

Who Is the Servant?

A Short Guide to the Servant's Identity in Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Adapted for the BFF course from Paul J. Bucknell, "The History of the Servant's Identity, Isaiah 52:13–53:10."

Why the Servant's identity matters

The identity of the Servant is critically important to the interpretation and application of Isaiah's Servant Songs. The historical discussion has produced many proposals. Some interpretations identify the Servant with Israel or a faithful group within Israel; others identify Him with an individual from Israel's past; Messianic interpretations understand the Servant as a future figure whose mission reaches beyond ordinary historical categories.

For this course, the question is not treated merely as an academic puzzle. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 describes a Servant whose suffering, innocence, sacrificial work, and exaltation shape the meaning of the entire passage and the way Christians understand Jesus Christ.

1. Major non-Messianic interpretations

Paul Bucknell's research groups the main alternatives under non-Messianic and Messianic headings rather than only collective and individual categories. The non-Messianic proposals generally locate the Servant in Israel's past or present social history.

Collective proposals

- Israel as a nation, or "corporate Israel."
- Ideal Israel, distinguishing the ideal calling of the nation from the people's actual condition.
- A pious or righteous minority within Israel that suffers on behalf of the larger community.
- Groups such as prophets, priests, or other faithful representatives of Israel.

These proposals take seriously passages in Isaiah where "servant" can refer to Israel. Their difficulty in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is explaining the strongly individualized portrait: the Servant is distinguished from the people, suffers innocently, is cut off, is associated with burial, bears the sins of others, and afterward is exalted and rewarded.

Individual historical proposals

Other scholars have proposed specific individuals from Israel's history or have understood the Servant as an idealized prophetic figure. The history of interpretation contains many different names and reconstructions, often with little agreement. Bucknell notes that some scholars eventually moved away from identifying the Servant with a known historical individual and allowed that the figure belongs to the future.

2. The Messianic interpretation

The Messianic interpretation understands the Servant as a future individual whose mission is not merely political but saving. In the paper's terminology, the Servant is "a soteriological rather than a political Messianic figure." The figure is more than an ordinary representative of Israel: His suffering has meaning for "the many," and His mission reaches nations and kings.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 combines two themes that can appear difficult to join: extraordinary humiliation and extraordinary exaltation. The Servant is disfigured, rejected, oppressed, killed, and buried; yet He acts successfully, affects many nations, justifies the many, sees the fruit of His work, prolongs His days, receives reward, and continues to intercede.

3. Clues within Isaiah 52:13–53:12

- The Servant is presented as an individual figure who can be distinguished from the speakers described as "we" and "us."
- His suffering is repeatedly described as innocent: He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth.
- His suffering is substitutionary. He bears griefs, sorrows, transgressions, iniquities, and the sin of "the many."
- His death and burial are described concretely: He is cut off from the land of the living and associated with a grave.
- His work is sacrificial. Isaiah 53:10 describes His life in terms of a guilt offering.
- His mission reaches beyond Israel: many nations and kings are affected by His work.
- Death is not the end of His story. He sees offspring, prolongs His days, is satisfied with the fruit of His anguish, receives a portion, and makes intercession.

4. Why this course identifies the Servant with Jesus the Messiah

The course follows the Messianic reading because the combined features of the passage converge in Jesus Christ: rejection, innocent suffering, silence before His accusers, death, burial, sacrificial bearing of sin, the justification of the many, resurrection life, exaltation, and continuing intercession.

The course book also points to Acts 8. When the Ethiopian eunuch asks about the suffering figure in Isaiah, Philip begins with that Scripture and tells him the good news about Jesus. For the Christian reading of Isaiah 53, the Servant is therefore not only a subject of historical debate; He is the Messiah whose saving work becomes the pattern for those who follow Him.

5. The course application

Identifying the Servant is only the beginning. Isaiah 53 leads from interpretation to discipleship. Jesus is presented as Savior, Lord, and Grand Mentor. The Servant secures salvation through His

suffering and also shows what faithful service looks like. The course summarizes that path in three movements:

- Accepts God's design for His life (Isaiah 52:13–15).
- Endures hardships (Isaiah 53:1–9).
- Embraces God's greater purpose in hardship (Isaiah 53:10–12).

The goal is not merely to settle the identity question, but to fix our eyes on the Servant, understand His saving work more clearly, and learn to follow His pattern of faithful obedience.

For further study

Students who want the fuller history of interpretation and detailed commentary may also read Paul J. Bucknell's complete paper, "The History of the Servant's Identity, Isaiah 52:13–53:10," provided as an optional course resource.