

“About Whom, May I Ask You?” (Acts 8:34): Isaiah’s Servant Songs in Luke-Acts

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The question asked by the Ethiopian Eunuch to Philip in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:34) is continually probed by scholars, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”¹ This simple question raises various issues. Do all four Isaiah’s Servant Songs refer to the same servant figure? If so, is it Israel? Is it a king (Cyrus perhaps)? Is it the prophet? Is it an historical individual or possibly an ideal person still to come, like a future Messiah? A definitive answer to the servant’s identification has not been reached.

This essay examines the four servant songs of Isaiah and the possible identity of the servant. While the servant’s identity is still a mystery to many biblical scholars, for Luke, Jesus of Nazareth is that messianic figure whose life and mission, especially his death, fulfill the messianic expectation described in the four servant songs of Isaiah. The question is: Was this aspect of servant Christology derived from Jesus’ self-understanding or was it introduced later by the early Christians, possibly by Luke, to make sense of Jesus’ tragic death? Before addressing this crucial question, it is necessary to briefly examine the content of the four servant songs.

¹ The passage that the eunuch is reading comes from Isaiah 53:7-8, which is part of the fourth Servant Song of Isaiah.

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

The four servant songs (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12) were first isolated from the rest of Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) by the German scholar Bernard Duhm in the late nineteenth century.² The publication of his commentary, *Das Buch Jesaia*, in 1892 has had profound influence on Isaiah scholarship.³ According to Duhm, each of these songs deals with a mysterious figure known as God's servant whose character and mission distinguish him from other servants in Isaiah 40-55.

The expression "servant of Yahweh" (Heb, *'ebed yhwh*), which is best translated as "servant of GOD,"⁴ is frequently found in the Old Testament as an honorable title attributed to prominent individuals, kings and prophets.⁵ They are called servants of GOD because they have obediently and faithfully accomplished the tasks entrusted to them. The title servant of GOD is a prominent concept in Isaiah 40-55. The word "servant" (*'ebed*) appears twenty-one times in these chapters of Isaiah (41:8, 9; 42:1, 19 [twice]; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21 [twice], 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5, 6, 7; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11; 54:17). The identity of the servants varies at different times. Sometimes the reference applies to Israel as the servant of GOD; at other times, the servant is identified as the prophet himself or even a gentile king (perhaps Cyrus, the king of Persia). In the case of the so-called Servant Songs (for example in 42:1; 49:3, 5, 6; 52:13; and 53:11), the identity of the figure is far from obvious.

First Song (Isa 42:1-4)

The first song begins with a solemn presentation of the servant. The servant is introduced by God as "my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him" (42:1a). The description

² The classification of these isolated texts as "songs" is really a misnomer, for these passages are more correctly identified by form critics as "poems," "speeches," or "oracles." For the sake of convenience and consistency, I will continue to call these passages "songs."

³ For a history of interpretation since Bernard Duhm, see the first part of Christopher R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 1-116.

⁴ Throughout this article, the title "GOD" (in caps) will be used to represent the divine name of YHWH. The purpose is to avoid using the sacred Hebrew name of GOD. To be more inclusive, the title "GOD" is used rather than the usual title "LORD." All Scripture citations are taken from the NRSV unless noted otherwise. For a study on the Servant of the LORD, see vanThanh Nguyễn, "Siervo de Yavé," in *Pasión de Jesucristo*, ed. Luis Diez Merino, Robin Ryan, and Adolfo Lippi (Madrid: San Pablo, 2015) 1201-1211.

⁵ For a list of individuals who are called "servant of GOD" in the OT, see Walther Zimmerli and Joachim Jeremias, "Pais theou," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 4:663-666.

demonstrates God's love and affection for the servant. The servant has been uniquely chosen and given spiritual empowerment. In him, God finds joy and delight. Once the servant has been rightfully introduced, the speaker, who is identified as God, reveals the servant's mission. The servant's primary task is to bring forth or establish justice (*mispat*) for the nations.⁶ He will not fail or be discouraged until it is fully achieved on earth.

The manner in which the servant will carry out his mission is clearly depicted. First, the servant will conduct his task in a quiet and unpretentious way, for "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street" (v. 2). Second, the servant will act with gentleness, careful not to harm the weakest of persons or things. The servant's tenderness is demonstrated by means of two metaphors: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (v. 3a). Third, the servant will patiently endure in his mission by not growing faint or being crushed "until he has established justice in the earth" (v. 4a). The description of perseverance in times of trial indicates that the servant will undergo personal suffering.

While the manner of the servant is modestly depicted, his character and role in this song connote hints of royalty. He is commissioned to "bring forth or establish justice to the nations." The task, at least, can be kingly. Furthermore, according to some commentators, verses 5-7, which are part of the first servant song, might refer to Cyrus, the Persian king who freed the exiled Jews and therefore fits the description of the one who will be a "light for the nations" (v. 6b), open the eyes of the blind and liberate prisoners from the dungeon (v. 7). Since Cyrus seems to be the subject of 41:25, which is situated only a few verses before the first servant song, the Persian king is a possible candidate. However, there are scholars who find it difficult to equate the mighty character of Cyrus with the humble servant of 42:1-4.⁷ The description of the character of Cyrus in its immediate context is often majestic and all powerful, one who will "trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay" (41:25b; see also 41:2, 45:1-4). In contrast, the portrait of the servant is of an unassuming and gentle figure, who will not raise his voice nor even break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick (42:2, 3). The identity of this figure could be Israel or Judah⁸ who is called, "my servant" in the preceding passage (41:8, 9), but it could also be the prophet whom God has chosen and endowed with

⁶ For a variety of possible meanings of *mispat*, see F. Duane Lindsey, *The Servant Songs: A Study in Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 43-45.

⁷ Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, "The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988): 86. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (Anchor Bible 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002), 300.

⁸ Hoppe (*Isaiah*, 112) suggests that the servant is Judah fulfilling its destiny as the light to the nations.

his Spirit. The identity of the servant however remains ambiguous but perhaps shall be made clearer in the second servant song.

Second Song (Isa 49:1-6)

Unlike the first servant song, in which God is the speaker, the servant himself is the speaker in the second servant song.⁹ The first section of the song (vv. 1-4) describes what the servant does. The servant addresses his message to all the nations who are living near and far, implying, perhaps, the whole human race. He pleads for their attention to listen to what he is about to say. Called by God while he was still in his mother's womb (v. 1b; cf. Jer 1:5), he has been equipped with a unique gift and capacity to deliver God's message. Even though God graciously assured him that he is the servant in whom God will be glorified (v. 3), the servant nevertheless laments the failure of his labor (v. 4a); yet he still has confidence in God's vindication and recompense (v. 4b). The second section of the song (vv. 5 and 6) describes the servant's two-fold mission and task. The servant's primary mission is to Israel, God's chosen people, for whom the servant has been commissioned since he was formed in his mother's womb (v. 5a). In this mission, he was to bring Israel (also known as Jacob) back and to gather them to God.¹⁰ The servant's efforts to call Israel to repentance and to spiritual renewal seemed to have been in vain as alluded to in verse 4. Nevertheless, his effort has not gone unnoticed in the sight of God (v. 5b). His disappointment in the mission to Israel is assuaged by God as "too light a thing" or "trifling" (v. 6a) in comparison to God's great plan. In the form of direct speech, God re-commissioned the servant to expand his mission saying, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6b). Thus, the servant's mission is now universal.¹¹ He is to be "a light to the nations" and to bring "salvation" to the ends of the earth.

Although the opening section unveils the identity of GOD's servant as "Israel" (49:3), some scholars question this association and even suspect the word "Israel" is a later interpolation.¹² While verse 3 explicitly identified the servant as Israel, we are told in verse 5 that the servant was given a mission to

⁹ Isaiah 49:1-6 contains several forms of speech. It might be described as a poem and/or an autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony, but definitely not a song. See John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55* (Vol. II; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 155.

¹⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 301.

¹¹ Robert Ellis, "The Remarkable Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-55," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 34 (1991), 22.

¹² Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 65.

Israel. Obviously, there is a contradiction here, for Israel cannot have a mission to itself. So, who really is the servant if the servant is not Israel? The best solution is to interpret the whole song, including the controversial identification in 49:3, as a reference to the prophet himself.¹³

Third Song (Isa 50:4-9)

As in the second song, the servant speaks in the first-person singular. This rare self-referential discourse, or more exactly monologue, is a reflection on the nature of his vocation and the mission for which the Lord GOD (or “*Yahweh Adonai*,” appearing four times in 50:4, 5, 7, 9) has commissioned him. The song can be divided into two parts. The first part of the song (vv. 4-7) focuses on his confidence in God’s assistance at times of suffering and affliction. The servant describes himself as one who has been given “the tongue of a teacher” (some commentators have “the tongue of disciples”), which means someone who repeats faithfully what has been learned. God has opened his ear so that he might listen to God’s words and has given him a well-trained tongue to comfort the weary. As a good disciple, the servant has learned to accept suffering and affliction without complaint or retaliation. He gives his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pluck his beard (v. 6). He does not even try to escape from the insulting spittle, but rather quietly accepts the insults and shame (v. 7). How is the servant able to endure such humiliation and affliction? The servant reveals that it is the Lord GOD who actually strengthens him in his suffering and preserves him in his disgrace. The second part of the song (vv. 8-9) expresses the servant’s confidence that the Lord GOD will vindicate him and justify him in the face of his enemies. Confident of God’s help and vindication, the servant defiantly declares: “Who will contend with me?” “Who are my adversaries?” “Who will declare me guilty?” The servant is confident that he will be vindicated by God and will be declared innocent.¹⁴

The third song contains no reference to the term servant (*‘ebed*). Nevertheless, its status as a servant song is not in question because of the dominant theme of suffering that is directly related to the other servant songs. As a committed student, the servant obediently listens to God’s words and then speaks words of comfort to the weary. Since the Lord GOD stands by his side to assist him in his suffering, the servant is able to patiently endure without resistance and is filled with confidence to declare that the Lord GOD will vindicate his innocence in the sight of his enemies. The personal language and the detailed

¹³ Wilcox and Paton-Williams, “Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah,” 91. See also Goldingay and Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 157-58.

¹⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 321.

description in the first-person singular do not seem to apply to Israel but rather to the prophet as the suffering servant of God.

Fourth Song (Isa 52:13—53:12)

The fourth servant song, which is the longest of the four servant passages and one of the most studied texts in the Old Testament,¹⁵ can be divided into three units.¹⁶ Encapsulated by two short speeches in which God is the speaker (52:13-15 and 53:11b-12), the middle section is spoken by an anonymous “we” (53:1-11a). The first speech (52:13-15) opens with words that echo the first servant song: “Behold, my servant” (cf. 42:1). In this divine presentation, God assures that the servant’s mission will be accomplished and exalted. Despite his terribly disfigured appearance, by which many nations will be startled (53:15), the suffering servant shall be glorious and exalted.

The speaker and the theme of the central section of this song (53:1-11a) are noticeably different than in the other two. The repetition of the “we” throughout the section indicates a new speaker(s), who represents a collective whole. The focus is not on the servant’s exaltation but on his humiliation and suffering. There is no “form or majesty” in his appearance (v. 2). His unattractiveness and misery caused many to despise and reject him (53:3). His affliction and infirmity were thought by all (even by the speakers) to be a punishment of God (v. 4). However, those who had once despised the servant came to the shocking realization that the servant did not suffer because of his own sins. Rather, it is for their iniquities that he was injured, and it was through his affliction that they are healed (vv. 4-5).

There is a unique element found only in this song. The servant suffers not just innocently but vicariously for others. His suffering actually has the power to atone for “the iniquity of us all” (v. 6). The manner in which the servant endured his suffering reflects the descriptions of the character found in the other songs. The servant suffered silently and submissively “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent” (v. 7).¹⁷ The speakers also make reference to the servant’s “grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich” (v. 9). Some scholars take this as an indication that the

¹⁵ See Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Trans. Daniel P. Bailey; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁶ For a detailed study of the concentric structure with the theme of exodus and new exodus as its center, see Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12): Poetry and the Exodus-New Exodus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994): 42-55. For an alternative chiasmic structure, see Goldingay and Payne, 275-77.

¹⁷ For a study on the theme of exodus and new exodus found in the fourth servant song, see Ceresko, “Rhetorical Strategy,” 47-50.

servant had already died or at least his death was imminent. Whatever the case might be, a humiliating death, one he was willing to die for others, is foreseen. The fourth song concludes with GOD as the speaker (53:11b-12). Similar to the opening speech, GOD again vindicates his servant.¹⁸ The servant is declared as God's righteous one (v. 11b) and ranked among the great ones because of his fidelity to the will of God. God promises to allot him "a portion with the great" (v. 12). While resurrection is not explicitly mentioned, his future reward is implied; furthermore, he will be an intercessor for those who turn to him.

What can we know about the identity of the servant of the fourth song? The song does not explicitly say who the servant is. However, of all the songs, this one gives us the most detailed description of the servant in the most personal language and style. Such personal language makes it difficult to see how Israel as a nation could be identified as the servant, especially the language about the servant's death in 53:8, 9, 12. Who then is the "he" that is frequently mentioned in the middle section of the song? It could be the prophet with whom the "we" sympathizes and remembers. Some scholars suggest that the "we" represents the nations and kings in 52:15 while others claim they are Israelites. A more likely possibility is that the "we" represents a group of disciples of the prophet who sought to reflect upon and interpret the mission and tragic death of the prophet. Consequently, the song would not be written by the prophet but by his followers about the prophet.¹⁹ This explains why the form of the song has a combination of thanksgiving, liturgical, and funeral motifs.

Who Is the Servant?

Biblical scholars have not fully reached a consensus concerning the identity of the servant.²⁰ However, various interpretations and personalities have been

¹⁸ Michael L. Barré argues that GOD is the one who inflicted suffering upon the servant for God's mysterious purpose. See Michael L. Barré, "Textual and Rhetorical-critical Observations on the Last Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000): 11-23.

¹⁹ Ceresko, "Rhetorical Strategy," 44-47.

²⁰ For a detailed study of the theories and history of the various interpretations, see North, *Suffering Servant*. For a concise summary of the discussion up until the mid-1980s, see Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 9-17. For a more current discussion, see William H. Bellinger, Jr., and William R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998). This volume, which is a collection of papers from a colloquy at Baylor University, examines a variety of perspectives from experts in their field including articles from Otto Betz, Morna D. Hooker, Mikeal C. Parsons, Daniel P. Bailey, and N. T. Wright, just to name a few.

proposed.²¹ We will examine two proposals, first the servant as a representative figure and second as some mysterious historical person.

A Collective Figure—Israel

One popular view considers the servant as Israel, which represents a collective personality rather than an individual.²² Perceptive readers will notice that Israel is repeatedly designated as God's servant in Isaiah. Furthermore, in the second song the figure is explicitly identified by God who says, "You are my servant Israel" (49:3). Moreover, the servant's portrait and character in the four songs remarkably resemble Israel as a whole, which is also despised, rejected and humiliated by its enemies. As noted earlier, the personal and individual descriptions of the servant throughout the four songs, particularly in the fourth song (Isa 53), are quite distinct and do not fit with the historical Israel. As a result, some scholars shift their focus from an historical Israel to an ideal Israel. While the collective interpretation has good basis in the context of Isaiah and has appealing features, the identification of the servant as Israel is not without weakness and difficulty.

A Mysterious Historical Figure

Some scholars attempt to identify the suffering servant with an individual person rather than a collective group. Various past, present, or future figures have been proposed. One noticeable historical figure who has been considered as the servant is king Cyrus of Persia. The royal allusions and images that are found, especially in the first servant song (Isa 42:1-4) and its surrounding context, have led some to conclude this figure is the foreign king who seemed to fulfill Israel's hopes and dreams when he liberated God's people. As noted earlier, this identification poses many difficulties and has been rejected by most scholars today.

Another possible historical figure is the prophet Jeremiah. The prophet and the servant seem to have much in common, for example, their call, mission to the nations, and suffering (see Jer 1:4-5; 11:19; 18:19-20). In reality, however, Jeremiah's life, mission, and particularly his death, which can hardly be considered as an exaltation, do not match well with that of the servant.

²¹ Ellis ("Remarkable Suffering Servant," 25-29) offers a very fine summary and evaluation of the major approaches to the question of the servant's identity.

²² For Hoppe, the servant is Judah. In commenting on Isaiah 42:1-4, Hoppe writes, "It is most likely that the servant is Judah fulfilling its destiny to be the light to the nations, bringing about the victory of justice" (*Isaiah*, 112).

Other scholars claim that the figure in the songs is not from the past but is actually the prophet himself, namely Isaiah, who gives an autobiographical report about his own prophetic mission and the affliction that he endured in trying to accomplish God's will. There are others, however, who propose that the servant was an anonymous contemporary of the prophet, whom the prophet considered to be the Messiah. This messianic figure suffered and died vicariously for the sake of others. For New Testament writers, specifically Luke, this messianic figure is none other than Jesus Christ, whose life and mission, especially his death, fulfill the messianic expectation described in the four servant songs of Isaiah. The question is: Was this aspect of servant Christology derived from Jesus' self-understanding or was it introduced later by the early church, possibly by Luke, to explain Jesus' tragic death?

Making Sense of Christ's Horrific Death

There are four references ascribing to Jesus the title of the servant of God in the Acts of the Apostles (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). All of them are found in the speeches of Peter. In the sermon at Pentecost, Peter begins by confessing to the Jerusalem crowds saying, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus" (Acts 3:13) and ends the sermon testifying that it is God who "raised up his servant" (3:26). Later in Acts, Peter and the community who had just witnessed the power of God at work in their lives, fearlessly proclaimed that Jesus is God's "holy servant" (4:27, 30) who has been predestined to suffer, die and rise. These confessions by Peter possibly reflect an early Christian Christological *kerygma* or proclamation concerning Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah.

The most explicit reference to Jesus as the suffering servant is found in the passage of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). In this passage, the eunuch asked Philip to interpret the fourth servant song of Isaiah and to identify to whom the prophet is referring, "about himself or about someone else?" (Acts 8:34). The passage that the eunuch is reading comes from Isaiah 53:7-8 (found in the LXX), in which Luke quotes, "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth" (Acts 8:32-33). Philip clearly identifies that Jesus is the servant about whom the prophet Isaiah has spoken. The Ethiopian Eunuch, who was likely a marginal Jew rather than a Jewish proselyte or a Gentile, responded favorably to Philip's interpretation of Scripture and requested to be baptized immediately.

Even before Philip's Christological confession in Acts, Luke had already identified Jesus as the suffering servant of God in his gospel. Luke made many indirect references to the servant songs at various important events in the life of Jesus.²³ Simeon's canticle in Luke 2:29-32 speaks about having seen God's salvation and being a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. The prophetic quotation is a combination of texts taken from the servant songs and other sections of Isaiah (42:6; 49:6; 52:10; cf. 46:13). At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22; cf. Mark 1:11). This divine proclamation echoes Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, the first servant song.

A similar divine pronouncement and revelation occurs at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:35; cf. Mark 9:7). As one who is anointed by the spirit to announce the good news to the poor, to cure the sick, to restore sight to the blind and to liberate the oppressed, Jesus' life and ministry according to Luke fulfills the words of Isaiah 42:1-4 (see Luke 4:16-21; 7:22). Jesus repeatedly teaches the importance of humble service (Luke 4:39; 9:46-48; 17:5-10). He even describes himself as a servant (22:27) and demands that the disciples also be servant leaders (22:26).

On the night before the crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples, "For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed, what is written about me is being fulfilled" (Luke 22:37). The scripture passage that Jesus was quoting comes from Isaiah 53:12. Although Jesus did not recite the latter part of verse 12 that mentions the servant who "bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors," that Jesus quoted directly from the fourth servant song indicates that he understood his passion and death in the light of the whole passage.²⁴ It is very possible that the fulfillment formula used by Jesus in Luke 22:37 could confirm Jesus' self-identification with the suffering servant of God as described in Isaiah. However, there is no absolute certainty that Jesus cited Isaiah 53 or saw his mission and death as fulfilling the redemptive work of Isaiah's suffering servant.²⁵ It is likely that Luke has inherited the servant Christology from the early

²³ There are two direct quotations where Matthew claimed that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Matthew 8:17, the evangelist cites Isaiah 53:4 and in 12:17-21 he quotes Isaiah 42:1-4. In John 12:38, the Fourth Evangelist also cites Isaiah 53:1, claiming that Jesus fulfills the mission of Isaiah.

²⁴ Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 5.

²⁵ For a view suggesting that Isaiah 40-55 as a whole was thematic for Jesus' ministry and kingdom announcement, see N. T. Wright, "The Servant and Jesus: The Relevance of the Colloquy for the Current Quest for Jesus," 281-297. For studies that support Jesus' own understanding of his mission and death in terms of the suffering servant of Isaiah, see Peter Stuhlmacher, "Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, MI:

church and developed it further to explain and make sense of the scandalous death of Jesus the Christ.²⁶

The author of the gospel of Mark seems to have been the first evangelist to make the connection between the life and death of Jesus and the suffering servant of Isaiah. Jesus' three passion predictions about the Son of Man who will be handed over, crucified and rise again on the third day (Mark 8:31-33; 9:29-31; 10:32-34, and parallel passages in Matthew and Luke) echo the life and mission of the servant song, particularly from the fourth song. In his teaching, Jesus even portrays himself as a servant saying, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). Many of the words and phrases of Jesus in the institution narrative at the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-25 and parallels) reflect direct influences from the servant songs. Words such as "new covenant," "forgiveness of sins," and "ransom for many," have clear allusions to the vicarious suffering of the fourth servant song (Isa 53:10, 12). Finally, the manner in which Jesus suffered and died (Mark 10:34; 15:19; Matt 27:30 and parallels) is strikingly similar to the descriptions of the suffering servant of Isaiah. Following closely Mark's gospel, Matthew expanded Mark's allusions and references by citing two formula quotations to demonstrate that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah (see Matt 8:17 citing Isa 53:4 and Matt 12:17-21 citing Isa 42:1-4).

The Gospel of John gives some additional allusions to the servant songs in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist's testimony concerning Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; see also 1:36) alludes to the fourth song where the servant is "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isa 53:7). Interestingly, Jesus died at the moment when the sacrificial lamb is slaughtered in the temple. The Johannine motif of "lifting up" (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34) reflects also the description of the exaltation of the servant in Isaiah 53:13. According to John, the explanation for people's disbelief and their rejection of the Son of God is that it fulfilled the prophetic oracle of Isaiah 53:1. This fulfillment prophecy is directly quoted in John 12:38. In short, for the fourth evangelist as well as for the Synoptic writers, Jesus is the perfectly obedient son and servant of God who fulfills the ideal image of the suffering servant of Isaiah.

Eerdmans, 2004) 147-162, and Lindsey, *Servant Songs*, 139-45. For a synthesis of the different views, see Otto Betz, "Jesus and Isaiah 53," in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer, (HarrisburgPA: Trinity Press), 70-87.

²⁶ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Anchor Bible 31; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 414 and Donald L. Jones, "The Title 'Servant' in Luke-Acts," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1984), 148-165.

Nevertheless, the earliest Christian writer who associated Christ's life and death on the cross as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy seems to have been the apostle Paul.²⁷ Writing in the mid-50s, Paul proclaims and confesses to the Philippians the true nature of Jesus Christ who though in the form of God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave [servant]" (Phil 2:7).²⁸ There are other Pauline references that indicate that Paul was not only familiar with the servant of God motif but moreover interpreted Jesus' life and especially his death as an atonement for the sins of many, which parallels the vicarious suffering servant of the fourth servant song (see especially 1 Cor 15:3-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 4:25; 10:16; 15:21).

In the early second century C.E. during a time of intense persecution of Christians in Asia Minor, the author of First Peter also interprets Jesus' death as the messianic fulfillment of the suffering servant of Isaiah. First Peter makes plenty of allusions to the fourth servant song (see 1 Pet 2:22-24). One interesting element that is also found in First Peter is that the author interprets the suffering Christ as a prefiguration of the suffering Christians of the second century. The author of First Peter encourages the persecuted Christians in this way: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps" (2:21). Similarly, the author of the letter to the Hebrews views Christ's death as a redemptive offering "to bear the sins of many" (Heb 9:28).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that while it is possible that Jesus could have viewed his life and mission in connection with the suffering servant of Isaiah, there is no concrete proof that it actually originated with Jesus' self-understanding. It is possible that the Christological interpretation of the servant songs might have been conceived by the earliest Christians soon after Jesus' resurrection (as attested by Peter and Philip in Acts) to explain and make sense of Christ's cruel and tragic death. Nonetheless, Luke was hardly the first evangelist to use the servant Christology to explain the scandal of the cross since this interpretation had already been developed in the gospel of Mark, which Matthew also retained and expanded. Based on the literary evidence that we have gathered, the apostle Paul was likely the earliest Christian writer to have employed the

²⁷ Hooker is convinced that the use of Isaiah 53 to interpret Jesus' mission began with Paul ("Did the Use of Isaiah 53," 103).

²⁸ It is possible that the Philippian Hymn in 2:6-11 was an early Christian hymn that Paul had received and quoted here.

servant Christology to explain both the scandal of the cross and Jesus Christ's tragic death. Consequently, Paul's servant Christology might have influenced the thoughts of the evangelists and later Christian writers.