

## Introduction

The prophecy of Isaiah divides naturally into two main parts. The first part consists of the first thirty-nine chapters and covers the history of the southern kingdom of Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1), from about 739 to 686 BC. Although it contains predictions of the virgin birth of Christ and the Messiah King who shall reign forever on earth (7:14; 9:6-8), the central theme of this section is that of judgment. It predicts the destruction of Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Egypt, Tyre and even Judah's captivity in Babylon (14:23-32; 16:1-14; 19:1-17; 23:1-18; 39:1-8).

Part two (chapters 40-66) looks beyond the captivity of God's people to the future plans that God has in store for them, and indeed for the whole earth (40:1-5,10,11; 44:21-28; 45:22-25; 51:11; 54:10,17; 56:8; 65:17-19; 66:22-24). These last twenty-seven chapters are full of the comfort of God's salvation – extended not just to Jews, but also to Gentiles who will enjoy His presence and blessing for ever in a recreated heaven and earth.

Now, one of the most striking characteristics of this second part of the Book of Isaiah is the collection of what are usually called *The Servant Songs*. They are so named because they are poems featuring a fascinating, if shadowy, person simply entitled 'My Servant', with the subject of the pronoun being the 'LORD' (i.e. Jehovah). The term 'servant' occurs twenty times in chapters 40-53 in the singular, where it refers to the prophet once (44:26); to the nation of Israel eleven times outside the Servant Songs (41:8-9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1,2,21; 45:4; 48:20); and eight times to the Person in the Servant Songs (42:1; 49:3,5,6,7; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11). Although there is no evidence that they were ever sung, for over a hundred years these four passages have been designated Servant Songs: 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12.<sup>1</sup>

Biblical scholars have long debated the identity of the Servant, but most are agreed that whatever immediate reference these verses may have had for Isaiah's contemporaries and later generations of Jews after the captivity in Babylon, the perfect fulfilment of them is to be found in Jesus of Nazareth. Not only did our Lord regard Himself as fulfilling the role of the Servant of the LORD, but the accomplishments of the Servant in these songs are and could only be true of the life and work of Jesus Christ recorded in the New Testament.

### **Jesus saw Himself as the Servant in Isaiah's songs**

It was with reference to the character and mission of the Servant that our Lord understood the nature and scope of His Messiahship. He disowned the popular view of His contemporaries who thought that the Messiah would deliver Israel from all her political enemies, particularly the

Romans, by military prowess, and rule the world as David's heir from Jerusalem. Instead, He would, as Isaiah foresaw, defeat the enemies of God's people by offering His life as a ransom for theirs; by paying the price to redeem them from the slavery of sin and death and eternal punishment in hell.

It is very significant that this is precisely how our Lord answered James and John, the sons of Zebedee, when, at the urging of their mother, they said to Him, 'Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.' They wanted authority and power to rule and have others to serve them, and probably did not at this time understand Christ's answer: 'You do not know what you ask. Can you drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' The word 'cup' is often a biblical expression for the lot that God apportions us in life, and the word 'baptize' was often used to describe someone submerged in debt. So what Jesus was asking them was: 'Can you bear the suffering that God has allotted to Me if I am to rule the world? Can you face being submerged in hatred, pain, death and damnation, as I must be if I am to be the Saviour of the world?' Our Lord saw Himself as the suffering Servant in Isaiah's songs and thus went on to issue this definitive statement to them: 'For even the Son of Man [who, in Daniel 7, is given glory and a kingdom that all peoples should serve Him] did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:37-39,45; Matt. 20:20-21; Dan. 7:13-14).

The emphasis is on the words, 'to serve' and 'to give'. The Son of God and the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. Although He was Lord of all, whom angels worshipped, He spent His life in service. He said, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work'; and again, 'I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me' (John 4:34; 6:38). He healed the sick, helped the needy and comforted the sad. In the streets and on the hills of Palestine He preached the good news of the kingdom of God and salvation. But above all, He gave His back to the smiters, His cheeks to those who plucked out the beard, His face to spitting, and His soul as an offering for sin (Isa. 50:6; 53:10; Matt. 26:67; John 19:1). Christ's penal substitutionary death on the cross at Calvary was the price He was willing to pay to ransom 'many' from the slave market of sin.

On the eve of His crucifixion, at the Last Supper, our Lord makes two further statements claiming the role of the Servant as His own. When He gave the cup of wine to His disciples to drink, He said, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26:27-28, ESV). The 'covenant' our Lord refers to here is not only the 'new covenant' prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31, but also to the 'covenant' of the Servant mentioned in Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8. Moreover, the words 'my blood ... which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' speak of the Servant who 'poured out His soul unto death ... and He bore the sin of many' (53:12).

The second statement alluding to the Servant that Jesus made that night, is recorded in Luke 22:37, 'For I say to you that this which is written must be accomplished in Me: "And He was numbered with the transgressors". For the things concerning Me have an end' [or fulfilment, ESV]. He was quoting from Isaiah 53:12 and claiming its fulfilment in His atoning death on the cross when He would be crucified between two thieves as a criminal bearing the sin of many. As on an earlier occasion, He used the word 'must': 'From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day' (Matt. 16:21; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22; 17:25). Why did our Lord say 'must'? He told His disciples that it was necessary because 'all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished' (Luke 18:31). And in Luke 22:37 Jesus pinpoints Isaiah as one of those prophets, and in particular his fourth Servant Song (53:12).

Clearly, then, Jesus saw Himself as the Servant in Isaiah's songs. To quote Henri Blocher, 'In them our Saviour found the blueprint of His mission. From them Jesus learned that He would have to suffer for us; that He would die for us, as though He were a criminal, under the weight of our sins. How holy the ground we tread when studying the songs! How unspeakably moving it is to imagine Jesus meditating upon those passages, and knowing that this was the Father's will and way for Him; that this Servant was none other than Himself.'<sup>2</sup>

### **The Apostles confirmed Jesus as the Servant in Isaiah's songs**

This is not surprising, as their Master and Teacher had identified Himself as the Servant prophesied in Isaiah's well-known Servant Songs, which were so perplexing to Jewish scholars both before and after Christ. Moreover, as He promised, Jesus sent them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to 'teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you' (John 14:26; 16:5-14).

Although Mark and Luke make no reference to the connection between Jesus and Jehovah's Servant in Isaiah (except for the teaching of Jesus that they record), Matthew, in his Gospel, makes two specific references to prophecies in the Servant Songs which were fulfilled in our Lord's ministry. The first occurs in Matthew 8:16-17, 'When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.'" It is a direct quotation from Isaiah 53:4, 'Surely He has borne our griefs [or pains] and carried our sorrows [or sickness].'

Matthew is saying that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy about the Servant in two ways. He fulfilled it first of all by sympathizing with those He met who were suffering pain and sickness, part of the curse of sin upon the world. Moreover, His sympathy was practical. He healed all who came to Him (Matt. 1:23; 4:23; 8:16; 9:35; Mark 1:34; Luke 1:40, and so on). But in the second place, Jesus chiefly 'bore our pains and carried our sickness' by bearing the curse of sin and death through His vicarious suffering for sinners on the cross. William Hendriksen says, 'Our physical afflictions must never be separated from that without which they never would have occurred, namely, our sins. Note how very closely the Isaiah 53:4,5 context connects these two; for verse 4, "Surely our diseases He has borne" ... is immediately followed by: "He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities."' <sup>3</sup> Sickness, physical and spiritual, will plague us until it is finally remedied by the return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age, when there 'shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain' (Rev. 21:4), when the curse itself will have been overthrown (Rev. 22:3).

The second quotation is in Matthew 12:14-21 where the apostle quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 in support of Christ's avoidance of ill-timed publicity or premature confrontation which would only speed up the efforts of the Jewish leaders to destroy Him before His ministry was completed. 'But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, how to destroy Him. Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed Him, and He healed them all and ordered them not to make Him known. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope"' (ESV).

Luke, indeed, does record the Spirit-inspired testimony of Simeon, a godly old man in Jerusalem who had been 'waiting' for the coming of the Messiah and been given the assurance by God that 'he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' When Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to the temple, Simeon identified the Christ Child with Isaiah's Servant when he held Jesus in his arms and said, 'Lord, ... my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles' (Luke 2:25-32). This is the very task Jehovah has commissioned His Servant to do: 'I the LORD ... will keep You and give You ... as a light to the Gentiles'; and again, 'I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles' (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

The apostle John also bears witness to this truth when he says that Jesus Christ is 'the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world', and records our Lord's claim to be 'the light of the world' (John 1:9; 8:12; 12:46). In addition, the apostle records the

testimony of John the Baptist, who when he saw Jesus, said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', a clear allusion to Isaiah 53:7-8. Another allusion to Jesus as the Servant of Jehovah is found in John 12:37-38, 'But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed",' quoting the fourth song (53:1).

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter calls Jesus 'God's Servant' four times (Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30). Later, in his first letter, Peter makes the identification more explicit by declaring God's Son to be the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Encouraging Christian servants to be submissive even to harsh masters, the apostle says:

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for it, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth [53:9]; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten [53:7], but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree [53:11], that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed [53:5]. For you were like sheep going astray [53:6], but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (1 Peter 2:20-25).

The apostle Paul also identifies our Lord Jesus Christ with the Servant in the songs of Isaiah. In Acts 13:46-47, he justifies the preaching of the gospel of salvation through Christ to the Gentiles on the basis of Isaiah 49:6, saying:

It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you [Jews] first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set You [the Servant] to be a light to the Gentiles, that You should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'

In Romans 10:16, Paul quotes from Isaiah 53:1 to show that the Servant knew that not all who heard the gospel would 'obey the gospel', and that is why He sorrowfully put the question to Jehovah: 'Lord, who has believed our report?' And again in Romans 15:20-21 the apostle vindicates his preaching to the Gentiles by using the words of Jehovah in Isaiah 52:15, 'But as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand"' (ESV).

Although Luke was not an apostle, he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write two books of the New Testament: the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Furthermore, what he wrote in both those books was infallibly true and 'profitable for doctrine' (2 Tim. 3:16). With regard to the doctrine that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messianic Servant in Isaiah 53, Luke records the evangelist Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53 the words of verses 7 and 8: 'He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away. And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.' Needing guidance, he said to Philip, "'I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?'" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him' (Acts 8:32-35).

Philip's conviction that Jesus is the Servant depicted in Isaiah 53 clearly reflects the belief of the early Christian church. They did not see Cyrus as the Servant of Jehovah, for the simple reason that though God used him to return His people to their homeland, he was not a believer. Of Cyrus, the Lord says, 'I have named you, though you have not known Me' (Isa. 45:4). Nor did the early Christians think that the nation of Israel is the Servant in Isaiah's four songs. Although ethnic Israel is indeed called God's servant eleven times (41:8-9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1,2,21; 45:4; 48:20), she is *not* the Servant in whom God 'delights' (42:1). Israel is a blind and deaf servant (42:18-20); the messianic Servant listens to God every morning and is not rebellious (50:4-5). Israel is a servant who has been justly punished for her disobedience and sin (40:2; 42:21-25); the Servant of Isaiah 53 is sinless, 'and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all' (vv. 6,8,9,11). There can be no mistaking of the one for the other. To do so would be to misread chapters 40 to 53.

As we have seen, the teaching of Jesus Himself and His apostles clearly identifies our Lord and Saviour, the God-man, with the sinless, suffering Servant of the songs of Isaiah, who dies as an offering for the sins of God's people. Indeed, these four songs or poems of Isaiah are probably the clearest and most complete picture of Messiah/Christ in the Old Testament, especially chapter 53. Jonathan Edwards notes, 'The main business of the prophets was to point out Christ and His redemption ... Some of them are very particular and full in their predictions of these things, and above all the prophet Isaiah, who is therefore deservedly called the evangelical prophet. He seems to teach the glorious doctrines of the gospel almost as plainly as the apostles did ... How plainly and fully does the prophet Isaiah describe the manner and circumstances, the nature and end, of the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ, in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his prophecy! There is scarce a chapter in the New Testament itself which is more full of it.'<sup>4</sup>

### **The context of the Servant Songs**

The biblical, historical and theological context of Isaiah's four Servant Songs is universal idol worship as outlined in chapters 40 and 41. All the nations in the world, even Israel, were guilty of idolatry. In 722 BC the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were carried into captivity by the Assyrians, for their worship of the gold calves at Dan and Bethel, as well as worshipping Baal and other gods from the surrounding nations (1 Kings 12:25-33; 2 Kings 17:7-23). One hundred or so years later, between 608 and 586 BC, the Southern Kingdom of Judah went into captivity into Babylon for the same reason (2 Kings 24:17-20; Jer. 2:4-13).

In Isaiah 40 God begins by showing His people, the Jews, the irrationality and absurdity of worshipping idols:

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? The workman moulds a graven image, the goldsmith overspreads it with gold, and the silversmith casts silver chains. Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution chooses a tree that will not rot; he seeks for himself a skilful workman to prepare a carved image that will not totter.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless [He is the only true God].

Scarcely shall they [the idols] be planted, scarcely shall they be sown, scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth, when He will blow on them, and they will wither, and the whirlwind will take them away like stubble.

'To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel: 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my just claim is passed over by my God'? (vv. 18-27).

Isaiah is prophesying to the Jews who will be taken captive to Babylon because of their idolatry. Instead of being humble and repentant, their mood is one of defiant, proud unbelief. They

accuse God of failing to deal fairly with them; of disregarding their just rights as His covenant people to be protected and delivered from their oppressors. The verbs are in the present tense. This is what they 'keep saying' and 'keep speaking'. Sin blinds (42:7), and there is no greater sin than idolatry, as we shall see below.

God's answer to the complaint of Israel that He was doing nothing to uphold 'justice' in the world, is to summon all the nations of the world to appear before Him in a court of law to prove who controls the world – Jehovah or the idol gods? Chapter 41 begins:

Be silent before me, you islands [distant lands]! Let the nations renew their strength [muster all their resources]! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment (NIV).

As the nations listen in silence, God makes His case first:

Who stirred up one from the east [Cyrus] whom victory meets at every step? He [God] gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. He pursues them and passes on safely by paths his feet have not trod. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning [into existence and into doing His will]? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he (41:2-4, ESV).

God answers the two questions ('Who stirred up?' and, 'Who has performed and done this?') by claiming, 'I am He.' Things do not happen in the world by chance. God is behind everything. History is not a cyclical recurrence of events, but a progression of events which God is directing toward a final and perfect consummation. Cyrus, the future founder of the great Persian empire, is the example God gives of His sovereign control of what happens on earth, for God is predicting here the 'stirring up' of Cyrus to do His bidding, at least 150 years beforehand. Although Cyrus is not named in this passage, he is named in chapter 44:38, 'Who says of Cyrus, "He is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, 'You shall be built,' and to the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid'"' (see also 45:1-7). Most modern commentators agree that 'the one from the east' is Cyrus (v. 2).

Prophecy, which is the prediction of events well before they happen, is proof positive of God's sovereignty over this world. Only God can predict the future, because He alone knows the future. And He alone knows the future, because every detail of it has been predetermined by Him. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, 'God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, feely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass' (III.1). In eternity past nothing forced God into making any of His plans, and all of them will be



carried out to the end as He has willed (Isa. 46:10; Eph. 1:11). This is what God means when He says, 'I, the LORD, am the first; and with the last I am He' (v. 4). God is 'the first', since, as Creator, He was there before He brought anything into being. He was the first cause. Moreover, God will remain in control of everything that happens until the 'last' event of history transpires.

What, then, will happen when God stirs up Cyrus to conquer the world? In chapter 41:5-7, Isaiah describes the reaction of the idol-worshipping nations. Although they will be reduced to fear and trembling, they will not seek after the true and living God. Instead, they will draw near to each other and their idols for support. God's people, Israel, on the other hand, can be assured of His help: 'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; they shall be as nothing, and those who strive with you shall perish ...' (vv. 8-16).

But God will not only protect Israel from her enemies, He will provide for all her physical needs. He says, in figurative language, 'When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none ... I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will plant in the wilderness the cedar and the acacia tree, the myrtle and the oil tree ...' (vv. 17-19). And what is the purpose of this outpouring of blessing upon His covenant people? It is to glorify God by showing the world that the Sovereign Creator of the universe is the only true God, who is to be trusted and loved: 'That they may see and know, and consider and understand together, that the hand of the LORD has done this, and the Holy One of Israel has created it' (v. 20). In other words, that all may know that God has stirred up Cyrus to 'thresh the mountains' (vv. 15-16), so that the 'worm Jacob' can return home.

The enquiry continues in verses 21-29. The argument here is that the idol-gods cannot predict the future or do anything to determine its course. It is directed at all idol-worshippers, including the idolaters in Israel.

'Present your case,' the LORD says. 'Bring forward your strong arguments,' the King of Jacob says. Let them bring forth and declare to us [God and His people] what is going to take place; as for the former events [past predictions made in the name of the idol-gods], declare what they were, that we may consider them, and know their outcome [whether they came true or not]; or announce to us what is coming. Declare the things that are going to come afterward, that we may know that you are gods; indeed, do good or evil [do anything to show you have life and power], that we may anxiously look about us and fear together. *Behold*, you are of no

account, and your work amounts to nothing; he who chooses you is an abomination (vv. 21-24, NASB, italics added).

The argument now switches from what the idols cannot do to what the LORD can do.

I stirred up one from the north [Cyrus], and he has come, from the rising of the sun [‘from the east’, v. 2], and he shall call on my name [by restoring the worship of Israel’s God at Jerusalem]; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who [among the idols] declared it from the beginning, that we might know, and beforehand, that we might say, ‘He is right’?

There was none who declared it ... I was the first to say to Zion, ‘Behold, here they are [the predictions about Cyrus]!’ and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news [Cyrus’ decree to rebuild the city]. But when I look [for anyone who could accurately predict as God has done], there is no one ... *Behold*, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing [they cannot accomplish anything]; their metal images are empty wind (vv. 25-29, ESV, italics added).

That is the context in Isaiah for chapters 42-66, and in particular the Servant Songs. It is the context of universal idolatry from the beginning of time, which is still true even now, bearing in mind that an idol does not have to be an actual image of wood, stone or metal. Anything can become an idol when our devotion and service to it takes the place of the devotion and service we owe to God. We can make idols of money, pleasure, fame, power, family, career, possessions, a political party, and a host of other things; which is why John Calvin said that ‘the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.’<sup>5</sup>

It is the *worst* of sins because it breaks ‘the first and great commandment’ which Jesus said was: ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’ (Matt. 22:35-38; Deut. 6:5). Moreover, it is the *mother* of all sins, for the apostle Paul says, ‘Claiming to be wise, they [humankind] became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity ...’ (Rom. 1:22-24, ESV). It is also what he means when he says, ‘For the love of money [making money an idol] is a root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Tim. 6:10).

It is important to understand that idolatry, deeply ingrained in fallen human nature, is the context of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. Indeed, the *condemnation* of idols in chapter 41:24 and 29, ‘Behold, you are nothing ... Behold, they are all a delusion’, prepares us for the *exclamation* in chapter 42:1, ‘Behold! My Servant.’ God’s remedy for humanity’s idolatry is His Servant; not

His servant Israel, who were 'deaf' to God's voice and 'blind' to His truth (41:8; 42:19; 44:21), but His messianic Servant, the 'Elect One in whom [His] soul delights' (42:1); who will 'establish justice in the earth' [i.e. justice for God who has been wronged (42:4)]; and be 'a light to the Gentiles' and God's 'salvation to the ends of the earth' (49:6); and 'shall justify many, for He will bear their iniquities' (53:11).

### **The name of God and its meaning**

In the Old Testament section of the English Bible, 'Lord' always has a capital 'L' when used of God to translate the Hebrew word *adonay*, meaning, lord or master. It occurs 1,300 times. The proper name for God occurs 6,700 times in the Old Testament and is translated in the Authorised Version as 'LORD' (capital letters), except in four places (Exod. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Isa. 12:2; 26:4) where God's name is rendered in the Authorised Version as JEHOVAH (LORD in the NKJV), which remained the traditional version which the church has used since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the four Servant Songs, the word 'LORD' in capitals is the only form of the divine name used, so a word of explanation is needed.

The Hebrew word is actually unpronounceable, being made up of only four consonants: *yhwh*. In all the existing Hebrew manuscripts the word has no vowel pointings, because after the exile in Babylon, the scribes believed that the divine name was too sacred to be pronounced. Technically, these four consonants are known as the 'tetragrammaton' (tetra, meaning 'four', and grammata, meaning 'letters'). Modern scholars believe that the missing vowels are 'A' and 'E', and therefore pronounce the word as *YAHWEH*.

The pronunciation of the sacred name as 'Jehovah' came about through a misunderstanding of the pointings found in the Massoretic text (the traditional Hebrew text with vowel pointings). 'The vowels of *adonay* (*a-o-a*) were placed under the tetragrammaton to remind the reader that he was not to pronounce *yhwh*, but instead was to read the word *adonay*. Christians who were unaware of this substitution read the vowels as if they actually belonged to *yhwh*, which resulted in the English form 'YeHoWaH' or 'JeHoVaH' (the *a* of *adonay* having been reduced to *e* under the *y* of *yhwh*):<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the editorial decision of substituting LORD for *yhwh* or of using Jehovah or Yahweh, the reader must keep in mind that although the name of God in the Old Testament is unpronounceable, a blessing is lost when no attention is paid to the difference between the use of a title (LORD) and the actual name of the God of Israel. Personally, it is the preference of the author of this book to use the time-honoured version of the divine name: 'Jehovah.'

Now Jehovah, as a label for God, was known to Abraham (Gen. 15:2) and was indeed used in worship before the flood: 'And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the LORD' (Jehovah, Gen. 4:26, cf. 9:26). It was not till Exodus 3, however, that the meaning of the divine name was made plain. Having received God's commission, at the burning bush, to lead His people out of Egypt, Moses asks God, 'When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you", and they say to me, "What is His name?" what shall I say to them?' The meaning of the divine name given to Moses was, 'I AM WHO I AM ... thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM [for short] has sent me to you"' (vv. 13,14).

As J.I. Packer explains, 'God's phrase-name is thus a proclamation of God's gracious sovereign self-sufficiency and self-consistency: He is free and independent; He acts as He pleases; He does what He wills; what He purposes and promises, that He also performs. Therefore Israel, to whom He extended this staggering promise of redemption, could rely on Him absolutely to do as He had said. Because the God of the promise is almighty to fulfil His word, He is also utterly trustworthy, for He is absolutely invincible ... The meaning of "Yahweh" [Jehovah] is that which was symbolised by the flame in the bush which did not need to feed on the wood of the bush. "Yahweh" [Jehovah] signifies an inexhaustible ruler – God of limitless life and power – a God, therefore, whom it is safe to trust at all times and in all places.'<sup>7</sup>

This exposition of the Servant Songs has been written primarily for devotional, rather than academic purposes. It does not spend much time on problematic issues, but seeks to go to the basic meaning of the text, and then make a suitable application of its truth to the reader. By God's grace and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, may something of the beauty and splendour of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Servant of Jehovah, be manifested to the reader; especially the wonder of His penal substitutionary death on the cross for sinners, and the glory of His exaltation to the right hand of God, 'till He has established justice/righteousness in the earth' (42:4). It is a lofty desire, but Jesus, the Christ, is worthy of everyone's wholehearted faith and adoration forever.