

## Session 10: The Unknown Prophet of the Exile

### C. Jerusalem, the suffering servant

#### Activity 10.5

Read Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-10 and 52:13 – 53:12

So far the prophet has assured his hearers that Yahweh is the sole creator of the world with the power to give new life to his weary and failing people; that Yahweh alone of all gods is in charge of history and to prove it has sent the prophets to announce what he is about to do; that Yahweh loves his people above all others and intends to comfort and restore them. There is one piece of the jigsaw left to fill in: in order to convince the exiles that they are still God's people and that he loves them, he will have to explain why they have been allowed to suffer.

Within the text of Second Isaiah are four passages collectively known as the 'suffering servant songs': 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-10, 52:13 – 53:12. For many years Old Testament scholars have been puzzled about these passages, how they fit into the message of the book as a whole and just who the servant is meant to be. Some scholars suggest that the passages do not fit at all and are outside additions. Between them there are something like 15 suggestions for who the servant might be.

Since the servant is spoken of as an individual, it could well refer to the prophet himself, or perhaps he could be referring to the experience of some other prophet, such as Jeremiah. Certainly the experience of the servant has several prophetic features:

- Yahweh puts his spirit in him, 42:1
- he was called before he was born, as was Jeremiah, 49:1
- he has the word of the Lord in his mouth like a sharp sword, 49:2
- he wakes each morning to hear the word of the Lord, 50:4
- he is oppressed and afflicted and 53:7-8 is a verbal echo of Jeremiah 11:19

So the servant could be a prophet, or he might be a figure still to come who will fulfil the vocation Yahweh intends for Israel.

On the other hand, the nation of Israel is frequently spoken of as an individual, especially in the psalms. Psalm 129 has the nation speaking as an individual about the way she has been mistreated by the nations:

#### Psalm 129: 1-2

'Often have they attacked me from my youth'  
—let Israel now say—  
'often have they attacked me from my youth,  
yet they have not prevailed against me.  
Those who plough ploughed on my back;  
they made their furrows long.'

This means that, although spoken of as an individual, the servant could equally well be a collective entity, such as Jerusalem or the people of Israel. And in fact not only in 49:3 but throughout chapters 40 to 48 Israel is repeatedly referred to as Yahweh's servant (41:8-9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1-2,21; 45:4; 48:20) and in 51:13 Zion is specifically said to have characteristics of the servant previously given in 49:2.

In this session I am going to assume that the servant is Israel / Jerusalem / Zion: that is, the nation of Israel insofar as she is faithful to the calling of God. Since the nation is unfaithful and unbelieving, Yahweh is in fact working through her without her co-operation (42:18-23; 43:8-13, 22-24). The faithful will be in a small minority, of whom the prophet sees himself as one. This means that the servant Israel has a ministry to the whole people of Israel as well as to the nations as a whole (49:6). But why does Israel as God's servant need to suffer? Let us take the servant songs in turn:

In 42:1-4 the servant is the one through whom Yahweh will bring justice to the nations. Isaiah of Jerusalem had been primarily concerned with justice and its absence in Jerusalem. Second Isaiah is just as concerned for justice: it is the vocation of the faithful servant to bring Israel's tradition of law to the whole world. In 42:4 the coastlands wait for his 'torah': what Israel has learned of God will be taught to all the nations. In the words of the church father Athanasius, Israel was to be 'a school of the knowledge of God and the spiritual life for all humankind'. Thus the 'covenant' by which she becomes Yahweh's special people is a covenant with the nations (42:6) because the ultimate purpose of revealing himself to Israel was that through them he would be revealed to the whole world. However, as we have seen, Jerusalem was defeated and its people sent into exile precisely because they failed to live up to this calling.

In 49:1 the servant is called from the womb (see also in 44:2,24 and 46:3 where Israel is formed in the womb). He is given Yahweh's word and then hidden away so that there seems no purpose in his calling. 49:4 expresses the true response of the servant: to trust in Yahweh even though everything seems in vain. Again, the servant's mission as a light to the nations means that he is given as a covenant to the peoples (49:6,8).

50:4-9 again express the proper response of the servant in contrast with the nation's unbelief, expressed in 49:14-21. Perhaps here the prophet is writing out of his own experience; certainly he has that of the pre-exilic prophets such as Jeremiah to call on. Called to suffer on God's behalf, he does so willingly, giving his back to the smiters (as in Psalm 129). Again, there are parallels in other chapters: in 51:23 Israel's back is a road for her persecutors. The servant trusts in Yahweh and waits for his persecutors to wear out (50:9), the same assurance he gives Israel in 51:8. In other words, the servant accepts the exile as Yahweh's just punishment and waits patiently for him to end it, leading to his challenge to Israel in 50:10-11: whose light will you live by, the servant's or your own?

Finally in 52:13 - 53:12 the prophet shows how the suffering of the righteous servant leads to the salvation of many. In 52:13-15 the servant is to 'prosper' and be lifted up; the nations will be astonished at him because his appearance is so marred. They will be startled when they discover Yahweh's real purpose. In chapter 53 the nations speak, explaining how they looked on the servant beforehand and what they now realise: that the appearance of Israel hid her true mission (as in 49:2). All this suffering, they now realise, is in fact the 'arm of the Lord', that is, something Yahweh has done himself.

In verses 4 to 6 the servant carries the sicknesses of the nations, traditionally seen as a sign of God's displeasure. In verses 7 and 8 he suffers injustice and oppression, in verse 9 he dies and is buried in the land of the rich and wicked, the land of Babylon. But all this is now reinterpreted

as a 'guilt offering' (verse 10), in other words a sacrifice made for the guilt of others. Because of the servant's suffering, he will have 'offspring'. His righteousness will make many others righteous (verse 11) because he bore the sin of 'many' (verse 12).

Because Israel was given the Lord's 'torah' they knew his nature. His intention was that they should live in such a way that this should be revealed to all nations. When they failed to do so it was absolutely necessary that they should be punished in order to demonstrate the consequence of sin, to refine them and give them a second chance of demonstrating Yahweh's righteousness in their way of life. Thus their punishment was not first and foremost for themselves but for the nations. Although less wicked than the wicked nations surrounding them, they needed to be punished as a witness to the righteousness of God. And in patiently bearing that suffering, acknowledging the vital importance for all mankind of the knowledge of God with which they had been entrusted and which they had betrayed, Israel would be a witness to the whole world both of God's love and his righteousness.

## The servant in the New Testament

The New Testament makes it clear that the early church saw the death of Jesus as fulfilment of this passage. Acts 8 gives the story of Philip meeting an Ethiopian who is reading this passage and explaining to him how Jesus fulfils it. In 1 Peter 2:22-25 Peter quotes from this passage and refers it to Jesus as does Matthew in Matthew 8:17. There is also an indication that Jesus thought the same thing and was the source of the apostles' interpretation:

### Mark 10:45

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Are the 'many' for whom the Son of Man is to give his life the same as the 'many' of Isaiah 53:12?

But the prophet also shows that the same kind of suffering is the vocation of God's people generally. God called righteous Israel to be this kind of faithful servant, and he is probably describing something of his own experience and that of Jeremiah. Although Jesus fulfils this passage perfectly, as he does the whole of Scripture, the faithful community is called to go the same way: in Jesus' words, to take up our cross and follow him. Because the world is full of sin, the righteous will suffer; they will be rejected just as Jesus was. But if they suffer willingly with faith in God they will play their part in the salvation of the whole world.

### Further Reading

Background reading to the study of Hosea can be found in either:  
Bernhard Anderson: *The Living World of the Old Testament*, chapter 14  
John Drane: *Introducing the Old Testament*, chapter 7

### Preparation

The next session on Isaiah chapter 56 to 66 is not yet ready

The key passages for session 12 are Genesis 1 and 2