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# The problem of suffering in Deutero-Isaiah

Senior Thesis.

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"The Problem of Suffering in Deutero-Isaiah."

To Professor A. C. Knudson.

# Problem of Suffering in Deutero- Isaiah.

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# The Problem of Suffering in Deutero- Isaiah.

The great prophet of the exile might well be called the prophet of comfort and inspiration. His timely message was calculated to give courage and hope to a distressed people. This was the precise message they needed, as we can gather from various passages. Jerusalem was evidently in ruins and the surrounding country a desert. (44, 26; 51, 3; 52,9). In 54;1 the city is compared to a barren woman forsaken by her husband, and in verse 11 it is described as " afflicted, tossed with tempest, and

not comforted". Violence had been meted out to many of those in exile as we learn from 51;14 and 52;1-2. Famine and slaughter had been the lot of many while others had been robbed and plundered and constantly exposed to the contempt and cruelty of their masters. (41;11, 51;7-23).

We learn from 43;20 that the scene of their suffering was Babylon and according to 40;27 they had become despondent and skeptical. Suffering had broken their spirits and they lived in constant fear. While in this apparently hopeless condition the welcome voice of the prophet of hope and encouragement

cries out, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem; and cry unto her that her time of service is accomplished."

An inspiring outlook is described by this prophet. "The captive exile shall speedily be loosed". (51;14) A deliverer is to be "raised up in righteousness;" and ~~Jehoveh~~ future will be the antithesis of the past.

The Cause of Suffering.

The prophet is fully conscious of his mission to comfort th faint-hearted and encourage the unbelieving and " his own unshaken confidence in the God of Israel as the God of the whole earth makes him the first of universalistic theologians, but a theologian "madeby the heart rather than by the intellect". Nevertheless, he attributes the suffering of the people of Israel to their sin. In 42;24 we read that Jehovah gave Israel to the robbers because of sin and disobedience; 46;3 and

44;22 also support this contention. Their is very little evidence that the prophet thought his people worthy of any great divine favor, but rather the reverse. They had no merits of their own. Yahweh had been burdened with their transgression and it was for this reason that punishment had been meted out. He sympathized with them in their affliction and his interest caused Him to bring deliverance to them.

Moreover, the relation of Yahweh to Israel was peculiar. Israel was his servant (41;8) who had

been especially chosen. The bond between them was as binding as the marriage relation, 54;6, and Yahweh was expecting Israel to be His witness and spread abroad divine truth.

Thus, while their punishment and suffering was great, it was the result of their own wilful disobedience. They had sinned in spite of the fact that Yahweh loved them. The past dealings of Yahwah had not been appreciated by Israel. She had been deaf, blind, and obstinate (42;13), yet the infinite love of Yahwah will compel him to bring home His

scattered children(47;1-7). Because of his goodness and grace Israel's deliverance from this unenviable condition will be more wonderful than that from Egypt, 47;14.

Again the suffering will have a beneficial effect upon the afflicted people. They will be purified and refined in the "furnace of affliction"; the dross of insincerity and self-will will be purged away, and the people will emerge from the trial fit vessels for their Master's use. They will, after the refining, be ready to undertake the

work for which they were being prepared. Jehovah's long- cherished plans for them will be executed and they will fully understand His will. He "is bringing this deliverance to pass in order that Israel, now so apathetic, so blinded by her sorrows, may be impelled to proclaim His character and establish His worship throughout the whole inhabited world." (Sanders.).

Among the many significant lessons taught during the exile some few stand out prominently. The exiles would learn anew concerning the character

of God, the malignity of sin, and the hope of coming good and deliverance. The steadfast character of God, the absolute love of right, and His eternal power to uphold the right would burn into their consciousness as they remembered the guilty past. But God's wonderful love for, and interest in them could not be extinguished even by their sin. Some of the captives were no doubt clinging to the faith that God was righteous, yet were well-nigh overwhelmed by the thought that the innocent as well as the guilty were suffering. Jeremiah and Habakkuk both give utterance

to the distress of that righteous remnant of Israel which had really set out to seek God. The whole problem of suffering began to press for solution. If suffering is for sin why do not only the sinners suffer? Why are not the righteous exempt? A common calamity had overtaken the nation and those conscious of their integrity were sharing in its misery. This fact had proven that the old theories of retribution were inadequate. The righteous found themselves in circumstances which needed some other explanation. A new doctrine of suffering was essential. In this

time of calamity Israel learned the great and fundamental lesson of the real meaning and purpose of suffering. Suffering is an element in the progress of the kingdom of God as well as a judgment upon sin. It is a means of discipline by which many are fitted for some unique mission. Back of the affliction of the Israelites is the wonderful plan of Yahweh. He will punish them for their sins; purify them from their evil desires; but he will also bring all the world to the conviction that Israel is His chosen people.

Mitchell sums up as follows:-

" The Jews are suffering, some of them in Babylonia. They are suffering, they confess, on account of their disloyalty to God. Cyrus appears on the horizon, and a nameless prophet recognizes in him their deliverer. The prophet declares that, not for their sake, but for the sake of their fathers, and that he may reveal his unique godhead, Jahweh has commissioned the Persian king to set them free. They are slow to believe, but he pictures them leaving the scene of

their suffering, crossing the desert under divine guidance and protection, by a miraculous highway, and reoccupying, with songs of triumph, their restored country. Finally they behold the nations, moved by their testimony to these wonders, recognizing Yahweh as the only true God and enrolling themselves among his worshippers".

" The optimism of the prophets", says Bruce, " does not consist in shutting the eyes to the evil that is in the world. On the contrary, it knows how to take the evil into the ideal as one of its

constitutive elements, and transmute it into the highest good". The idea that the destiny of Israel embraced the good of the whole world threw light on one of the problems which had perplexed both Habakkuk and Jeremiah. Habakkuk had complained of God's government of the world.(Hab.1;13). Israel had been "swallowed up" by Babylon, and the former nation was righteous in comparison with the latter, yet God held his peace. This moral difficulty, however, found a solution when it was perceived that the trials and suffering of a righteous nation fitted in with a

Divine scheme of purpose which included in its scope all mankind. Benefit would even come to those (~~who would even come to those~~) who were afflicting ~~him~~ Israel. Jeremiah's complaint would likewise be given a reasonable solution. " Wherefore, doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they at ease that deal very treacherously?" (Jer. 12;1). This first indication of the questioning spirit would be enlightened by Isaiah 51;7.8. " Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be

ye dismayed at their revilings. For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool; but my righteousness shall be forever, and my salvation unto all generations".

## The Servant of Jehovah.

" The Exile not only brought the Jews to realize, as never before, the ethical character of the divine government; it also gave them new ideas on the subject of human excellence. In early times David was their ideal, other and later men being measured by this brave, impulsive, resourceful and masterful warrior and ruler. During the Exile, with their wonderful ability to adapt themselves to existing conditions, they abandoned this ideal and chose another clothed in the virtues that bondage and

suffering had developed in their best and noblest. He is the central figure of Isaiah 40-55 the so called Servant of Yahweh". ( Mitchell).

Many questions arise with reference to this Servant of Yahweh. Is He a Person or a personification? A part of Israel or ideal Israel? A martyr who has suffered or one to come in the future? Various answers have been suggested. Some say the Prophet refers to all Israel; others think the reference is sometimes to all Israel and sometimes to a fraction of that nation or some historical personage. It would be dangerous to say that there

is a consensus of opinion regarding the matter.

Piepenbring's view is that the title Servant of Jehovah is given by turns to the entire people and to a faithful fraction but to neither exclusively. The Servant is to fulfill his mission, in part at least, by his suffering, by becoming an expiatory victim both in the eyes of the people and the eyes of God.

Wade contends that a review of human history in general, and of Hebrew history in particular, leads to the conclusion that the character of the Servant long remained an ideal one. He points out that more

than five hundred years passed before it was [illegible]

realized, and the creation of the prophet's inspired genius obtained concrete embodiment in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Another Old Testament scholar draws attention to the fact that there are two standing personifications of Israel in this prophecy--Jerusalem and the Servant of the Lord. In Chap.40;9 "Zion" represents the nation on its receptive side. She is the recipient of the blessings of salvation because she is the mother of the people; while the

Servant represents the historic Israel, past, present and future in its religious aspect, with a divine mission to fulfil for humanity. " Israel includes the Servant of Jehovah". The figure of the Servant is an ideal creation of the prophet's mind.

One thing seems certain, that not all the references to the Servant of Jehovah in Deutero-Isaiah are to be applied to the same group of people. The four passages known as the Servant poems, 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13 to 53:12, are to be interpreted as " Israel ideally conceived and probably

of later date". It is possible he is a fraction of the people. Comparing these passages with other references we observe that the Servant here described differs in many respects from the servant mentioned in other parts of the book. Both servants suffer, but there is a marked difference in the nature, cause, purpose and spirit of their suffering. In the rest of the book the Servant is simply a witness to divine power (41;10) who fails to promote the divine purposes (42; 18-20. He has sinned, therefore suffers (42;24) and complains under the severe test(40;27).

Yahweh delivers him because He is merciful(43;25). A study of the Servant poems will bring out the glaring contrast and reveal the profound interpretation of suffering as taught by the author of these passages.

Servant Poems.

In these passages Deutero- Isaiah works out a solution of some of the problems which confronted the prophets of an earlier generation. Referring to these passages, Schultz, says, " Of all the figures in O. T. the deepest and most significant is the Suffering Servant of Yahweh". The writer quoted

thinks that the Prophet did not mean to speak of an individual of the future in this figure, but starts from a historical figure, them beholds an ideal figure in which he sees salvation accomplished and all present riddles solved.

1. The Servant's Mission.

In the first of these passages(42:1-4) the mission of the servant is described. He has special equipment, because Yahveh has put his Spirit upon him, and" he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles". The idea that he is invested with a mission

to the Gentiles and chosen by God for this purpose is developed here. The manner in which he will do this task is found in verse 2. He will not cry nor lift up his voice," but in a quiet way, unlike many of the prophets, will devote himself to his work of establishing justice and encouraging the weak and unfortunate. He will not fail or become discouraged. We note here a contrast to the Servant in 43:10. There the servant was simply a witness to the divine power, but here a definite mission to the heathen is laid upon the ~~Servant~~ him. Through him, as an agent,

is to be established the true religion in the world, " a light to the Gentiles". He will be kept by Yahweh till the fulfillment of his mission.

In the second of these significant Passages (49:1-6) we have emphasized the universality of the Servant's mission. He calls to the peoples "from afar" to hear his message because Yahweh has formed him "from the womb to be His servant". It is no trivial occupation in which he is engaged, but a task which is far-reaching in its importance. Salvation is to be sent to the ends of the earth. Yahweh is

the Redeemer and will use His servant to bring Jacob again to Him and " restore the preserved of Israel", gathering them as survivors of the twelve tribes into a new nation. Here we have another contrast as Wade suggests with the servant found in 42:18-20. In the reference just made failure to promote the divine purpose is displayed. The people will not heed the message, but in 49;4, in spite of seeming failure, the servant looks to ultimate success and resolutely discharges his duty.

In the third passage(50:4-9) we note a

new element. The servant has accepted his task and set his "face like a flint" toward the accomplishment of it, but sorrow and indignity become part of his lot. He is confident that he is the chosen, trusted messenger of Yahweh, but his very fidelity to his mission brings upon him suffering. He is smitten and shamefully treated, even spit upon. Nevertheless, suffering only made him more determined to prosecute his mission. Unlike the servant in (42; 24f) who suffered because of his sin this servant is "not rebellious." He is obedient to the divine will in

spite of insult and indignity which are heaped upon him. He has the assurance of the help of Yahweh. Over against the obstacles with which he has to contend stands his invincible faith in God and the definite conviction of the final triumph of his cause. In reading this passage one is reminded of a passage in N. T. with a similar thought:"But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost; for a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries".(Paul I Corinthians 16:8).

The open door of opportunity to deliver his

message is the chief thing. The many adversaries are simply more or less insignificant incidentals. So in the suffering Servant's experience the mighty dynamic which drove him forward was the deep conviction of a mighty task which he assayed to do in spite of pain and ill treatment. Suffering was incidental to the supreme mission. It was not able to turn him from his purpose.

## Vicarious Suffering.

In (52:13-53:12) we find the greatest and most significant of the Servant passages."If it is true anywhere in the history of poetry and prophecy, it is true here that the writer, being full of the Spirit, has said more than he himself meant to say and more than he understood!'(Schultz). A new and higher conception of suffering is taught by the prophet. The belief of the average Jew was that suffering as a rule was an indication of sin, but here the suffering of one who was innocent is explained as

having a redemptive purpose. The servant accepts it as imposed by Jehovah for the sake of others. The suffering in itself, when recognized as undeserved and voluntary, is a force which will aid in turning the wicked persecutors from an attitude of defiance to one of humility and penitence. The prophet here carries to their conclusion the leading ideas of the other Servant-passages. The climax of his conception of suffering is reached as he pictures for us the character, and destiny of the suffering one.

There is a wealth of literature on the

interpretation and exposition of this passage. As we compare this passage with the teachings of the earlier prophets it is easy to understand Wade's suggestion that the process of development of ~~that~~ thought in Israel was from the old sense of solidarity based on blood-relationship, which made the guiltless involuntary ~~partakers~~ of the punishment of the guilty, through the assertion of the rights of the individual that each must suffer for his own offence, to a solidarity resting on sympathy and leading to voluntary self-sacrifice which, in the long run,

would promote the welfare both of him who made the sacrifice and those for whom it was made. The new solidarity, if we may call it such, is exemplified in 52:13- 57:12. By his willing sufferings, with and for the guilty, an innocent person established a fellowship in virtue of which his afflictions availed to make intercession for them. Jeremiah's problem of suffering of the the innocent finds new light toward its solution here also. The families of Korah and Achan though guiltless suffered involuntarily for sins committed by the

heads of the families. The suffering Servant accepts his chastisement and bears the sins of others. Just how this is possible the prophet does not explain.

## The Unique Sufferer.

The Servant as described in (53) is not in the least attractive, but rather repulsive"; no beauty that we should desire him", nay his visage is " marred more than any man;" a person of no esteem, but one " acquainted with grief". He staggers men because they see no reason or promise in him. Not only here, but all along the history of the world the sufferer has been the astonishment and stumbling

block of humanity. He remains, and probably will remain to the end, the problem of philosophy and the severest test of faith. In 53:4 the people confess that this uncomplaining Sufferer was their substitute in his endurance of pain and sickness; and in verse 5 after penetrating more deeply into the meaning of his sorrow they perceive the connection between his passion and their own sin. They found that this " connection is twofold; in the first place the Servant's suffering was the penalty due to the people's transgressions, and in the second

place it was the remedy by which they were restored to spiritual health. " But he was pierced because of our rebellions, crushed because of our iniquities". (Kirkpatrick.)

Not only does the Servant suffer underservedly but his sufferings culminate in a most shameful death and burial. They made his grave with the wicked and his humiliation was completed. Yet this pleased Yahweh because his soul was an offering for sin and " the pleasure of Yahweh shall prosper in his hand". "Two ideas seem clearly expressed;(1)

that there was a divine purpose back of the sufferings of the Servant, and (2) that a glorious future awaits him". (Knudson). The essence of the whole teaching of Chapter 53 seems to be contained in verse 5,"With his stripes we are healed"." The prophet seeks to teach us, that vicarious suffering is not a dogmatic, but an experimental truth. The substitution of the Servant for the guilty people, and the redemptive force of that substitution , are no arbitrary doctrine, for which God requires from man a mere intellectual assent; they are no such formal institution of

religion as mental indolence and superstition delight to have prepared fo their mechanical adherence: but substitutive suffering is a great living fact of human experience, whose outward features are not more evident to men's eyes than its inner meaning is appreciable by their conscience, and of irresistible effect upon their whole moral nature.

In every nation, in every family, the innocent suffer for the guilty. Vicarious suffering is not arbitrary or accidental; it comes with our growth; it is of the very nature of things. It is that part of the Service of Man to which we are all born, and of

the reality of which we daily grow more aware".

(G.A. Smith).

Relation of Suffering Servant to New Testament.

It is evident from the teaching of the N. T. that the idea of vicarious suffering, which is the climax and essence of Deutero-Isaiah's thought, is used with reference to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. The heroic, self-sacrificing God stands revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus used the language best understood by those of His time in order successfully to teach the great truths which He came to reveal. In the life of the great Teacher sacrifice was synonymous with His self-dedication. His mission like that of the Servant of Isaiah was

to do the will of God, not his own. Whatever this mission involved of pain or suffering or death itself he accepted. Some of the leading Bible scholars hold that Jesus looked upon Himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He says of Himself: " The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Even His own disciples never fully understood why He was so willing to bear misunderstanding and ridicule. He was a problem both to His friends and enemies. The Jewish leaders were hostile to Him and even the

loyalty which the common people professed was held by a very superficial and fragile bond. But He knew God's will for Him and that was the driving force of His life. He yielded Himself utterly, without reserve to the Father and His purpose. Paul tells us that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament requirements and completed and concluded all its ritual of material sacrifice for sin. To use an Old Testament idea, He gave His life a ransom for many. The Israelites had a new and deeper conception of what God's love meant to them when the innocent suffering servant revealed that love by his

life and death. So the people of Jesus time were given a profound revelation of God in the Incarnation. The Incarnation is the highest revelation of God as well as the great source of power of Christianity.

For us the past is represented in the familiar words which convey most transcendent truth-"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." We know very little about the real, inner meaning of this, but as long as such an affirmation means anything at all, it means that Jesus is the expression of the very best that God Himself could give, at unthinkable cost, to redeem humanity. "Jesus Christ and

Him crucified" is the very essence of the Christian gospel; or to appropriate the words of the prophet of the exile "With His stripes we are healed".

The suffering Servant mentioned in Isaiah was unique because he suffered in silence. "Other Old Testament sufferers broke out into one of two voices,- voice of guilt or voice of doubt. David, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Job and the Psalmist all strive and are loud under pain".The difference is that this unique one was conscious of the purpose of His suffering. He was performing a service of redemption which would

bring results and also glory. This strength to suffer in silence was also characteristic of Jesus." He did not sacrifice the dignity of His innocence to the pleasure of a retort as did Paul, but His wonderful patience remained unsullied". When He was reviled He reviled not again". We have no right,,however, to infer that this silence of Jesus cost Him nothing. It really cost Him much, but we have a proof of the perfectness of His soul's self-discipline. He, who might have summoned twelve legions of Angels, endured all that He might reveal the love of God for

Humanity. Thus he accepted pain for the sake of others.

In His parables He makes clear the fact that God loves and seeks men. But love to be effective and dynamic demands deeds not mere words. Because of this fact we read of Jesus setting His face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, knowing that there His sufferings would culminate on the cross. Whatever else may be said concerning the tragedy of Calvary, so long as the Gospels are held to be of any value we have the sublimest of paradoxes there set forth, in that, according to His own testimony, Jesus was both free

and yet under supreme obligation to suffer and die. In some real sense He died for us. It is possible to waive the mystery and appreciate the fact. Precisely why and how He should die for men may be left to a future time. The overwhelming truth is that it was on behalf of human nature, as an absolute necessity, and yet as a perfectly voluntary self-sacrifice. We can learn, if we will, from the whole transaction the divine estimate of the worth of human nature.

" There is great mystery here, but through it all we get the impression of boundless love issuing in

mysterious self-sacrifice, a work of love at boundless c
cost and pain for the salvation of a perverse and
sinful world".(Bowne). Paul gloried in the Cross of
Christ but did not try to explain fully any theory of
the atonement. The fact was the important thing to him
and he delighted to spread the news abroad that the
suffering and death of Christ were vicarious and
redemptive. The Strong had borne the burdens of the
weak.

Bowne expresses it as follows:

"The great significance of the Christian revelation
does not lie in its contribution to ethics or to

speculative theology, though it has done something in both of these realms; but rather in this, that back of the mystery and uncertainty of our lives, back of the apparent aimlessness of much history, and back of the woe and horror of much more, it reveals God, the Almighty Friend and Lover of men, the Chief of burden-bearers and the Leader of all in self-sacrifice. Over the seething chaos there broods a Spirit divine; and from everlasting to everlasting there stretches a broad bow of promise and of light."

Summary.

Our study of the Problem of Suffering in Deutero- Isaiah has shown us that the prophet of the Exile made it clear to the Israelites that their suffering was a result of sin, but the suffering even would prove a purifying discipline which would fit them to carry out the redeeming purpose of Yahweh.

Again, the Suffering Servant stands between Yahweh and the nation with a mission to perform and in the prosecution of that task he encounters indignity and abuse, yet he bears all in silence, because of the conviction that ultimately his work will be triumphant.

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In the Servant poems, ~~which distinguishes between~~ ~~the two Servants~~, a new element is introduced.

The Servant suffers, not for his own sin, but for the guilty ones and his suffering is vicarious and redemptive. This latter view is applied to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the essence of the truth about God's love and the perfection of that love in suffering which Christ manifested and which is the glory of the doctrineof the Incarnation. God's perfect revelation of Himself to man was made by the sinless Christ, who suffered and died."With His stripes we are healed".