

The Rhetorical Strategy of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13–53:12): Poetry and the Exodus–New Exodus

ANTHONY R. CERESKO, O.S.F.S.

St. Peter's Pontifical Institute
Malleswaram West
Bangalore 560 055 India

DESPITE THE ENORMOUS AMOUNT of critical commentary that has been written on the Fourth Servant Song,¹ many aspects of this hauntingly beautiful and allusive poem continue to puzzle commentators. In recent years, scholars have begun to examine the possible social and political context out of which these poems came. Norman Gottwald, for example, notes with regard to these chaps. 40–55 that “a strong odor of political conflict surrounds the acclamation of Cyrus and the hostile treatment of the servant.”² Our study takes this observation as a starting point and pays close attention to this conflictual context out of which emerged the poetry of Second Isaiah, the Fourth Servant Song in particular. We will examine how the poet skillfully promotes the prophet's socio-political program, defined by R. J. Clifford in

¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp (“A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period,” *CBQ* 52 [1990] 12 n. 28) has correctly observed that since the surveys of “the immense amount of critical commentary on the four so-called servant songs in Isa 40–55 by C. R. North (*The Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah* [2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 1956]) and H. H. Rowley (“The Servant of the Lord in the Light of Three Decades of Criticism,” *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* [2d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1965] 3–60) there has been “no single comparable survey for the last quarter-century.” Carroll Stuhlmueller (“Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah,” *NJBC*, 330–31) locates these songs in Isa 42:1–7; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12. On the use of the name “Fourth Servant Song” for the poem in Isa 52:13–53:12, see R. N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (JSOTSup 4; Sheffield: JSOT, 1978) 143 n. 6.

² Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 500.

terms of a single aim: "to persuade the exiled people to join the servant in that act through which they will become Israel once more, the exodus-conquest."³ Our study of the poem and of its rhetorical strategy in promoting this single aim involves three parts.⁴

In Part 1 we will sketch briefly the historical context out of which emerged the poetry of Second Isaiah, and the Fourth Servant Song in particular. Some scholars today presume that the Servant figure of the four "Servant" poems is the prophet himself, the author of chaps. 40–55 of the Book of Isaiah.⁵ We also take this for granted. But the Fourth Song itself represents the work of the Servant's disciples,⁶ a thanksgiving hymn celebrating the vindication of the prophet's preaching.⁷

In Part 2 we will look at the way the poet subtly evokes the exodus–new exodus theme and links the suffering of both the Servant and the exiles with Israel's pre-exodus experience of suffering in Egypt. As those pre-exodus sufferings led to Israel's deliverance in the exodus, so now the sufferings of the Servant and his fellow exiles are preparatory to a new exodus, a return to that land of promise.

In Part 3 we will look at the poetry and concentric structure of the Song, focusing on 53:5cd. By means of this concentric structure the poet links the suffering and persecution of the Servant to Israel's pre-exodus experience. This linking provides an indirect but persuasive argument for the prophet-Servant's restoration program and a theological legitimation of it.

³ R. J. Clifford, "Isaiah 40–66," *HBC*, 573.

⁴ I borrow this expression "rhetorical strategy" from Paul B. Duff, "Metaphor, Motif, and Meaning: The Rhetorical Strategy behind the Image 'Led in Triumph' in 2 Corinthians 2:14," *CBQ* 53 (1991) 79–92. He uses it in the course of identifying more formal elements of Greek and Roman rhetorical techniques employed by Paul. I use it as a convenient way of providing an overarching concept to link the various aspects of this study of the Fourth Servant Song. I will take up this question again in the conclusion below. See also Randall C. Webber, "'Why Were the Heathen So Arrogant?': The Socio-rhetorical Strategy of Acts 3–4," *BTB* 22 (1992) 19–25.

⁵ E.g., Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 25; Richard J. Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (Theological Inquiries; New York/Ramsey/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1984) 57 n. 21; Stuhlmüller, "Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah," 341.

⁶ John W. Miller, "Prophetic Conflict in Second Isaiah: The Servant Songs in the Light of Their Context," *Wort, Gebot, Glaube: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments. Walther Eichrodt zum 80. Geburtstag* (ed. J. J. Stamm, E. Jenni, and H. J. Stoebe; ATANT 59; Zurich: Zwingli, 1970) 84; Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 105–6; Blenkinsopp, "A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period," 13–14.

⁷ For this identification of the poem's genre, see Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 110–15; Clifford, "Isaiah 40–66," 583; Stuhlmüller, "Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah," 341.

I. The Historical Context: The Betrayal and Execution of the Prophet-Servant

We noted above Norman Gottwald's comment with regard to the "strong odor of political conflict" in chaps. 40–55 of Isaiah.⁸ Gottwald allies his remarks with John W. Miller's reconstruction, put forward a number of years ago, of the social and political context out of which the poem would have come.⁹ In Miller's reconstruction of events he sees the Servant as standing for the prophet himself. Further, the prophet, in his exhortations to the exiles had presented Cyrus, a new figure on the international political scene, as a potential liberator, unknowingly chosen and destined by Yahweh to fulfill that role. Such language was dangerous in that it could have aroused the suspicion of the community's Babylonian captors and led to eventual intervention on their part. In addition, there were undoubtedly pro-Babylonian elements within the exilic community, Jews who had won positions of trust and responsibility in the Babylonian administration. They would have been threatened by the prophet's apparent anti-Babylonian and pro-Persian rhetoric as they saw their own interests endangered by an end to Babylonian rule.¹⁰ The persecution and trials of the Servant figure described in the poem would then reflect the actual historical experience of the prophet, arrested and imprisoned by the Babylonians with the collaboration of the pro-Babylonian Jews.

The Fourth Servant Song itself is unclear about the ultimate fate of the Servant, and some scholars argue that he was eventually freed.¹¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp asserts, however, that the text should be taken at face value, which in its totality points to the Servant's "violent death": "He is led like a lamb to the slaughter, taken away, cut off from the land of the living, smitten to death, buried with the wicked. While one or other of these expressions taken by itself might be patient of a different explanation, they point cumulatively to a violent death, a conclusion which has been widely accepted.

⁸ See n. 2 above.

⁹ Miller, "Prophetic Conflict in Second Isaiah." Whybray (*Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 134-39) defends a similar historical scenario as the context for these chapters.

¹⁰ See Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 499-500. He says, for example, that "it is highly likely that some prominent members of the exilic community had been taken into the very Babylonian government that Isaiah of the Exile declared would shortly be destroyed. In moving to neutralize the prophet, these privileged Jews would have been fighting for their own stake in the survival of the Babylonian regime" (p. 500).

¹¹ E.g., Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, 105-6; Clifford, "Isaiah 40–66," 384.

R. N. Whybray . . . pulls out all the stops to argue that the servant was alive and well at the time of the writing, but this is hardly the natural sense of the passage."¹²

Miller's argument about the political nature of the circumstances surrounding the description of the Servant's death coincides with the assertions of John Pairman Brown in his article on techniques of imperial control. Brown suggests that this poem indeed contains a veiled allusion to the death of the Servant-prophet by impalement, a frequent form of execution for political crimes in the ancient world. In describing the history of impalement or crucifixion as a form of execution used by these ancient imperial powers, Brown notes that "the royal inscriptions of the Assyrian and Persian kings constantly affirm how they flayed or impaled their rivals, and Herodotus attests the same of the Persian kings."¹³ He argues that Psalm 22 "was originally conceived as a lament of a crucified one, with some self-censorship in view of whatever the foreign power at the time may have been." He then comments that "Isaiah 53 is not quite so clear a case but it is most easily understood as a development of the same theme."¹⁴

Brown points to the poem's use of the verb *hll*, "to pierce," which usually refers to piercing with a sword (e.g., in Jer 14:18; Ezek 32:26) or with a spear (see 2 Sam 23:8,18). Other terms are more often employed in the descriptions of impalement, such as *yq*¹⁵ and possibly *tlh*.¹⁶ But to avoid attracting the

¹² Blenkinsopp, "A Jewish Sect of the Persian Period," 14 n. 35. See also Miller, "Prophetic Conflict in Second Isaiah," 83-85; M. J. Dahood, "Phoenician Elements in Isaiah 52:13-53:12," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (ed. Hans Goedicke; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University, 1971) 69, 71.

¹³ J. P. Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control: The Background of the Gospel Event," *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (ed. Norman K. Gottwald; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983) 373. In the context of Martin Hengel's extensive documentation of the widespread use of impalement or crucifixion in the ancient world, Brown's proposal is not at all surprising; see especially chaps. 4 and 10 of Hengel's book, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). For the extension of this form of capital punishment even as far as the Indian subcontinent in ancient times, perhaps under Persian or Greek influence, see R. L. Mehta, *Survey of Ancient India* (Delhi: Akashdeep, 1939, reprinted 1988) 157-58; A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove, 1954) 119.

¹⁴ Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control," 374. See also idem, "Prometheus, the Servant of Yahweh, Jesus: Legitimation and Repression in the Heritage of Persian Imperialism," *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991) 116.

¹⁵ E.g., in Num 25:4, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale (*wēhōqa*^c) them in the sun before the Lord'" (see *HALAT*, 412). This translation of Num 25:4 follows the *NRSV*. Translations of biblical texts hereafter are either my own or are based on the *NRSV*, unless another translation is indicated.

¹⁶ E.g., in Esther 5:14; 6:4; etc. (see *HALAT*, 160); Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 22 n. 1.

attention of the authorities, the author may purposely have couched his description of the Servant's death in indirect and allusive language employing instead the term *ḥll*, "to pierce." The verb *ḥll* does have some links with the notion of impalement. It occurs, for example, in Isa 51:9, where it parallels *mḥš*, "to strike down, crush,"

By his power he stilled the Sea;
by his understanding he struck down [*māḥaš*] Rahab.
By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced [*ḥōlālā*] the fleeing serpent.

The parallel term to *ḥll* here, *mḥš*, is the Hebrew cognate of the Aramaic *mḥ*², "to impale," used in the quotation from the Persian King Darius's decree in Ezra 6:11, "If anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house and he shall be impaled [*yitmēḥē*²] upon it, and his house will be made into a manure pit." This verb *ḥll*, "to pierce," which alludes, Brown suggests, to the Servant's execution by impalement, is in fact highlighted in the poem as one term of the parallel pair *dk*², "to crush" || *ḥll*, "to pierce," which appears in 53:5ab (*mēḥōlāl*, "was pierced" || *mēdukkā*², "was crushed") and is repeated later in the poem in chiasmic order in 53:10a (*dakkē*²*ō*, "to crush him" || *wēḥālillī* [MT *heḥēlī*], "and to pierce him").¹⁷

Some scholars see the latter part of the poem as containing, in addition to the veiled allusion to the Servant-prophet's execution, oblique references to his trial, condemnation, and burial. This would coincide with the reconstruction by Miller, and others, of the historical context of the prophet-Servant and his poems and would support it. C. Westermann, for example, comments that 53:7b-e,

. . . and he opened not his mouth.
Like a lamb led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep before its shearers
he was silent;
and he opened not his mouth

¹⁷ On this version of v 10a, see Dahood, "Phoenician Elements," 71. He comments: "That the root *ḥll*, 'to pierce,' underlies consonantal *ḥḥly* is inferred from vs. 5b, *m'ḥōllāl/m'dukkā*²." He notes further that "1QIs^a *wyḥllhw*, 'and he pierced him,' sustains our translation which, however, preserves the consonantal text." John Scullion (*Isaiah 40-66* [OTM 12; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982] 118) likewise interprets the passage in this sense: "But it was Yahweh's purpose to crush and pierce him." See also HALAT, 307, and the comment of J. Muilenburg ("The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, Exegesis," *IB* 5. 628): "The Dead Sea Scroll reads *wyḥllhw*, 'that he might wound [or "pierce"] him.' . . . This deserves serious consideration."

“may mean that he was taken into court.”¹⁸ Dahood also detects a “judicial metaphor” in 53:5c and thus translates the hapax legomenon expression *mûsar šêlômênû* as “the penalty we should have paid was upon him.”¹⁹ Finally, Westermann, referring to 53:9ab,

A grave was assigned him among the wicked,
and a burial place with evildoers

(the translation is that of the *NAB*), points out that after the Servant’s condemnation and execution he was “buried with the accompaniments of shame,” as befits a criminal.²⁰

Thus, as the text itself would seem to indicate, the Servant’s persecution and death issued from a conflictual situation involving the Servant, his fellow Jews, and the Babylonian authorities. The vivid description of the Servant’s suffering would reflect the horror and repugnance of the Servant’s followers and fellow Jews in the face of this harsh intervention by the Babylonian authorities. At the same time, the poet skillfully links the Servant’s sufferings with the pre-exodus sufferings of his people at the hands of another cruel, indeed genocidal empire, that of Pharaoh in Egypt. It is to this subtle evocation of the exodus theme that we now turn.

II. Exodus–New Exodus in the Fourth Servant Song

The theme of exodus and new exodus has long been recognized as a central one in the poetry of Second Isaiah. Carroll Stuhlmueller, for example, echoes the words of another scholar in asserting that “The theme of the Exodus, as N. H. Snaith reminds us ‘is not merely one of the themes. . . . It is the prophet’s dominant theme. . . . Basically [his] ONE theme, and all else is subservient to it.’”²¹

Despite the number of references to the exodus and new exodus which Stuhlmueller and others list and discuss in these sixteen chapters of Isaiah, it is curious that not one of these scholars notes any reference to the exodus in *any* of the four so-called Servant Songs (42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9;

¹⁸ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (OTL; London: SCM, 1969) 257; see also 264. Scullion (*Isaiah 40–66*, 123) notes as well that in vv 7-9 the Servant figure “is presented as one dragged off from the court, cut off from the land of the living and given over to the grave.”

¹⁹ Dahood, “Phoenician Elements,” 68.

²⁰ Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 257.

²¹ C. Stuhlmueller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah* (AnBib 43; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970) 59, quoting N. H. Snaith, “Isaiah 40–66,” *Studies in the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah* (VTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 147.

52:13–53:12).²² However, attention to some of the language of at least the Fourth Servant Song reveals echoes not so much of the exodus, the actual “going forth” from Egypt, but rather of the persecution and the condition of servitude imposed on the Hebrew people by the ruling elites of Egypt.

A first set of words, drawn principally from the opening chapters of Exodus, refers to the *external* sources of the Servant’s suffering, his oppression and persecution.²³ The most obvious example is the reference to the Servant’s unjust imprisonment in 53:8a, “By a perversion of justice he was taken away [*lūqqāh*].” The same word used of the Servant here in 58:8a, *lūqqāh*, “taken away,” also occurs just before the Fourth Servant Song in 52:4–5, a passage which describes Israel’s “imprisonment,”

For thus says the Lord God: Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without cause. Now therefore what am I doing here, says the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away [*kī-lūqqāh*] without cause?

Westermann suggests that this passage implies a parallel between the oppression of the Egyptian “exile” of Israel’s ancestors and that of the present exile in Babylon. “The whole story,” he writes, “began with the sojourn in Egypt. Then came the oppression at the hands of Assyria—this too without justification. And then Babylon, whither the chosen people have been deported ‘for nothing.’ . . . Thus far the meaning and purpose of the marginal gloss is clear. . . . it ranges the Babylonian Exile alongside the previous occasions of subjection to a foreign power.”²⁴

Another root, *ʿnh*, “to oppress, afflict,” which describes the externally caused suffering of the Servant, also suggests a connection with Israel’s Egyptian oppression. The Song says of the Servant in 53:4d, “We accounted him . . . struck down by God and afflicted [*ūmēʿūnneh*],” and in 53:7a, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted [*naʿāneh*].” Likewise, of the Hebrews in

²² Following Stuhlmueller’s location of the four Servant Songs (“Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah,” 330).

²³ Westermann (*Isaiah 40–66*, 265) observes that we are encountering here the stereotypical language of the psalms of lament, which emphasize the totality of the subject’s suffering by ascribing it both to *external* and to *internal* causes. Thus, in this poem, the language of violence and persecution is paralleled by the language of illness or of suffering in bodily terms. Scullion (*Isaiah 40–66*, 119) makes a similar point when he comments that “the sufferings of the innocent one are described in the traditional terms of illness and persecution.” In mentioning the two sources of suffering, external and internal, the poet is employing a kind of merism, an abbreviated way of expressing a totality. For further discussion and bibliography on this poetic device, see W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 321–24.

²⁴ Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 248.

Egypt, Exod 1:11-12 relates that the Egyptians “set taskmasters over them to oppress them [*l̄ema^can ^cannōtō*] with forced labor. . . . But the more they were oppressed [*yē^cannū*], the more they multiplied and spread.”

The root *sbl*, “to bear a heavy load,” offers a further verbal link between the Servant Song and the opening chapters of Exodus. The verb occurs twice in the Song, and it is highlighted in its formation of a parallel pair with *ns^c*, “to lift up, carry.”²⁵ The parallelism is direct and obvious in 53:4ab,

Surely he has borne [*nāsā^c*] our infirmities
and carried [the burden of, *sēbālām*] our diseases.

The parallelism of the same pair toward the end of the Song (53:11d,12e), an example of “distant parallelism,”²⁶ is not so obvious,

And he shall bear [the burden of, *yisbōl*] their iniquities. . . .
yet he bore [*nāsā^c*] the sins of many.

Nouns formed from this same root (*sēbel*, *siblā*, “load, burden”) occur a number of times to describe “the burden” the Hebrews bore as slaves in Egypt. Note, for example, in Exod 1:11, “They set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor [*bēsiblōtām*],” and in Exod 2:11, “He [Moses] went out to his people and saw their forced labor [*bēsiblōtām*].”²⁷

The term “servant” (*‘ebed*) itself provides a link. It occurs at the beginning of the Song (52:13a, “my servant,” *‘abdī*) and again near the end (53:11c). The word’s root *‘bd*, with its sense not of (willing) servant but of “slave, to enslave,” appears a number of times in the opening chapter of Exodus, e.g., in Exod 1:13-14:

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing servitude [*wayya^c‘ābīdū*] on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service [*ba^c‘ābōdā qāšā*] in mortar and brick and in every kind of field service [*ūbēkol^c‘ābōdā baššādeh*]. They were ruthless in all the services [*kol^c‘ābōdātām*] that they imposed on them.

If the poet draws principally on the language of oppression in Exodus to describe the Servant’s external suffering, he employs mainly Deuteronomy’s language of covenant curse to depict the Servant’s internal suffering and link the experience of the Servant to the experience of Israel in Egypt prior to the exodus. The Servant, “acquainted with sickness” (*wīdūa^c ḥōlī*), recalls the “sickness” (*ḥōlī*) and “diseases” (*madweh*) with which Israel was “acquainted” (*yd^c*) in Egypt: “The Lord will turn away from you every sickness

²⁵ On the use of parallel word pairs in Hebrew poetry, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 128-44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134-35.

²⁷ See also Exod 6:6; Ps 81:7.

(*kol-ḥōlî*); and all the dread diseases (*madwê*) of Egypt which you experienced (*yādaṭā*), he will not inflict on you” (Deut 7:15). Exod 15:26 makes a similar point using the related word *maḥālâ*, “sickness” (from the same root as *ḥōlî*, viz, *ḥlh*), in alluding to the “plagues” suffered by the Egyptians:

I will not bring upon you any of the diseases [*kol-ḥammaḥālâ*] that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am Yahweh, your Healer [*ropʿekā*; cf. 53:5d, *nirpāʾ-lānû* “we are healed”].²⁸

The curses threatening Israel with a return to the sufferings of Egypt in Deut 28:59-61 also employ *ḥōlî*, “sickness,” this time in tandem with *makkâ*, “affliction,” a term which recalls the description of the Servant in 53:4 as one “afflicted, stricken” (*mūkkēh*),

The Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions [*mak-kōr*], afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses [*woḥōlāyim*] grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt [*kol-madwēh*] . . . every sickness also, and every affliction (*gam kol-ḥōlî wēkol-makkâ*).

(The translation is that of the *RSV*.) Note the comments of Joseph Blenkinsopp, for example, on Deut 28:60: “The plagues of Egypt will afflict the unfaithful Israel (cf. 28:27). Infidelity involves a reversal of the exodus and of the Abrahamic promise.”²⁹ The Song thus describes the Servant bearing in his own person the effect of these curses. He himself experiences the threatened repetition of the “sickness” (*ḥōlî*) and “affliction” (*makkâ*) of the Egyptian “exile.” Like the Egyptian suffering, however, it serves also as a proximate preparation for a (new) exodus and return to the promised land.

III. The Poetry and Concentric Structure of the Song

A number of modern English versions group the Song’s verses into five sets or “strophes” according to subject matter: (1) 52:13-15; (2) 53:1-3; (3) 53:4-6; (4) 53:7-9; (5) 53:10-12.³⁰ However, there also appear indications of an overall concentric structure which focuses on the central verse, 53:5cd, “The penalty we should have paid was upon him, and by his stripes we were

²⁸ Note also Exod 23:25, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness [*maḥālâ*] away from among you.”

²⁹ J. Blenkinsopp, “Deuteronomy,” *NJBC*, 106.

³⁰ The *NIV*; the *RSV*; *Today’s English Version*; *The Complete Bible: An American Translation* (ed. J. M. P. Smith and E. J. Goodspeed; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939). See also Muienburg, “The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66,” 614; Paul R. Raabe, “The Effect of Repetition in the Suffering Servant Song,” *JBL* 103 (1984) 77-78.

healed.”³¹ The first indication of such a concentric structure consists in the two-part divine speech in 52:13-15 and 53:10-12, which serves to “frame” the third-person narrative of 53:1-9. Claus Westermann, for example, observes that “what certain people say, 53.1-11a, is set within the framework of something that God says, 52.13ff. and 53.11b-12.”³²

In addition to their distinctive first-person address, the framing or inclusive function of the first and fifth strophes is evident in the repetition of three key terms in each. First, the verb *ns*³, “to lift up, exalt, carry,” occurs at the beginning of the first strophe (*wēniššā*³, “and he shall be lifted up,” 52:13b) and at the end of the fifth strophe (*nāšā*, “and he bore,” 53:12e). Also, the word *rab*, “many, much,” is found only in the “divine speech” parts of the poem, twice in the opening lines (*rabbîm*, “many,” 52:14a, 15a) and three times in the concluding lines (*lārabbîm*, “many,” 53:11c; *bārabbîm*, “with the great,” 53:12a; *rabbîm*, “many,” 53:12e).³³ Finally, *abdi*, “my servant,” is mentioned in the first line of the poem, 52:13a, and again four lines from the poem’s end in 53:11c.

The framing effect of the “divine speech” at the beginning and end of the Song is further enhanced by the contrast between the language of exaltation in the frame (52:13-15; 53:10-12) and the language of humiliation in the intervening verses (53:1-9). A number of scholars have commented on this contrast. Muilenburg, for example, observes the “contrast between humiliation and suffering on the one hand, and exaltation and triumph on the other,”³⁴ and Raabe notes that this contrast is underlined by the repetition of the same words in both the frame and the intervening narrative, with eighteen of thirty-six words occurring in both the humiliation strophe (53:1-9) and the exaltation strophes (52:13-14; 53:10-12).³⁵ He also points out that

³¹ On this version, see Dahood, “Phoenician Elements,” 64, 68.

³² Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 253. See also Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading*, 175: “Narrative in the third person in 53:1-11b is framed by divine speech in the first person (‘my servant’ in 52:13 and 53:11c) at the beginning, 52:13-15, and the end, 53:11c-12.” Both Westermann and Clifford consider only 53:11c-12 as divine speech. We follow those who include 53:10-11ab also in the divine speech (see n. 30).

³³ The occurrences of *rab* thus total five. The deity is also referred to five times in the poem, four times by the personal name *yhw* (53:1,6,10[twice]) and once as *’ēlohîm*, “God” (53:4). On the significance of the number five (half of ten) in OT literature, see Anthony R. Ceresko, “A Poetic Analysis of Ps 105, with Attention to Its Use of Irony,” *Bib* 64 (1983) 28 n. 38; idem, “Psalm 121: A Prayer of a Warrior?” *Bib* 70 (1989) 499.

³⁴ Muilenburg, “The Books of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66,” 615.

³⁵ Raabe, “The Effects of Repetition,” 78. Raabe includes all the repetitions which we have noted here, but he does not discuss the *function* of these repetitions in terms of the poem’s structure, which is our purpose here.

eleven of those words appear at least once to describe the servant's humiliation and at least once to describe his exaltation.³⁶

In addition to this inclusive function of the frame, Westermann observes a focusing taking place within the central "narrative" part, i.e., 53:1-9. What he calls a "confession" in 53:4-6 is, in turn, framed by a two-part "report" in vv 1-3 and 7-11a.³⁷ Finally, within these central "confession" verses, 53:5cd seems to lie at the heart of the whole poem. First, it holds a central place in the narrative section (the ninth or middle line of the seventeen lines in the MT)³⁸ and comes at the very center of the narrative section in terms of syllable count, with 145 syllables in 53:1a-5b and 145 syllables in 53:5c-9d.³⁹

A second indication of the importance of 53:5cd is the number of both words and motifs which occur before this verse and are repeated after it, thus calling further attention to it and highlighting its centrality. The clearest and closest of these repetitions is the chiasmus involving the paronomasia between ʔāwōn , "transgression," and ʕnh III , "to be afflicted": ūmēʕūneh , "afflicted" (v 4d) : mēʕāwōnōtēnū , "our transgressions" (v 5b) :: ʕāwōn , "transgression" (v 6d) : naʕāneh , "was afflicted" (v 7a).⁴⁰ Other verbal repetitions include the parallel word pair hll , "to pierce, impale" || dk^2 , "to crush, break into pieces," of 53:5ab (mēhōlāl , "was pierced, impaled" || mēdūkkā^2 , "was crushed") repeated in reverse (or chiasmic) order in 53:10a ($\text{dakkē}^2\text{ō wēhālillī}$, "to crush him and to pierce [or] impale him" [MT $\text{dakkē}^2\text{ō hehēlī}$]).⁴¹ Another parallel pair, nś^2 , "to carry" || sbl , "to bear," of 53:4ab (nāśā^2 , "he has carried" || sēbālām , "he has borne them"), is reversed and broken up over 53:11d and 53:12e (yisbōl , "he shall bear"; nāśā^2 , "he carried"). Single words which are repeated before and after this verse include r^2h , "to see" (52:15e and 53:10c, 11a), ʕeṣ , "earth, land" (52:2b and 53:8c), mī , "who" (53:1a,b and 53:8b), ng^c , "to touch, strike" (53:4c and 53:8d).

In addition to these verbal repetitions, four motifs introduced in the earlier part of the poem (52:13-53:5ab) are echoed or contrasted in the second part (53:6ab-12ef). For example, the Servant, who "did not open his mouth"

³⁶ Ibid., 78-79. The eleven words are nś^2 in 53:4,12 and 52:13; rabbīm in 52:14; 53:12 and 52:15; 53:11,12; peh in 53:7b,e,9 and 52:15; r^2h in 53:2 and 52:15; 53:10,11; ʕal in 52:14; 53:5,9 and 52:15; nepēš in 53:10,12 and 53:11; hps in 53:10a and 53:10d; yhwh in 53:6,10a and 53:10d; lō/lāmō in 53:2,8 and 53:12; kēn in 52:14 and 52:15; kī in 53:8 and 52:15.

³⁷ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 264.

³⁸ Taking the isolated colon of v 7e with the preceding line, v 7cd.

³⁹ On the use of syllable counting as a help in determining structures in Hebrew poetry, see David N. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980), the index under "syllable counting" (p. 355); more recently, idem, "Another Look at Biblical Hebrew Poetry," *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTSup 40; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 11-28.

⁴⁰ On the frequency and function of this device in Hebrew poetry, see Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 201-8.

⁴¹ For this reading of 53:10a, see n. 17 above.

(*wēlō² yiptaḥ-pîw*) in 53:7b,7e parallels the kings earlier, in 52:15b, who “shut their mouths” (*yiqpēšû . . . pîhem*).⁴² Again, belief in the *truthfulness* of the report of the narrators in 53:1a (“Who would have believed our report?”) is echoed in the denial of any deceitfulness (*mirmâ*) in the mouth of the Servant (53:9d). Also, the plant simile used of the Servant in 53:2ab (*kayyônēq*, “like a plant,” . . . *wēkaššōreš*, “like a root”) contrasts with the animal simile in 53:7cd (*kaššeḥ*, “like a lamb,” . . . *ûkērāḥēl*, “like a sheep”). Finally, the two members of a merism indicating the totality of the Servant’s suffering in temporal terms, that is, through his whole life, are separated across the length of the third-person narrative (53:1-9). First we are told in 53:2 of the Servant’s birth into a suffering and humiliating condition,

He grew up like a sapling before him,
 like a shoot from the parched earth;
 There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him,
 nor appearance that would attract us to him.

Then 53:8c and 9ab report his ignominious death and burial,

. . . he was cut off from the land of the living . . . ,
 A grave was assigned him among the wicked
 and a burial place with evildoers.

(The translation of vv 8c,9ab is that of the *NAB*.) Of this merism Westermann remarks: “In laments and declarative praise, the suffering brought to God’s notice always has limits to it. Here, however, the drift involves an entire life-span: he grew up (53:2) . . . he was buried (53:9).”⁴³

The structural centrality of 53:5cd accords with its role in describing the Servant as the link between the experience of pre-exodus Israel in Egypt and the present experience of the Servant’s fellow Jews in Babylon. The Servant himself bears the “sickness, disease” of a return to Egypt. He thus effects the “healing” his people require (53:5d). Further, in his courageous acceptance of the externally caused suffering, the unjust imprisonment and execution, the Servant pays “the penalty we should have paid” (53:5c): he himself endures the imprisonment-exile of an Egypt-Babylon. His example provides the motivation and courage for his fellow Jews to become the people of a new

⁴² On this absence of speech or verbal communication in the poem, see D. J. A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (JSOTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT, 1976) 43-44.

⁴³ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 257. See also p. 261: “When the psalms of lament and of praise speak of suffering, this is invariably restricted, only an incident in the life of a healthy man. Here, however, there is a difference. The thing described is an entire life-span with the stamp of suffering upon it.”

covenant through a new exodus-conquest: "Due to the servant's exemplary bearing of the guilt of all Israel, the whole people is now free to enjoy the great gift—the land."⁴⁴

Conclusion: The Rhetorical Strategy in the Fourth Servant Song

Presuming a specific historical context for the Fourth Servant Song, we have examined the poem's poetry and concentric structure as well as its subtle evocation of the theme of the exodus. In the course of our discussion we have already touched upon some of the elements of the rhetorical strategy in the poem. In this final section we will highlight those elements and conclude with a few brief remarks on the importance of this poem for the early Christians.

In his article on the "socio-rhetorical strategy" of Acts 3–4, R. C. Webber notes that "practitioners of rhetoric during the Hellenistic and Roman periods reached a consensus regarding a broad definition of the art as the ability to speak persuasively and gracefully in a variety of settings."⁴⁵ Webber comments further that Quintilian "proposed an additional but integral emphasis on the moral qualities of the speaker and his cause."⁴⁶ Although our poem predates the formal explication of the art of rhetoric by the Greeks, the Fourth Servant Song conforms implicitly to many aspects of Webber's definition. First, our analysis has demonstrated the poem's persuasiveness and grace in its inventive employment of the techniques of Hebrew poetry, in the complexity of its structure, and in the subtlety of its evocation of the theme of the exodus. It accomplishes this latter not directly, by mentioning the event of the exodus itself, but indirectly, by alluding to the pre-exodus sufferings of the Hebrews, the "diseases" (*hōlî*) and "afflictions" (*makkâ*) of the Egyptian oppression. Further, the poem skillfully elicits the sympathy of its hearers or readers. In linking the sufferings of the Servant to the pre-exodus sufferings of the ancestors at the hands of the Egyptians, the poem taps into the anti-imperial sentiments implicit in those exodus traditions. The appropriateness of those sentiments to the situation of the poem's first hearers and readers, the Jews under Babylonian domination, is not difficult to imagine.

Webber also cites Quintilian's "additional but integral emphasis on the moral qualities of the speaker and his cause."⁴⁷ The Servant's courage in facing and accepting suffering and martyrdom eloquently demonstrates his

⁴⁴ Clifford, "Isaiah 40–66," 584.

⁴⁵ Webber, "Why Were the Heathen So Arrogant?" 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

moral worth. In addition, the linkage of the cause or program for which the Servant suffered and died to the theme of the exodus affirms that program's value and gives it theological legitimacy.⁴⁸

Finally, we should point out how our study has confirmed J. P. Brown's conclusions concerning the NT writers' almost uncanny grasp of the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures they cited to describe and explain the life and message of Jesus. Recalling in one place that C. H. Dodd sees Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 at the heart of one of four groups of Hebrew texts serving as a substructure of the theology of NT writers, who remain "true to the main intention" of the Hebrew text,⁴⁹ Brown can assert elsewhere, with regard to Jesus' crucifixion:

Since the Romans stepped so accurately into the old imperial pattern, we can give a very objective sense to the idea of fulfillment of prophecy: the old pattern repeats itself, this is the expected fate of a prophet of justice under imperial rule.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Clifford ("Isaiah 40-66," 572) has remarked that "the new act is validated by its resemblance to the ancient one. Babylon, like Egypt of old, is the land of oppression and false gods. . . . Zion, on the other hand, is to be glorified by the return in the exodus-conquest of her Lord and children."

⁴⁹ Brown, "Prometheus, the Servant of Yahweh, Jesus," 115, referring to C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952) 108-10. Our study accords as well with many of the conclusions found in Clifford, "Isaiah 40-66," as the number of our citations of it witnesses.

⁵⁰ Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control," 374.



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