

# Isaiah's Servant of Yahweh and Christian Mission in Luke-Acts

*SPS Presentation: Pentecostal Mission at 2000*

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The Christian church has always recognized that the Servant of Yahweh mission in the Servant Songs of Isaiah 42-53 is fulfilled in Jesus, according to the New Testament. What is *not* so widely recognized is: 1) that Isaiah's Servant of Yahweh is Israel, according to the book of Isaiah itself, and 2) that the Servant's mission is to be fulfilled by the church, according to the New Testament.

More than anywhere else in the New Testament, it is in Luke-Acts that we most clearly see the mission of Yahweh's Servant in Isaiah fulfilled not only in Jesus, but also in the mission of the early church. This paper seeks to uncover biblical support for pentecostal Mission at 2000 from the mission of Isaiah's Servant of Yahweh.

## I. The Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah

Within that majestic portion of Isaiah which scholars often refer to as "Second Isaiah," we have what are commonly known as "Servant Songs." Though delimitations of the songs vary somewhat among scholars, the following are often identified as the songs: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.<sup>1</sup>

*Who is this Servant according to Isaiah?* We need to observe two facts:

1. The servant is *collective* Israel, and thus referred to in the singular. We see this even prior to the songs in 41:8-10 ("But you, Israel, my servant . . . I have chosen you [singular in Hebrew]. . . Surely I will uphold you" [singular]). The first "*song*" (42:1-4) likewise speaks of the Servant as being "upheld" and "chosen" by Yahweh (vs. 1). In this song the singularity of the Servant is stressed with the third person singular pronouns. The plurality of Israel is linked with the "Servant" (singular) in 43:10 ("You" [plural] are My witnesses . . . and My servant whom I have chosen"). According to 42:18-19 the Servant is blind and deaf, which certainly fits Israel historically in the O.T. (cf. 43:9)!

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<sup>1</sup> At times "Servant song" references may exceed these conservative boundaries. This is particularly true for us with 42:1-4, as vs. 6-7 clearly refer to the Servant also. It appears that Isa. 61:1-3 may well be considered a Servant text as well. See note 6 below.

2. Collective Israel is narrowed down to a group or one *within* Israel. In the second song (49:1-6), the Servant Israel (vs. 3) has a ministry of restoration *to* Israel (vs. 5), as well as to the nations (vs. 6). In the last song (52:13-53:12) the Servant's ministry is both to the nations (52:15) and to Israel (53:4-6). But the vicarious suffering of the Servant is so described that the singularity of the Servant is most prominent. The silence, the death, the burial of the Servant (53:7-9) lend themselves to seeing a singular personage here.

John Bright has commented on the fluidity of the Servant idea in these passages. He adds: "But at all times the Servant is described in individual terms. And it is clear that sometimes this figure overshoots all that Israel, all that the true Israel, all that any individual in Israel ever was, and becomes a description of an ideal figure. He is the coming Redeemer."<sup>2</sup>

*What may we learn about the mission of the Servant?* We may note three aspects.

1. The power of Yahweh through the anointing Spirit accomplishes the tasks. "I have put My Spirit upon Him," in 42:1c, precedes the accomplishments of the Servant, as these are stated in verses 2-4.
2. The Servant becomes a "covenant" to His people and a "light to the nations" (42:6; cf. 49:6). As the Servant engages in a quiet and compassionate ministry, the establishment of judgment/justice among the nations is emphasized (42: 2-4).<sup>3</sup> The salvation of Yahweh is thus to be worldwide (49:6). The idea of establishing "justice" is synonymous with that of Yahweh's "law" in verse 4.<sup>4</sup>
3. The suffering of the Servant is apparently seen in Isaiah 50:6; and it becomes vicarious on behalf of his people in 52:13-53:12. However death issues forth in victory, as his days are "prolonged" in (53:10).

## II. The Identity and Mission of the Servant in Luke-Acts

It is widely recognized that Luke is the theologian of "salvation-history." He is distinctly concerned to demonstrate the continuity of the Christian faith with what we call the Old Testament. He does this in narrative form in Luke-Acts. The first Christians are clearly Jewish. The speeches in both Luke and Acts reflect this continuity, with significant references to the Old Testament. In such passages of Luke-Acts "Servant" texts are interpreted in terms of both Jesus and the church in mission. I shall also seek to show that Luke's version of the "Great Commission" (Lk. 24:44-48) forms a critical link

<sup>2</sup> *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 150.

<sup>3</sup> Mishpat (Heb.) for "justice" points to the idea that God has revealed the right way for men to live together as brethren in peace and concord, George A. F. Knight, *Servant Theology: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40-55* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. Ernest Wright, *Isaiah*, The Layman's Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1964), 105. Wright adds: "Justice" here is identical with "the righteousness of God; that is, God's reaching down in human affairs in order to save those who are lost," *ibid.*

between the Servant mission of the earthly Jesus and that subsequently of His apostles. By implication, this commission becomes the Servant mission of the church in union with its Lord.

*First, the Servant is Jesus in Luke-Acts*

Curiously, the Servant per se is more explicitly identified as Jesus in Acts than in the Gospel of Luke. The term *pais* (meaning "child" or "servant") is used of Jesus in Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30 in ways that parallel the same term in the Isaiah Servant songs. In 3:26 the Servant (Jesus here) is sent *first* to Israel (as apparently in Isa. 49:6). Acts 4:27 refers to Jesus as the "anointed" Servant, as in Isaiah 42:1 ("I have put My Spirit upon Him"), a clear reference to Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21-22). This Acts passage refers to the rejection and suffering of Jesus, which is elaborated upon in Acts 8:32-35, with Philip explaining to the Ethiopian eunuch the fulfillment of Isaiah 53 in Jesus.

In Luke's Gospel the only use of the term "Servant" in relation to the Isaiah songs identifies the Servant as Israel. But it is noteworthy that this is in the context of help coming to Israel (the Servant) through Jesus (cf. Mary's Magnificat, Lk. 1:46-55 with vss. 39-45). Could this be an implicit reference to Luke's "Servant" being one who is within Israel bringing deliverance to Israel (cf. Isa. 49:3, 6)?

In Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:67-79 (the Benedictus, as it is called) John is to prepare the Lord's way in which "darkness" will be dispelled (vs. 79), obviously through the mission of Jesus. This blessing is for Israel ("His people," vs. 77) according to the prophecy. This harks back to the Servant's mission as described in Isaiah 42:6-7, in which the Servant is to open blind eyes and deliver from "darkness," although there the Servant is a light "to the nations." In Simeon's inspired exclamation in Luke 2:25-32, Jesus is to be a "light of revelation to the Gentiles" (vs. 32). Simeon follows with: "And the glory of Thy people Israel," perhaps an inference of the Servant's mission to Israel.

In Paul's defence before Herod Agrippa in Acts 26, he states that "the Christ," according to "the Prophets and Moses," was by reason of His resurrection to "proclaim light" both to Israel and to the Gentiles (vss. 22-23). We see here again an indirect reference to Isaiah's Servant mission (cf. Isa. 42:6d; 49:6). This seems clear in light of Luke's earlier explicit reference to Paul's mission in relation to Isaiah 49:6 (cf. Acts 13:46-47).<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that the Servant mission is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, according to Luke.<sup>6</sup> But Luke says more than this. He sees the Servant mission extended through the outreach of the early church. We shall now observe just how Luke shows this.

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<sup>5</sup> In anticipation of our next consideration, Paul on this same occasion refers to his *own* mission in terms clearly reminiscent of Isa. 42:6-7, that is, "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God" (vs. 18). He refers to the Gentiles and possibly also to Israel here (cf. vs. 17).

<sup>6</sup> Luke's programmatic use of Isa. 61:1-2a in Luke 4:18-19 is significant. Although this Isaiah passage is not usually considered a "Servant Song," the themes here of anointing and of a delivering ministry are consonant with Isa. 42:1-4, and especially if we see 42:7 as an extension of that ministry. Luke clearly sees Jesus fulfilling the Servant mission.

### *The Servant mission as fulfilled in the church*

The text that calls out loudest to us is Acts 13:46-47. In a bold way Luke has Paul and Barnabas as recipients of the Servant mission mandate according to Isaiah 49:6. Paul says that *they* have been commissioned by Yahweh. Paul says: "For the Lord has commanded *us* (my emphasis), " meaning at least himself and Barnabas. What immediately follows is the Isaiah text: "I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth." This is a critical text in Acts because it concludes an extensive reference to Paul's synagogue preaching (in Pasidian Antioch) in which Paul responds to Jewish rejection of his gospel by "turning to the Gentiles" (vs. 46). (Paul's seeing *himself* as fulfilling the Servant mission may be profitably compared with his testimony in Acts 26:17-18. Here Paul recounts how the risen Jesus told him that he was to be instrumental in turning Gentiles from darkness to light.) From Acts 13:46-47 on, it is the Gentiles in Acts who comprise most of the fruit in the Pauline mission. Paul still goes to the synagogue (in Thessalonica, 17:1-3, in Corinth, 18:1-4, and at Ephesus, 19:8), but the success of the mission is predominately with the Gentiles.

Acts concludes with a final word of Jewish rejection of the gospel and the offer of salvation to the Gentiles (28:17-28), as Paul is now in Rome. It is clearly Luke's purpose to show that salvation-history is to expand into all the world. This worldwide mission is actually what Luke has at the beginning of Acts. In 1:8 it is not only to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, but "to the remotest part of the earth" that witness to the Lord Jesus is to go. In 1:8 Isaiah's Servant mission is evident in two ways: 1) the mission is to be accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Isa. 42:1), 2), the mission is worldwide (cf. Isa. 49:6).

Thus, it is evident from Acts that the Servant mission is fulfilled not only in Jesus but also in the outreach of the early church.

### *Luke's "Great Commission" as a Bridge from Jesus to the Church*

There are four ways in which we may see continuity between Isaiah's Servant Mission and Luke 24:44-49. Here we see Luke relating the Isaiah message to Jesus, but then linking the Jesus mission with what His eleven apostles were to do.

1. The Prophetic word of the sufferings and resurrection of the Christ (vss. 44-46) coincide with Isaiah's fourth Servant song (52:13-53:12). The Servant is to be the *suffering* Servant, but with victory following.
2. The message of repentance and forgiveness of sins "to all the nations," starting from Jerusalem (Lk. 24:47), links with the message of judgement/justice in conformity with Yahweh's law for all *the nations*, that is the Gentiles (*ta ethne*, same noun in the LXX for Isa. 42:1, 6; 49:6). "Forgiveness" is implied in the Servant's redemptive suffering wherein he "justifies" many (Isa. 53:11-12). According to Luke it is righteousness with forgiveness among the Gentiles that the risen Christ ordains to be

proclaimed. This is exactly what is to result from the Pauline mission, with repentance and forgiveness of sins being critical parts of the apostolic message (cf. Acts 13:38; 17:30; 20:21; 26:18, 20).

3. The servant messengers are in fact "witnesses" (Gr. *martures*) of Christ's sufferings, resurrection, and commission to proclaim the good news (Luke 24:48). In Isaiah 43:10, 12 and 44:8 (with vs. 1) it is the collective Servant (i.e. Israel) to whom Yahweh says: "'You are My witnesses.'" (The LXX has the same Greek word in the Isaiah passages.) It is Isaiah's Servant that is to proclaim the acts of the true God to the heathen. These acts have now been wondrously accomplished in the redemptive sufferings and resurrection of the Christ. His apostles are to be "witnesses" to what has now been gloriously realized in fulfillment of the prophetic hope. In Acts the apostles bear "witness" to this resurrection (see 1:8 with 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:30-32; 10:40-41; 13:30-31). Significantly, the apostle Paul is also to be a "witness" to what he has seen, heard, and to what Jesus would yet show him (Acts 22:15; 26:16).
4. The apostles are to be "clothed with power from on high" before beginning their mission (Lk. 24:49). This "promise" of power from the Father for mission is repeated in Acts 1:8 and fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). This corresponds to Yahweh putting his Spirit "upon" the Servant (Isa. 42:1). As we have noted, this was fulfilled at Jesus baptism, and He subsequently ministered in the power of that Spirit (Lk 4:14-15; cf. Matt. 12:28). But in Acts the anointing of the Spirit becomes part of Christian initiation in that it is to be part of the water baptism event or at least is to follow immediately water baptism for new believers (cf. 2:38 with 19:5-6). In the case of Paul, see Acts 9:17-18 with 22:16. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at His baptism seems to function in Acts as a paradigm for early Christian initiatory experience.<sup>7</sup>

Thus at four crucial points there is correspondence between Isaiah's Servant and Luke's version of Jesus' commissioning of His apostles.

### III. Conclusions for Christian Mission Today

First, Luke writes not only as a historian, but as a theologian, with a message for the church of his day.<sup>8</sup> His message through the Spirit concerns what God was doing in the time of the earthly Jesus and His apostles. But the reason he writes is to inform believers subsequently (or potential believers, cf. Lk. 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1) what God was yet about. The worldwide gospel mission was to continue to occupy the followers of Jesus until His return (Acts 1:6-11). When Luke writes, this mission is still in process, as it is in our

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 8:14-17 and 10:44-48 are exceptional situations, as the text of Acts itself indicates (cf. 8:16 and 10:47).

<sup>8</sup> As is frequently held in New Testament studies today, I see Luke writing most likely in the '70's or '80's. Luke closes with Paul in Rome in concert with his concern to emphasize the worldwide spread of the gospel. Luke's first concern is not to present a biography of Paul. For discussion of the issues, cf. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible, v. 31, ed. W. F. Albright and D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 51-55.

day, and will be unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Servant mission is for us today, as it was for the early church.

Secondly, the fact that the Servant mission was first fulfilled in Jesus has made Him an Exemplar par excellence for His disciples in certain ways. (Even as Jesus did not embody Isaiah's Servant in every respect--Jesus was not blind and deaf--so Jesus' disciples may not embody the Servant Jesus in every respect. But the following seem to hold true.)

1. Even as Jesus was effective through the anointing Spirit, so His disciples would be effective in mission through the anointing Spirit. Acts makes this very clear. If we are to be effective in fulfilling the Servant mission, we too need the Spirit's anointing for the task!
2. Even as Jesus was the *suffering* Servant, so disciples in mission are likewise called to suffer. Again, Acts clearly shows this (e.g. 5:41; 7:58-60; 11:19; 13:50; 16:22-24; 20:17-19). Luke's Gospel likewise establishes the suffering motif (cf. 9:21-26=Matt. 16:21-27=Mk 8:31-38; and especially 21:12-19). This is evidently a part of the Servant mission.<sup>9</sup>
3. A humble, selfless, caring kind of mission characterizes the Servant mission. This is to be noted in Isaiah 42:2-4, and it was surely true of Jesus' mission as He had compassion of those without a shepherd (cf. for example Mk. 6:34; 8:2-3. This also characterized the Pauline mission according to Acts (20:17-35). Surely Servant ministry today must reflect this quality of caring ministry, putting the good of those served ahead of one's own personal gain.

Finally, it is the *Jesus* mission that the church is to undertake. Not only is the church to emulate Jesus in its mission, it is to understand itself as the channel through which the risen Jesus Himself is continuing His own mission!<sup>10</sup> This has important interdenominational/ecumenical implications for our relationships with others who may not belong to our church or denomination, but who also are faithful participants in the Jesus mission.

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<sup>9</sup> This seems to be the sense in which Paul says that he is "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions," as he rejoices in his sufferings (Col. 1:25).

<sup>10</sup> This may be a point by Luke in Acts 1:1 ("all that Jesus *began* to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up" (emphasis mine). Commenting on the verse, F. F. Bruce says: "Luke presents one continuous story of Jesus, telling how he worked first on earth and then from heaven." He adds that our verb "is emphatic here, and should not be regarded merely as a semitizing auxiliary," *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 98. Cf. Acts 2:33 (Jesus "pours forth" the Holy Spirit); 2:47 (the Lord adds to the church daily); 9:5-6 (Jesus arrests Saul); 16:14 (the Lord "opens" Lydia's heart); 18:9-10 (the Lord promises Paul His presence in ministry at Corinth). Miracles of healing, exorcisms, bestowal of salvation all occur in the Name of Jesus (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:12, 30; 16:18; 19:3-5).

