logically, these words don't make much sense! How can one have a grave with the wicked ones and with a rich one? The only way to make some sense of this is to say the second singular noun is to be taken as a compound noun 'the rich', and then to say that the rich are being seen as the wicked ones, as so often, those with wealth have the power and use it for their own ends and unrighteously.

However, as we know the story, these words are easily understood! It was true that the Romans, who were responsible for the physical crucifixion, would have assigned the grave of all crucified victims in Jerusalem to the grave of criminals, that is, to the valley of Hinnom, which was used as the rubbish tip of Jerusalem, and was continually burning. This is where we get the word 'Gehenna' from, the place of judgment and continual burning. This is where men assigned the grave of this Crucified One.

But God had other intentions for His sacred body! Mankind's rejection and abusive oppression of this noble Servant of Yahweh was now at an end. From this point, the LORD would ensure his body show honour and respect. He was assigned a grave with wicked ones by wicked men, but he was assigned a grave with a rich man by God himself.

We know the story. How the devotion of a secret disciple called Joseph of Arimathea, obviously high up in the Sanhedrin and rich enough to have his own rock-hewn tomb outside the walls of the ancient city, plucked up the courage to go public with his devotion to Jesus, and to request audience with Pilate, the Governor. Quite dramatically, and unusually, the story occurs in all four Gospels:

<sup>57</sup> When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. <sup>58</sup> This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given *to him*. <sup>59</sup> And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, <sup>60</sup> and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. (Matthew 27:57-60 NASV)

<sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>44</sup> Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. <sup>45</sup> And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. <sup>46</sup> Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. (Mark 15:43-46 NASV)

<sup>50</sup> And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man <sup>51</sup> (he had not consented to their plan and action), *a man* from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God; <sup>52</sup> this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>53</sup> And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain. <sup>54</sup> It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. (Luke 23:50-54 NASV)

<sup>38</sup> After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. <sup>40</sup> So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. <sup>41</sup> Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no

one had yet been laid.<sup>42</sup> Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38-42 NASV)

From these passages, we discover the details about Joseph. He was:

- Rich
- From Arimathea, a town of the Jews
- A good and righteous man
- A member of the Sanhedrin council, and a prominent one
- Not one of the Council who had voted for the plan to kill Jesus
- Waiting for the Kingdom of God
- A new disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews
- Rich enough to own his own new tomb, which had never been used, and which he had hewn out of the rock, in a garden conveniently near to the crucifixion scene
- Devoted enough to
  - buy linen for burial garments
  - Take Jesus down from the cross – no mean feat
  - Wrap Jesus in the grave clothes
  - Bury Jesus in his own tomb
- Also, friends with another Council member called Nicodemus, who was also rich and a secret follower of Jesus, and who helped him with the burial of Jesus

In the light of our passage here in Isaiah, how dramatic it is to read such detail of this ‘rich man from Arimathea’. The words of Mark say: ‘he gathered up courage to go in before Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus’. The verb here means: he dared, he had the courage, he was brave enough, to take this risky step to go and ask Pilate for the body. Pilate could well have been angry about just a brazen attitude. He had just been publicly exposed by the religious hierarchy, and had been forced for crucify this man to get him out of his hair. And everyone knew that crucified ‘criminals’ deserved an ignominious death – their grave was assigned to the rubbish pit of the city, with other wicked men of society.

And now Joseph dares to come in and ask if he can give this ‘criminal’ an honourable burial! Such an action could amount to treason and, certainly, was siding with the crucified one, and so against Pilate. Such an action could have infuriated Pilate, and he could easily have condemned Joseph to a similar fate, for such brazen behaviour against the state!

But instead, surprisingly, Pilate gave him permission to take the body of Jesus (John) commanded the soldiers to give up or release it to him (Matthew).

Joseph left Pilate’s presence and on the way to the crucifixion site, he bought linen cloth to wrap the body in, and then went to the cross, and took Jesus’ body down. He probably took the body with Nicodemus to an appropriate place and together they used a huge amount of expensive spices<sup>19</sup> that Nicodemus had brought, to prepare the body for burial and to wrap it in the linen cloth. They then buried the body in Joseph’s new tomb and sealed the entrance with a large stone.

So the words of the Servant Song are few but amazingly accurate: ‘He was assigned his grave with the wicked ones, and with the rich one in his death’.

### **His deaths**

Unusually, the word for ‘death’ in Hebrew is in the plural<sup>20</sup>. Now, this may be just a plural of magnitude, so emphasising the enormity of this death or the extreme nature of this death. It could be translated: ‘He was assigned his grave...with the rich in his violent death’.

But in this prophetic context, the poetic language is still remarkably sharp. As we know, the Servant died a violent death, but his death was not just a physical one. He bore our sins and God’s punishment for our sins, and died the death because of sin. He bore the sin and bore the punishment, and suffered the darkness of spiritual separation from a holy God. In some unfathomable way, he bore an eternity of hell in those hours of darkness. His death was a physical one and a spiritual one. His going down into the grave

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<sup>19</sup> One hundred Roman pounds is about ¾ of an imperial pound, so about 75 imperial pounds (5 stone) or 33 kilos.

<sup>20</sup> The only other time the plural occurs is in Ezekiel 28.10 – ‘you shall die the deaths of the uncircumcised...’

was a physical going down and a spiritual going down, into hades itself. He died the deaths for us, and 'by death dying slew'!

### **Though no violence he did, and no deceit in his mouth**

The stanza finishes as it began, forming an inclusio that emphasises the unbelievable abuse of this One, despite his perfect behaviour and speech.

It begins: 'He was oppressed even though he chose to humble himself and not open his mouth', and it ends: '...though he did no violence and no deceit was in his mouth'.

His actions and his words were impeccable. He behaved humbly and without any violence, and his speech was reserved and without guile!

What a perfect Man! And yet they oppressed him and abused him so!

Whereas the parallel stanza (v 1-3) describes his early life and our reaction to his person – we rejected him, this stanza sets out the reaction to him, despite his perfect behaviour – they physically abused him and ultimately murdered him! Rejection became oppression.

So, this doublet is the more dramatic. He did no violence. He spoke no guile. No violence...no deceit. He did...in his mouth.

Deceit in the mouth is an issue of particular concern with God and is used many times in the Psalms and often in relation to prayer to God himself. Speaking the truth is important to God, and being truthful in ones prayer is obviously vital. Psalm 10, talking about the wicked, says:

His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. (Psalm 10:7 ESV)

The whole psalm sets out the behaviour and speech of the wicked and how they do not think God sees or will bring them to account. But God does and will.

But how strikingly dissimilar is the Servant of the LORD! He did no violence and no deceit was in his mouth, towards man or God.

And these words bring the stanza to an end and the parallel stanzas to an end. The parallel stanza begins with questions, flowing out of the first stanza – who believes what we have just heard? This enigma continues through to this point – how we rejected him, this 'man of sorrows', and how wicked men abused him, even though he was so humble and guileless in his behaviour and speech! How can all this be possible? How can you explain such a paradox? Who would have believed it?

### **Stanza C**

And so we come to the focus of this amazing song – literally, the centrepiece. Stanza C is the crescendo and the theological turning point in the poem. It provides for us the answer to the paradox of how God's exalted Servant can, at the same time, be the One who suffered so.

The stanza goes from 53.4 to 53.6 and is set out below:

- C:** <sup>4</sup> Surely our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
one being smitten by God and being humbled.  
<sup>5</sup> But **he** was being pierced for our transgressions,  
he was being crushed/humbled for our iniquities;  
the punishment of our peace/wholeness was over him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup> **All of us**, like sheep, have gone astray,

each to his own way we turned;  
yet **the LORD** laid (made to meet) on him  
the iniquity of **all of us**.

Again, this stanza is probably to be considered as an inverted parallelism, with the central verse being the focus and the two outer verses being in parallel in an A – B – A' structure:

- A:**       <sup>4</sup> Surely, our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
one being smitten by God and being humbled.
- B:**               <sup>5</sup> But **he** was being pierced for our transgressions,  
he was being crushed/humbled for our iniquities;  
the punishment of our peace/wholeness was over him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.
- A':**       <sup>6</sup> **All of us**, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each to his own way we turned;  
yet **the LORD** laid (made to meet) on him  
the iniquity of **all of us**.

53.4

Let's consider the wonder and majesty of this mountaintop regarding the ministry of Yahweh's Suffering Servant.

<sup>4</sup> Surely our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
one being smitten by God and being humbled.

### **Surely**

The word comes with power, when set in this context. All that we have seen so far, all that has been argued in the flow of thought, is brought to an obvious, patent conclusion with this word 'Surely'. This word comes with a note of surprise, and introduces an emphatic affirmative of obvious truth – Surely!

It is the same word as used by Jacob, after seeing the vision of the ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, and the LORD at the top of the ladder. When he awoke he said: Surely, the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!

And a related word is used in the grand conclusion of Psalm 23 – 'Surely, goodness and lovingkindness shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever'.

So the song turns, from mystery and paradox, to revelation and understanding. The song-writer almost explodes with exasperation about the obvious truth, and in frustration over the apparent blindness of the 'we'!

### **Surely, our sufferings He took up, and our sorrows he shouldered**

The reason he suffered so, and the reason he became a man of sorrows, was because he voluntarily took up **our** sufferings and he voluntarily shouldered **our** sorrows! The voluntary acts of the Servant seem to come vividly into the foreground, rather than distant description of what happened to Him at the hands of others. 'He took up...he shouldered.' The third person pronoun is also emphatic in the first line: Surely, our sorrows **He** took up. This was an active taking on his part, and the verb doublet emphasises it further, and will occur again later in the song – he took up, he shouldered. The image seems to be of him taking the sufferings and sorrows off our shoulders, and carrying them himself, and then lifting them up onto his shoulders and bearing them on our behalf. What a beautiful verbal noun: 'shouldered'! He shouldered our sufferings and sorrows! There in the mysterious darkness, at the heart of the atonement, a substitution

was taking place. 'Our' changed to 'He'. Our sufferings, our sorrows, became his. He took them off us, and shouldered them on our behalf! He shouldered them.

What deep theology here, that God's Servant was so committed to fulfilling the work of God that he was willing to go to these depths in his obedience, voluntarily to take up and carry on his shoulders our sorrows and our sufferings!

### Yet

This word brings to a pinnacle the dissonance expressed throughout the poem to this point – 'Surely', says the author, 'and yet...'. It might have been excusable at the beginning of the story that we did not grasp the significance of what was happening, but at this stage of the revelation, our eyes are still closed to the glaringly obvious!

### Yet **we**

Emphatic pronoun again, but not referring to him and his voluntary carrying of our sufferings, but to us, in our lack of understanding.

### **Yet we esteemed him as one being stricken, one being smitten by God and being humbled.**

Notwithstanding all his sufferings and sorrows, we thought they were God's judgement on him! We esteemed him as one being stricken, one being smitten by God and being humbled by God. And, of course, in one sense we were right! He WAS being smitten by God, as we have seen in the B' stanza (v8), he took the stroke of God (same root) for 'the transgressions of my people'.

But that is not how we saw it at this stage. We assumed that all his sufferings were because God was judging him for his own sin, his own transgressions!

This prophetic message of Isaiah is something of a theological breakthrough. Israel's exodus and freedom to walk in relationship with God had become a formulaic religion, assimilating the old and current paganism. The normal world view was that the 'gods' would be angry with us if we were not faithful to them. So, if someone was suffering in some way, it must be the gods' judgement upon them. This same pagan belief is clearly visible here. We thought he was being stricken, being smitten by God and humbled, because of his own wickedness. Maybe we could not see the wickedness, but surely God could, and was punishing him for it.

So, in this passage, Isaiah is bringing a meaning to suffering that Israel had not understood. The Servant was suffering, but not for the reason Israel surmised. Suffering can have another significance.

53.5

See below

53.6

Following the parallelism again, let's look at verse 6 (A'), which is set in inverted parallel to verse 4 (A).

**A:**       <sup>4</sup> Surely, our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
                  and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
                  yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
                  one being smitten by God and being humbled.

**A':**       <sup>6</sup> **All of us**, like sheep, have gone astray,  
                  each to his own way we turned;  
                  yet **the LORD** laid (made to meet) on him  
                  the iniquity of **all of us**.

Verse 4 dramatically brings into clear focus the voluntary actions of the Suffering Servant on our behalf – our sufferings, he took up; our sorrows, he shouldered. Then, verse 6 vividly contrasts our actions – all of us, like sheep, have gone astray, each to his own way we turned! The contrast is stark – he willingly took our suffering and sorrow, despite the fact that we had rebelliously gone astray and turned to our own way.

Notice, also, the two opening words on the first two lines of verse 6 – ‘all of us...each’. Taken as a people, all of us have gone astray. Taken individually, each one of us has turned to his own way!

And the phrase, ‘all of us’, a single word in Hebrew, begins and ends the verse, bracketing with poetic emphasis the whole statement: ‘All of us, like sheep, went astray...and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of all of us!’ Our rebellious actions deserved the judgement of God, but instead, God took our iniquities off our shoulders and laid them on His Servant’s!

To quote Psalm 14,

The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no-one who does good, not even one.

Romans 3.10ff quotes this Psalm and other Hebrew scriptures to prove the point conclusively:

As it is written: "There is no-one righteous, not even one;<sup>11</sup> there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God.<sup>12</sup> All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one."<sup>13</sup> "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips."<sup>14</sup> "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."<sup>15</sup> "Their feet are swift to shed blood;<sup>16</sup> ruin and misery mark their ways,<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they do not know."<sup>18</sup> "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

And so Romans 3.23 concludes that evidence with this summary:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So, the Old and New Testaments conclude that we are all sinners before a holy God, all of us.

And, the two sides of the parallel verses in v4 and v6 set out the contrast between his voluntary action and ours. He willingly took up our sufferings and sorrows, whilst we rebelliously went astray, following our own way.

However, to follow the inverted parallel exactly, the first two lines of verse 4 are in parallel with the last two lines of verse 6, and the last two lines of verse 4 are in parallel with the first two lines of verse 6, as shown here:

<sup>4</sup> Surely, our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
one being smitten by God and being humbled.

<sup>6</sup> **All of us**, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each to his own way we turned;  
yet **the LORD** laid (made to meet) on him  
the iniquity of **all of us**.

Taking the middle cluster of lines first, they describe our position through all this – ‘we...us...we...’. Firstly, our thoughts, our attitude towards this Suffering Servant caused us to draw the conclusion that he was being punished by God for something he had done wrong. And secondly, our actions were rebellious, wilful disobedience. We were the wrong-doers really! Clearly, we were mixed up in our thinking – our wayward actions surely deserved the punishment – why did we assume this innocent man was being punished for sin!

Taking the outer parallels, these bring us to see the meaning of the suffering at last. He was personally and voluntarily taking upon himself our suffering and our sorrows. The suffering and sorrows we should have received, because of our wayward sinfulness, instead he shouldered them on our behalf. And even though we rebelliously went our own way, Yahweh took our iniquities, and laid them on the shoulders of his willing Servant! The first pair of lines refer to the Servant's voluntary actions, taking up our sufferings and sorrows; and the second pair of lines to the voluntary action of Yahweh, laying our sin on him!

What sudden clarity we have, what revelation regarding the mystery of the suffering servant! Now we can see why the glorious, exalted Servant, was humiliated so! He willingly came into our wicked world, and took upon himself our wickedness – 'the LORD laid on him the iniquity of all of us'!

The use of the verb 'laid on him' is rich also. The root idea is of 'making contact with' someone or something. Here, the verb has the sense of 'to burden with', so Yahweh laid on his Servant our iniquities, he burdened him with them.

These words bring to mind the image of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, when he laid his both hands on the head of the scapegoat:

He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites--all their sins--and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. (Leviticus 16:21)

The words here are very emphatic – 'all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat's head'. This is exactly what is being described here in Isaiah 53. Yahweh is the High Priest, taking all our sins and laying them upon his Servant!

When the High Priest laid both his hands on the head of the live goat, the idea behind the verb is of leaning, or resting one's weight on something. Whenever an individual brought an offering, he would do the same – whether for a burnt offering (Lev 1.4), a peace offering (Lev 3.2, 8, 13) or sin offering (Lev 4.4, 24, 29, 33), before then slaying it on his behalf. When the whole congregation sinned, the elders of the people would act as the nation's representatives and they would lay their hands on the head of the goat corporately (Lev 4.15). And on the Day of Atonement, annually, where the sins of the nation were being dealt with, the High Priest would represent the whole nation, and lay both his hands on the head of the scapegoat, and confess all their wickedness and rebellion, all their sins, and 'put them on the goat's head'.

It is interesting to notice the four verbs used here:

1. laying his both hands on the head of the live goat
2. confessing over it all their sins
3. putting them on the goat's head
4. sending the goat away into the desert

The idea of putting the sins on the goat's head here comes from a root that means primarily 'to give'. The High Priest, in confessing all the sins over the goat, is thereby taking all the sins from Israel's shoulders and giving them to the goat, putting them on his head, to carry away into a deserted place.

The verb used of Yahweh in Isaiah 53.5 is a different word, literally: 'Yahweh made to meet on him the iniquity of us all'. The primary idea here is one of 'contact', but often in the context of aggressive contact. In old English, it is sometimes translated 'falling upon' someone, and even meaning slaying someone. Of course, Yahweh was not physically placing his hands on the head of His Servant, but, in effect, causing all our sins to meet on his head, to fall upon him. The New English Translation probably goes too far theologically, but tries to express the nature of this violent encounter with the translation: 'the LORD caused the sin of all of us to attack him'!

The meaning of the Hebrew word for 'iniquities' is also richer than the English translation suggests. In Hebrew, the word covers the whole spectrum in relation to a just God. It means initially the iniquity of someone, literally their crooked, distorted behaviour, deviating from God's right way. It then means the guilt that comes from that iniquity, guilt before a holy God because of sin. And finally, it can mean the punishment that God justly metes out against the iniquity and the one who has committed the iniquity. Hence the various translations in English, for instance:

- ESV, TNIV – the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all
- TNK – the Lord visited upon him the guilt of all of us
- YLT, BBE – Jehovah has caused to meet upon him the punishment of us all

What a full expression of the Servant's work of substitution for us all – for our iniquities, for our guilt and for the punishment that we deserved!

53.5

And so we come to the centre pericope of the central stanza in this Song of the Suffering Servant! This is the pinnacle of the piece, the focal point of the poetry, and the sobering revelation of the mystery behind the suffering Exalted One. Listen to the words:

**B:** <sup>5</sup> But **he** was being pierced for our transgressions,  
 he was being crushed/humbled for our iniquities;  
 the punishment of our peace/wholeness was over him,  
 and by his wounds we are healed.

**But...**

The piece runs out of the previous statement in verse 4:

<sup>4</sup> Surely, our infirmities/sufferings – **he** took up  
 and our sorrows – he shouldered,  
 yet **we** esteemed him as one being stricken,  
 one being smitten by God and being humbled.

The opening word in this stanza dictates the tone of the stanza – 'Surely...'. The poet has set out the enigma of the exalted Servant of Yahweh, who suffered so terribly, and he then revealed the nature of this one, his early and later life, showing ultimately that the life and the suffering had a purpose – for the transgressions of my people.

So this stanza sets this revelation out in plain language – 'Surely, our sufferings, HE took up...' This clear revelation will reach its pinnacle in the central pericope, but our dramatic blindness is described first. Despite the fact that it was surely obvious that HE was carrying our sufferings, nevertheless, WE (notice the double emphasis) thought that his sufferings were because God was judging him for his sin, in some way!

**But HE...**

And so we come to the plain revelation, one that God chooses to set out for us, so we can see it clearly! The fact was, that 'HE (notice the emphasis again), was being pierced for our transgressions, he was being crushed for our iniquities.'

**...for...for...over...by...**

The amazing simplicity and clarity here, but the four-fold intensity of the revelation!

Notice the parties involved:

**He**...for our...  
 He...for our...  
 The punishment of our ...over him  
 By his...to us...

The twice-repeated words 'for our' in the first two lines emphasise that he was suffering in this way on our behalf, for us, because of our transgressions, because of our iniquities. His suffering was because of our sinfulness!

And it goes on, changing the rigid parallelism, but bringing out even more strongly the nature of this suffering. It says: 'the punishment, chastisement, severe discipline of our wholeness was over him!' God loves his people, but because of their wickedness and rebellion, it was necessary for justice for him to punish them severely, with a view to bringing them back to him, to a place of shalom and wholeness again. Clearly, their exile was an example of this chastisement by God, but here in this passage it is not talking about that. Instead, it is saying that the chastisement, the severe, disciplinary punishment that should have been poured out upon them for their rebellion, instead was poured out upon HIM! The punishment that brought us wholeness and shalom was over HIM!

And by his wounds, healing to us (literally). By the wounding of him, we received the healing.

These prepositions – for, over, by and to – emphasise the nature of the transaction going on here. What he was doing was for us, and the punishment and wounding that should have been ours was poured out over him! He took our place. He became our substitute in regards to our sinfulness. The first and last words seem to emphasise it so strongly – 'but HE...for us'. He was pierced...healing to us! His passion, his suffering, his humiliation, his death were 'for us'. How amazing that he voluntarily submitted to this, for our benefit!

Let's now meditate on the content of this substitution.

### **But HE was being pierced...crushed...**

Look at the clear parallel statements being made here:

<sup>5</sup> But	<b>he</b>	was being pierced	for our transgressions,
	he	was being crushed	for our iniquities;

He was being pierced and crushed for us. The first verb (halal) means wounded or pierced through, and usually with the sense of fatally. It could therefore mean 'slain'. He was fatally wounded or slain for our transgressions.

Zechariah talks of a future day of repentance, when Messiah comes and Israel comes to repentance, when 'they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn'. (Zec 12:10) The verb 'pierced' used here by Zechariah is different (daqar), but with a similar sense, maybe even stronger sense of being pierced through.

Isaiah uses this verb (halal) a little earlier in 51.9:

Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?

This earlier passage is calling for God to act on behalf of the nation. The author is recalling the great works of God in the past, and, in particular, the exodus, and asking God to act in the same way again. Using poetic language, he refers to Egypt as 'Rahab' and 'that monster!' Through the plagues and particularly at the Red Sea, the power of Egypt was destroyed by God's intervention. And so Isaiah says: 'Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?'

The use of the verb 'pierced' here shows the sense of the verb – a fatal wounding. The monster was pierced through, violently and fatally, and in the morning, the army of Egypt lay slain on the shores of the Red Sea.

And here in Chapter 53, Isaiah uses the same word of the suffering Servant. He was pierced through fatally for our transgressions, but his death was not because of his resistance against God, like Egypt's, but because of another's - ours!

The quote above from 51.9 also suggests another point behind this death. The term 'monster' there is used of any serpent and especially of any large sea creature that threatens one's life. It is used of Kings of empires, such as Pharaoh (Isa 51.9) or Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 51.34). Pharaoh is seen as a monster that lurks in the sea (the god of the Nile), and threatened God's people, but who was overcome through the exodus, by the passing through the sea, and the destruction of Egypt's armies (Ezek 29.3; 32.2). But this

metaphor is also used of the ultimate power behind godless earthly powers, the Serpent himself. This ultimate threat is referred to in Isaiah 27.1, as 'Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent', where God 'will slay the dragon that is in the sea'.

In this context, the slaying of the Servant is seen in its deep significance. The slaying of the Servant and the slaying of the Serpent are related! As Isaiah sets out graphically in chapter 14.12-15, all those who rise up against God will ultimately be cast down to the Pit. So every sinner, and we are all sinners, as we have seen, will suffer the same fate as the Serpent – unless there is way to be saved from that fate!

This chapter shows the way. The Servant came, and suffered such humiliation and pain, in the process of taking our transgressions and iniquities, and he was pierced and fatally wounded and slain for us, on our behalf! He became the substitute for our sure death!

The second verb used in verse 5 means 'crushed' or 'humiliated' or 'maltreated'. He was crushed for our iniquities. All the maltreatment that we have seen described throughout the chapter was willingly taken by Him for iniquities not his own, but ours!

Of course, Isaiah and his generation knew nothing of the tortuous death of crucifixion, but looking back, with hindsight, this prophetic word of Isaiah concerning the Servant could not have been more accurate a description – piercing, wounding fatally and crushed!

### **...The punishment of our peace/wholeness was over him, and by his wounds we are healed.**

This centre of the centre of this poem continues, not happy with a single parallelism, but a double parallelism, to bring home the depth and breadth of the significance of this fatal wounding.

The third statement switches the symmetry. To maintain the parallelism, as it the first pair, the poetry would have gone like this:

<sup>5</sup> But	<b>he</b>	was being pierced	for our transgressions,
	he	was being crushed	for our iniquities;
	he	was punished	for our peace
	he	was wounded	for our healing

From this re-structuring, it can be seen that the first pair of lines refer to His suffering for the causal problem, 'our transgressions...our iniquities', but the second pair of lines refer to the suffering for the ultimate purpose, 'our peace...our healing'. What glory and efficacy in this suffering! His death dealt with our sin. His death brought us wholeness! His death dealt with the negative cause and the positive fruit.

But the writer has switched the symmetry for a reason. The poetic richness reveals additional depths.

The punishment of our peace was over him. The word here for punishment frequently has the sense of discipline or chastisement for a sin but with a view to correction and restoration. So it is often used of God's chastisement of Israel, for their waywardness, as in Isaiah 26.16. And their current exile, always in the background here in Isaiah 53, was God's discipline upon them for their sin, but there was still hope. It was discipline for a purpose, to bring them back to obedience and to their inheritance.

However, here the word is used for the Suffering Servant. He was being punished, chastised, not for sin he had committed. Not to restore him to obedience. He was taking the chastisement that should have been upon us, for our transgressions, for our iniquities. But it was not just to deal with the negative stuff. It was to bring positive restoration and blessing. He was being punished for our peace. Of course, the word for peace here is the rich word 'shalom'. This word is best translated as 'wholeness' or 'well-being'. He was being punished for our wholeness, for our well-being!

In Hebrew, the word shalom has a wide semantic range, summed up by this list:

- Peace – the absence of conflict
- Peace – the presence of rest and security
- Safety
- Wholeness
- Prosperity and fruitfulness
- Well-being

- Relationship and fellowship with others
- Fellowship with God

One needs to grasp this whole range of meaning contained in 'shalom' in order to grasp the significance of God's purpose for His people! And the significance of the suffering of this One! He was being punished for our shalom! The punishment for our shalom was over him. God poured out upon Him the chastisement, not to discipline and restore him, but to restore us! His suffering on our behalf was with a view to our wholeness and well-being, in fellowship with God and others!

And by his wounds, we are healed. This is literally: 'by his wounding, healing to us' or 'for us'. The word wounding could also be translated blow or stripe. He received the wounding, we received the healing! The word healing also has the abstract sense of healing or salvation. So because he received the blow, the judgment of God, we received the salvation of God!

Notice now the symmetry in this pair of statements:

The punishment	of our peace	over him
By his wounding,	healing	to us

To have written this in literal symmetry, it would read something like this:

The punishment	of our peace	over him
The wounding	of our healing	over him

As we said above, this would have emphasised the fruit or result of his suffering – our shalom and our healing. But the writer wanted also to emphasise another element of the suffering, and to bring the central stanza to a striking conclusion. The symmetry reveals the heart of this poem – that the suffering, the punishment of God, was over HIM, but the healing, the shalom, was 'to US' or 'for us'! Allow it to sink in: 'Punishment...over HIM..., healing to US'! What revelation this is. What divine substitution! The whole flow of this amazing poem, in the final statement of this central pericope in the central stanza, brings us to this striking phrase, a single word in Hebrew: 'healing for US'! What grace, what glory, what blessing!

## Stanza A'

So we come to the final stanza, which although not the centre-piece of this poem, it is the conclusion of the poem, and indeed, it is the solution to the enigma presented in the first stanza.

**A':**     <sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand.  
<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.  
He will make righteous, the Righteous One, my Servant, the many,  
for their iniquities **he** shouldered  
<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will apportion to him (an inheritance) among the many/great ones,  
and he will divide the spoil with the mighty multitude,  
because that he poured out his soul unto death,  
& he was numbered with the transgressors.  
& **he** took up/carried away the sin of many,  
& for the transgressors he made intercession

To make the poetic structure more visible, it would be clearer to present this text like this:

<sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.  
He will make righteous, the Righteous One, my Servant, the many,  
for their iniquities **he** shouldered

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will apportion to him (an inheritance) among the many/great ones,  
and he will apportion the spoil with the mighty multitude,  
because that he poured out his soul unto death,  
& he was numbered with the transgressors.  
& **he** took up/carried away the sin of many,  
& for the transgressors he made intercession

Notice that in each verse, there is a double theme, referring to the suffering and to the glory that followed the suffering.

V10 – the Lord planned to crush him and to make his soul a guilt-offering, but the Lord's plan will prosper in the Servant's hand – the Servant will see his offspring and prolong his days

V11 – After the anguish of his soul, he will see light, be satisfied and will make many righteous

V12 – Because he poured out his soul to death, the Lord will give him an inheritance of a mighty multitude

This is the solution to the enigma of Stanza A. How could the exalted Servant of the LORD be so humiliated by men? Well the answer is revealed in this song, rising to a pinnacle in the central stanza, then falling away to this glorious conclusion and summary, where the answer is presented in triplicate!

Let's look at the conclusion in detail.

53.10

<sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

## Yet the Lord planned...and the plan of the Lord...

The first thing one notices is the opening and close around the 'plan' of the LORD.

<sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

The translation of this word is tricky in this context. The core sense of the word usually is the idea of 'delighted attention', or 'pleased to do a thing'. This is why the King James Version translates it:

'Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him...and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.'

However, one can hardly say 'it pleased the LORD to bruise him' – it was surely not pleasing to Yahweh to crush his Righteous Servant!

TWOT says 'the basic meaning is to feel great favor towards something. Its meaning differs from the parallel words, in that they connote less emotional involvement...In the case of this word (ḥāpēs), the object solicits favor by its own intrinsic qualities. The subject is easily attracted to it because it is desirable...'

And BDB defines the root meaning as 'delighted attention' or 'to take pleasure in, to delight in'.

A very similar statement is made by Job about his suffering, 'that God would be willing to crush him' (Job 6.9), but there the verb emphasises the volitional decision, with little or no emotional element. In this context here, in the Servant Song, the decision of Yahweh also includes deep emotional involvement.

In this sentence the verb is followed by an infinitive 'to crush him' or 'to humble him'. In other instances of this structure (eg. Jud 13.23; 1 Sam 2.25), they are also followed by verbs of killing or putting to death.

In both instances, the context suggests more 'the will of the Lord'. So it is probably best to translate this scripture also in this way:

<sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD willed to crush/humble him,  
He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering.  
He will see his offspring, he will prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

In so translating, however, we should not forget the emotional involvement integral to the word. Yahweh chose to crush His Servant, not as a cold, detached choice, but as fully and emotionally engaged with the decision. We can get a glimpse of this kind of choice when a parent chooses to give permission to one of her offspring to go under the surgeon's knife, in order to provide a kidney for another member of the family. A decision of the will, a clear plan, but not without deep emotional involvement. How amazing it is, to talk in such a manner about Yahweh God, and His purposes regarding His Servant!

And then the parallel is even more powerful – the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. God's deep decision was to humble his Servant, as we have seen above, but this plan was not inflicted on the Servant, but handed over to him for fulfilment. In the first line, it is Yahweh who is the active One, but in the fourth line it is the Servant who is the active one – fulfilling the will of the Lord. The Servant fulfilled the plan of the Lord in this world, not just in the suffering, but beyond the suffering to blessing for 'the many' and eternal life. The will of the Lord will prosper in his hand, says the poet, and surely it will!

## To crush him

Notice, too, the use of the phrase: 'to crush him' or 'to humble him'. This final stanza so resonates with the second line of the central pericope of the central stanza: 'he was crushed for our iniquities' – the very same verb. There, in the central stanza, the emphasis is on for whom the Servant is suffering – 'for our transgressions...for our iniquities'. Who is doing the wounding is not yet made clear. The verbs are set in the passive mood – the wounding and crushing was being done to the Servant by others, or by Another. The Who is then revealed in the last two lines of the central stanza, as we have seen, 'and the LORD laid on him / the iniquity of all of us'.

This same phrase opens this final stanza ‘and the LORD...’ Not this time ‘and the Lord laid on him’, but this time ‘and the Lord willed to crush him’. This unbelievable suffering, crushing and humbling of the Servant, bearing the iniquities of us all, is finally declared to be the very purpose and plan of the Lord. No wicked frenzy of men, no cynical justice of Rome, but the eternal plan and purpose of God Himself! And with this phrase, the final stanza opens, emphasising the thrust of the whole poem, that the eternal God was behind this unbelievable plan, in order to deal with our iniquities.

### **He caused him to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering**

Yahweh not only willed this humbling and crushing, but in parallel ‘He caused him to suffer’. The root word here is the same as the nouns used in verses 3 and 4 for griefs (KJV) or for ‘sicknesses’. It usually refers to physical sickness, that results in weakness. In Malachi 1.8, 18, God condemns Judah for bringing sick animals to him as sacrifices. But, from this song, it is clear that this Servant is perfect and ‘the Righteous One’, but nevertheless, the Lord makes him suffer spiritual sickness because he made his soul a guilt offering for others.

Most translations connect the suffering, the sickness, back with the previous clause, about the Lord bruising his Servant. For example, the NASV:

But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting *Him* to grief;

But it seems better to retain the parallelism in the first two lines

<sup>10</sup> Yet	the LORD	planned	to crush/humble him,
	He	caused him	to suffer

when he made his soul a guilt-offering.

The closing clause then acts as the reason for the crushing and suffering – Yahweh made the sovereign choice to send His Servant to sacrifice himself as a guilt-offering for the guilt of others. In making this decision, He knew it was a decision to crush and humble His Servant, and to cause His righteous soul to become sick because of sin! Truly, an unbelievable decision, and of cosmic significance.

### **Guilt-offering**

This now gives us the theological significance of the suffering and humiliation. Why did the Servant have to take ‘a stroke for them’? The centre of the centre of this poem has explained that it was ‘for our transgressions...for our iniquities...’ And now the suffering is set clearly in the framework of the sacrificial system that God had instituted for the nation.

We need to take an aside to understand the significance of this particular offering.

As set out in the second book of the Torah (the Pentateuch), Israel had been redeemed out of bondage in Egypt, and was now journeying with God through the wilderness. God’s Presence was made visible at the centre of their encampment, as represented by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night over the sanctuary, called the tabernacle. The book of Leviticus is the third and central book in the Torah, and sets out how a Holy God could dwell amongst a sinful people, and how a sinful people could come near to him in fellowship. The book opens with God speaking to Moses from the ‘tent of meeting’, and with encouragement for Israel to come near to him in the central meeting place.

There were however, conditions that had to be complied with, if God’s people were to come near to him in an acceptable manner. They had to come near to him with ‘an offering’. There were five different kinds of offerings, four of them were ‘sacrifices’, where a clean animal had to be brought, and slain, and the fifth offering was not a sacrifice, but an offering of grain or fine flour.

Now, in this context of Isaiah 53, we have based our interpretation on the ‘exposition’ of the evangelist Philip, that the Servant of the LORD being talked about here is none other than Jesus, God’s incarnate Son. In a similar manner, all of the New Testament writers make it clear that the sacrifices and offerings of the Mosaic covenant represent God’s perfect sacrifice, in his Son.

For example:

**Paul:** ‘...Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Eph 5:2)

**Peter:** ‘...knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you (1 Peter 1:18-20)

**John:** The next day (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

It is clear from such passages, and there are many others, that the apostles and early Christians were absolutely convinced that the Lord Jesus Christ had fulfilled the meaning of the sacrifices and offerings of the Mosaic covenant.

The writer to the Hebrews went into some depth to explain that the physical pictures in the Hebrew scriptures were fulfilled in Jesus. For example:

Now when these things have been so prepared (the tabernacle), the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle (the Holy Place) performing the divine worship,<sup>7</sup> but into the second (the Holy of Holies), only the high priest *enters* once a year, not without *taking* blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.

<sup>8</sup> The Holy Spirit *is* signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing,<sup>9</sup> which *is* a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience,<sup>10</sup> since they *relate* only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

<sup>11</sup> But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, *He entered* through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation;<sup>12</sup> and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.<sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh,<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?<sup>15</sup> For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were *committed* under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (Hebrews 9:6-15)

So, in summary, the writers of the New Testament were absolutely convinced that the sacrifices and offerings of the Mosaic Covenant, and indeed, the Tabernacle and the Priesthood as well, were all pictures, metaphors, of the new covenant that was being fulfilled in Christ.

Now, armed with this, we return to the topic of the five offerings in Leviticus. God welcomed his people to draw near to him, but if they came, they must come with the prescribed offering with them. Now, as we have seen, the offerings all speak of Christ. So, to explain the metaphor, God is saying to us now that if we wish to come near to him and to have fellowship with we must come with the prescribed offering, that is his Son! We can only approach God with his Son! God's Son is our 'mediator', the One who makes us acceptable to come near to God. God looks on His Son, on His offering, and welcomes us!

Now, without going into to much depth at this stage, we need to explain that there were two types of offerings:

1. The Sweet Aroma offerings – the burnt offering, the fine flour offering and the peace offering
2. The Most Holy offerings – the sin offering and the guilt offering

The first group of offerings were not primarily to do with sin, but were to do with worship, and fellowship with God. They were voluntary offerings, and the worshipper brought them when he wanted to, not because God told him he must. Basically, we can only worship God, we can only have fellowship with God and with each other, through his Son!

The second group of offerings were totally to do with sin. If a person sinned, then he had to come with one of these offerings to God, to deal with the sin. God still wanted him to come near, but he could only come near if he dealt with his sin. And, of course, the sin and guilt offerings speak of Christ, as the holy One, who was sacrificed on our behalf, so that we could have our sin cleansed and continue to walk in fellowship with a holy God.

In simple terms, the sin offering deals with our offense against God's righteousness, our breaking of His law. The guilt offering, which is a type of sin offering, but particularly is concerned with the damage that our sin does, damage against God's kingdom, damage against our fellow human being, damage against society.

And so here, in Isaiah 53, when it says God caused His Servant to suffer when he made his soul a guilt-offering, he was saying that the Righteous Servant's sacrifice was not a mistake, it was not because of the rejection and the oppression of wicked men, no, it was in God's sovereign and gracious purpose, to deal with sin, our sin against the holy law of God, but also to deal with the damage that our sin had caused, against God, against our fellows, and against our world! He paid the price, and some, for the debt that we owed to a just God.

And notice, that it is not the people bringing the offering to God, it is God Himself bringing the offering. Now, it is ambiguous, as the second 'he' can be referring to God or to the Servant. So, it could be translated:

'He (the LORD) caused him to suffer, when he (the LORD) made his (the Servant's) soul a guilt offering'.

But it could equally be translated, as with the Jewish Tanakh translation, of the Servant:

'He (the LORD) caused him to suffer, when he (the Servant) made his (the Servant's) soul a guilt offering'.

The Jewish Tanakh translation follows this, by translating it reflexively: '...he made himself an offering for guilt'

Either translation would be true, but probably the latter is the most appropriate, as Yahweh's plan caused the suffering of the Servant, as the Servant voluntarily submitted himself to death, and to be a sacrifice for our guilt, taking our punishment.

This clause is also the turning point in this pericope and in the whole stanza, and indeed in the whole song. From this purpose of God to send His Servant to suffering and to sacrifice, we turn to see the outcome, the glory that would following the sufferings.

The verse could be represented this way, to show the turning point:

<sup>10</sup> Yet the LORD	willed	to crush him,
He	caused him	to suffer
		when he made his soul a guilt-offering.
He	will see	his offspring,
he	will prolong	his days,
and the will of the LORD	will prosper	in his hand.

So, the Servant submitting to death and sacrifice as God's guilt offering for the damage caused by our sin, is the basis on which God has brought the fulfilment of his plan, the outcome of his will.

### **He will see his offering, he will prolong his days**

Again there is ambiguity about the 'he'. Is it talking of the LORD, or of the Servant? I will take it as the former, given the second clause and the last line. So, the LORD will see the outcome of the Servant's suffering, an offspring, a seed springing up, to use Jesus' metaphor, from 'the grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died' (John 12.24).

It seems such a dramatic turn – after the long catalogue of suffering, to come to this point and to see that it was all for a purpose, a plan. That from death there might come life, from one grain of wheat there might come a harvest, through pain their might be born many children!

It is as if the LORD is standing with his plan, his eternal purpose, deciding to send His Servant, deciding to put him through suffering and soul-sickness because of the agony of sin-bearing, and yet committing to such a plan because he could see the result, the outcome of it, an offspring that will bring glory to His Servant!

And not only offspring, but the other part of the concept of Jewish blessing – ‘length of days’. Every Jew looked for offspring and length of days. And God’s plan is for the same for His Son – out of suffering and atoning death – a multitudinous offspring and life out of death – ‘he will prolong his days’. So even from the beginning of the plan, before the Servant ever came, God was committed to this as the glorious outcome. The Servant would fully complete the will and purpose of Yahweh, even through such suffering, and ‘the plan of the LORD would prosper in his hand’! The plan, though to human eyes it seemed such weakness, such failure, such shame, was never at risk. The LORD had given it to His Servant to fulfil, and he would fulfil it to the letter and so abundantly – the plan of the LORD will prosper in his hand!

53.11

<sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.  
He will make righteous, the Righteous One, my Servant, the many,  
for their iniquities **he** shouldered

### **Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see light**

The word translated here as anguish basically means work, but the hard labour, trawling sense of work, painstaking work. The Servant went through anguish and travail as he fulfilled the work that was given him to do. But after all that travail, he will come out into the light, he would see light.

Clearly, this is a poetic expression referring to coming out of the guilt-bearing suffering and out of the pit of death, and out into the light of life. Following the previous verse, where it said the LORD would prolong his days, it now declares that the Servant will see light.

The word ‘light’ is not found in the Masoretic text, but is found in the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and also in the Greek of the Septuagint. This seems to suggest that the word should be included in the translation, though even without it, the meaning would be the same.

This verb for ‘see’ has an interesting story to tell in the context of this Servant Song. It is found four times, in 52.15; 53.2, 10 and 11. Setting them in chronological order, the story would be like this:

In his earthly life – the seeing of his contemporaries (52.2)

He had no form or beauty that we should look at him: No appearance, that we should find him pleasing.

The verb ‘look at’ and the noun ‘appearance’ are from the same root.

When the Servant grew up amongst us, we looked at him and found little that attracted us; little to draw our gaze; little that made us desire him!

In his death – the seeing of Yahweh (or maybe the Servant himself) (53.10)

Yet the LORD planned to crush/humble him,  
He caused (him) to suffer since he made his soul a guilt-offering  
He will see (his) offspring,  
he will prolong (his) days

After his suffering as a sacrifice, Yahweh will see the fruit of his Servant's suffering, the offspring from his suffering and he will prolong his days, granting him life from death.

In his resurrection – the seeing of the Servant (53.11)

Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.

After the Servant's suffering, he will see the light of life, as he rises from the dead, and he will be satisfied by his knowing, of the outcome of his suffering and death.

In his glorification – the seeing of the kings and nations (52.15)

so he will startle many nations  
over him kings will shut their mouths  
for what was not told to them, they will see,  
and what they did not hear, they will understand.

This now talks of the future day, after the Servant's suffering, and after his rising to the light of life, and entering into his rightful inheritance with the countless redeemed multitude, the very kings that mocked and ridiculed, the very nations that rejected, will suddenly be gob-smacked, as they discover who the humiliated one really was! They will suddenly come to see what had not been told to them previously, that the suffering one was God's appointed Servant, to bring about justice and righteousness through his suffering and death. They never would have guessed that, but now then can see it, now they understand it, as they bow before the glorified King of the universe!

### **He will be satisfied by his knowledge**

The context is 'out of the labour of his soul', and after seeing the light of life in his resurrection, and coming into the good of his glorious victory. As he looks at the outcome of his humiliation, and rejection and oppression and guilt-bearing and death, and now rising to life as conqueror of sin and death itself, he is satisfied by his knowledge, or, the more active verbal form, he will be satisfied by his knowing.

The word 'knowledge' or 'knowing' in Isaiah, and many of the references, has the force of 'wisdom' or 'obedience' to God. And it is in this sense that it should probably be read here. As he rises to the light of life, and knows the joy of having conquered sin and death, and having fulfilled the will of Yahweh, he will be satisfied by his wise obedience to Yahweh's will and plan. As the Song began, 'Behold my Servant will act wisely (or will prosper)'. And here, following the anguished labour of guilt-bearing, the Servant demonstrates that his knowing of God, his wise obedience to Yahweh's will, was not ill-founded. A deep satisfaction floods his inner being, and he is overwhelmed by satisfaction because of the fruit of his wisdom and obedience.

In the parallelism here, the knowing, the wise obedience is in parallel with the painstaking labour of his soul:

Out of the anguish of his soul, he will see (light);  
he will be satisfied by his knowledge.

The Servant of the LORD committed his soul to the painful path of humiliation, suffering and guilt-bearing, but he came through it into the glorious light of life, and experienced the satisfaction in his soul that had come from knowing and obeying the will of God in it and through it all. The satisfaction of knowing God strangely came through the painstaking labour of his soul!

Being satisfied, having a sense of fulfilment is a fundamental element of our human psyche. Even when all our physical and relational needs have been met, we still yearn for something more, and this is called 'self-fulfilment' by psychologists.

This scripture shows the true source of satisfaction. It is not in our achievements, but in our knowing of God, in our obedience to Him, to His will for our lives, even if it means suffering! As the Servant knew

Yahweh's will, and declared 'I delight to do your will', and moved out into the world to fulfil every detail of that will, whatever it cost, he was able to say at the end of it all that he was satisfied by his knowing of God, by his obedience to him.

Lord, help me to recognise deep within that it is by loving obedience to your will and purpose, even though it will mean death to self, that I will know the deep sense of fulfilment that will satisfy my soul. All other self-centred ways will fail to fulfil, fail to satisfy, and will feel like candy floss in the savouring!

**He will make righteous, the Righteous One, my Servant, the many, because he shouldered their iniquities**

We come here to a majestic conclusion to this Song, and one that sounds as if the Apostle Paul wrote it himself! He will make many righteous! Because he bore our sins, because he shouldered our iniquities, because he took responsibility for what was our responsibility, he will now be able to make many righteous! And, of course, he was only able to do this, the sin-bearing and the making righteous, because he is the Righteous One himself.

Notice the return to the personal address. The Song opened in this manner – 'Behold my Servant...' and now it closes in this manner – 'My righteous Servant will make many righteous'. The choice of this new title, 'the Righteous One', in this context, is exquisite. It is only 'the Righteous One' that could make others righteous! Clearly, another unrighteous person could not make unrighteous people righteous!

Once again we pick up the theme of 'the many' – to be repeated three times in these last two verses. The poem started with the many who were appalled at him in his humiliation, and it ends with many being made righteous. Probably not the same 'many', but making it clear that the work of the Righteous Servant, though via humiliation, suffering and death, was not a wasted work, as 'the many' will be brought into the good of it.

And why? Because he shouldered their iniquities. Even though this last stanza is of the poem is setting out the glorification of the Servant, it is not leaving the route to that glory aside. Righteousness can only be granted to the unrighteous ones, because this Righteous One took their iniquities upon his own shoulders.

53.12

And so we come to the dramatic climax of his glory:

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will apportion to him (an inheritance) among the many/great ones,  
and he will apportion the spoil with the mighty multitude,  
because that he poured out his soul unto death,  
& he was numbered with the transgressors.  
& **he** took up/carried away the sin of many,  
& for the transgressors he made intercession

Again, repeating the same two-sided expression of the previous verse, we see the glory is firstly stated and then the basis on which that glory is rightfully his – because of his sufferings.

**Therefore, I will apportion to him (an inheritance) among the many (or 'the great ones')**

God is still speaking about 'the Righteous One, My Servant', and he says: 'Therefore, I will apportion to him an inheritance...' The word translated 'apportion' could also be translated: to divide, share, allot or assign. The same root word dominates the later chapters of the book of Joshua (used 19 times), after they have conquered the promised land and so Joshua divides it up between the tribes, everyone getting their portion. Here too, the Suffering Servant has conquered death and sin and has risen to inherit God's promises.

The wording here is ambiguous to interpret – 'God will apportion to him among the many'. Translated like this, it sounds limited in its scope – the Servant will just receive a portion for himself, as will many others. However, given the following clause, the inheritance of God the preposition 'among' can be translated many ways, with its core sense being 'in'. God will apportion to His Servant 'in the many', or more clearly, '*in the form of the many*'. God will apportion to His Servant an inheritance in the form of the many!

Here we see again the second reference to 'the many' in this last stanza. Verse 11 has said he will make the many righteous by his vicarious sacrifice, and now we read that God will apportion as an inheritance to him 'the many' – the many that he has made righteous will become his glorious inheritance!

This is a repeating theme in the Bible. Back in Deuteronomy (32:8-9), it says:

<sup>8</sup>When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

<sup>9</sup>But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. (Deuteronomy 32:8-9 ESV)

Whereas nations of the world may possess physical territory as their inheritance, for God, His inheritance is His People!

But the passage in Deuteronomy goes on to prophesy the rebellion of God's Servant, Israel, and His judgement of them, ultimately in exile. Now, in Isaiah, we gain this insight of God's plan and purpose through His Righteous Servant, to deal with transgression and to redeem 'the many'.

The justified many now become the inheritance of God's Righteous servant!

### **And he will apportion the spoil with the mighty multitude**

The parallelism and flow of thought is clear:

Therefore I will apportion to him in the form of the many  
And with the mighty multitude he will apportion the spoil.

Or, showing the parallels more clearly:

Therefore and	I will apportion he will apportion	to him with the mighty multitude	in the form of the many the spoil.
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Following the Servant's victory, God will give to him an inheritance in the form of the many, and he in turn will give to the many, to the mighty multitude, the spoil of his victory. His inheritance is the multitude of great ones, and their inheritance is the spoil of his victory.

Whereas Yahweh's inheritance gift is given individually to His Servant, the Servant's inheritance gift is shared with a mighty multitude. And whereas Yahweh's reward to His Servant takes the form of 'the many', a mighty multitude of justified, believers and worshippers, the reward the Servant shares with them is made up of the 'spoil' of his victory, the blessings and outcome from his suffering.

In one sense, this is the closing crescendo for this poem, as the final four lines are a final reminder of the basis on which all this has become possible – 'by reason of the fact...'. So we can savour the crescendo again – after such humiliation and rejection and oppression and suffering and death, despite such glory and humility and servanthood and guilelessness of life, God's Servant is finally 'raised and lifted up and exalted highly' and the kings of the earth are gobsmacked over the realisation of who he really is, and he receives the fruit of all his labour in the form of a mighty multitude of righteous saints, and those righteous saints receive the fruit of his atoning work as 'co-heirs' with God's Righteous Servant! Glory!

### **Because he poured out his soul unto death**

The final portion is clearly a quadruple parallel, under the preposition 'in exchange for' or 'in return for':

in return for (the fact) that he poured out unto death his soul,  
& with the transgressors he was numbered  
& **he** the sin of many he took up/carried away  
& for the transgressors he made entreaty/interposed

Or, even more clearly:

in return for (the fact) that	he poured out	unto death	his soul,
&	with the transgressors	he was numbered	
&	<b>he</b> the sin of many	he took up/carried away	
&	for the transgressors	he made entreaty/interposed	

Notice that the first clause has the verb up front – ‘he poured out...’, but the following three have their verbs at the end – ‘...he was numbered...he took up...he made entreaty.’

This does seem to differentiate the arrangement of the four lines into one and three, rather than two pairs or even a quadruple parallel.

Line one makes the over-arching statement that his exaltation and inheritance has come ‘in return for (the fact) that’, or ‘in exchange for (the fact) that’ he poured out his soul to death. This is a generic description of his sacrifice, and we explore it further below.

The following three parallels are more specific about the reason – his exaltation was because he associated with transgressors and dealt with sin. By putting up front the issue each time, it draws attention to it most powerfully:

&	<u>with the transgressors</u>	he was numbered
&	<u><b>he</b> the sin of many</u>	he took up/carried away
&	<u>for the transgressors</u>	he made entreaty/interposed

Notice the people, ‘the transgressors’, occur in the first and third lines, and the issue of concern, referred to as ‘the sin of many’, is sandwiched in between. The emphasis on the central reason of the three is strengthened further by using the personal pronoun ‘he’ to start the sentence – ‘**he** – the sin of many – he took up’.

Having firstly made the distinction between the first line and the following three, if we remove the inverted parallels, we can now make the verbal links more obvious:

in return for (the fact) that	he poured out	unto death his soul,
&	he was numbered	with the transgressors
&	<b>he</b> , he took up	the sin of many
&	he made entreaty	for the transgressors

There is a deep and moving flow in these verbs, setting out the essence of his suffering, and summarising the whole Servant Song, and the reason why God has so highly exalted him, and why he so deserves his reward.

‘He poured out his soul unto death’ – this summarises the nature of his suffering, literally, ‘laying bare his soul’. The Inscrutable and All-glorious One became exposed and vulnerable and humiliated. Then, the three-phase process is described like this:

1. He was numbered with the transgressors – this is the only passive verb in the series, and suggests the Servant was placed amongst the transgressors by another or by others. It could mean that he suffered and died amongst transgressors, so those looking on the situation considered him a transgressor also, but more likely, in the majestic perspective of the context, it refers to God, who numbered him with the transgressors in the process of the atonement set out in this Song. ‘Behold my Servant’, the Song starts. God commissioned His Servant for this role, and His Servant willingly submitted to it. As he laid bare his life unto death, as he poured out his soul, the first stage was to be numbered with transgressors, to be incarnated amongst them. What an amazing wonder this was – for the Glorious One to be numbered with transgressors. Willingly to come and stand at our side, and to humbly take his place with us, as if he was one of us, as if he deserved our lot! When we imagine the Cosmic Judge calling out the list of transgressors in the universe, he voluntarily came and stood in the line with the rest of us!
2. He, he took up the sin of many – he not only was numbered with the transgressors, associated with them through his incarnation, becoming like us, except for sin, but he also lifted up our sin onto his own shoulders, as we have seen. This verb ‘took up, lifted up’ also includes the idea of ‘carried away’, so we see the process continuing – he was associated with sinners, and then he lifted up their sin onto his own shoulders and then he carried their sin away! What grace on behalf of sinners, for us, on our behalf!

3. He made entreaty for the transgressors – this clause is maybe the most difficult to interpret in the whole song. The verb used here, the last word in the whole Song, is the same as the verb used in verse 6 – ‘the LORD has made to meet on him the iniquity of us all’.

The verb has the basic sense of ‘to meet’ someone, to make contact with someone, but this can be for good or for harm (translated sometimes in the older versions as ‘to fall upon’ someone). To meet someone with a request then comes to mean ‘to make entreaty on someone’s behalf’, or ‘to intercede for someone’.

Clearly, in verse 6, as we have seen, it means that Yahweh made to meet upon his Servant the iniquity of us all, that is, he laid the burden of our sin upon him, and the Servant took our sin and its punishment on our behalf.

But here, in this context it is the Servant actively meeting Yahweh on our behalf. He made contact with God, he fell upon God in passionate appeal, on our behalf. He interposed himself between God and us transgressors, becoming our advocate, and interceding for us! To quote the apostle John in his first letter, talking of children of God, but applying to all who sin:

... if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2 ESV)

At the close of the first half of the Song, we were told that Yahweh made our transgressions to fall upon the Servant. Now, at the end of the second half of the Song, we are told that the Servant falls upon Yahweh on behalf of us transgressors!

Yahweh made to meet upon the Servant the iniquity of us all, and also the Servant meets with Yahweh on behalf of us transgressors!

He meets with Yahweh to plead our cause, to entreat on behalf of us transgressors, to intervene on our behalf, to be our righteous advocate on the basis of all he has done, his vicarious, atoning sacrifice!

So, God CAN be just and also the Justifier of transgressors who put their faith in His Servant, Jesus! (Rom 3.26).

That is why God says right at the beginning of this Song: ‘Behold my Servant’!

### ***To be completed...***

Paul Hocking  
Easter 2011

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<sup>ii</sup> ‘at you’ is found in all three ancient sources: 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>; LXX and MT. There are some MT manuscripts that use the more obvious ‘at him’.