



TOUCHSTONE
TEXTS

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

ISAIAH 53 FOR THE LIFE
OF THE CHURCH

J. GORDON McCONVILLE

THE SUFFERING SERVANT



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by J. Gordon McConville

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Isaiah 53 for the Life of the Church

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To Gordon J. Wenham



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Series Preface

In writing workshops, “touchstone texts” are high-quality writing samples chosen to illustrate teaching points about compositional techniques, genre conventions, and literary style. Touchstone texts are models that continually repay close analysis. The Christian church likewise possesses core scriptural texts to which it returns, again and again, for illumination and guidance.

In this series, leading biblical scholars explore a selection of biblical touchstone texts from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Individual volumes feature theological *exposition*. To exposit a biblical text means to set forth the sense of the text in an insightful and compelling fashion while remaining sensitive to its interpretive challenges, potential misunderstandings, and practical difficulties. An expository approach interprets the biblical text as a word of God to the church and prioritizes its applicability for preaching, instruction, and the life of faith. It maintains a focus primarily on the biblical text in its received canonical form, rather than engaging in historical reconstruction as an end in itself (whether of the events behind the text or the text’s literary formation). It listens to individual texts in concert with the rest of the biblical canon.

Each volume in this series seeks to articulate the plain sense of a well-known biblical text by what Aquinas called “attending to the way the words go” (*salva litterae circumstantia*). Careful exegesis is pursued either phrase by phrase or section by section (depending on the biblical text’s length and genre). Authors discuss exegetical, theological, and pastoral concerns in combination rather than as discrete moves or units. They offer constructive interpretations that aim to transcend denominational boundaries. They consider the use of these biblical texts in current church practice (including the lectionary) as well as church history. The goal of the series is to model expositional interpretation and thereby equip Christian pastors and teachers to employ biblical texts knowledgeably and effectively within an ecclesial setting.

Texts were chosen for inclusion partly in consultation with the authors of the series. An effort was made to select texts that are representative of various biblical genres and address different facets of the Christian life (e.g., faith, blessing, morality, worship, prayer, mission, hope). These touchstone texts are all widely used in homiletics and catechesis. They are deserving of fresh expositions that enable them to speak anew to the contemporary church and its leaders.

Stephen B. Chapman
Series Editor

||| Acknowledgments

I suppose the book of Isaiah has been with me, one way or another, all my life. At first, this was just by virtue of its firm place in the Christian spirituality and worship in which I was brought up. It provided language and ideas then in ways that I was scarcely aware of. In time, I found it to be one of the Bible's wonders: monumental, mysterious, delightful, sobering, and profoundly challenging. It has been a privilege to teach it over many years and, in recent times, to have had the opportunity to write both a commentary on the whole book and now this volume on Isaiah 53 in Touchstone Texts. Together, they represent my best shot at saying what this great book can mean for the Christian church. For both these opportunities, I am extremely grateful to Jim Kinney and his excellent colleagues at Baker Academic. And for the present series, I am much indebted to Stephen Chapman for inviting me to contribute to it and also for his careful, perceptive, and learned editing.

Like everyone for whom the Bible has been a lifelong companion, I have not read it alone, but with a great company of witnesses too many to name or even remember (*o tempora!*). In these latter days, they include members of St. Matthew's

Church, Cheltenham, who meet as a home group: Malcolm and Sybil Catto, Trevor and Margaret Cooling, Bill Harvey, Charlotte Jamieson, Anne Jones, Andrew Meakin, Ceri Settatee, Rachel Wadsworth, my dear wife, Helen, and, in memoriam, Gwen Harvey, Harold Jones, and Ralph Settatee. They also include members of the group we simply call the Symposium: Dee Carter, David Evans, Andrew Lincoln, John Richardson, and Robert Walker; and former colleagues, like me retired, but who still rejoice in chewing the theological cud: Fred Hughes, Nigel Scotland, and Gordon Wenham (and Andrew Lincoln again). I am immensely grateful to all of these for sharing with me in the unending task of listening to Scripture as we try to walk the Christian way together.

I pick out two of the above for special mention. My wife, Helen, has not only had a quiet but profound influence on all my thinking for the last fifty years, but also for the past six or more has had to share me with Isaiah—a *ménage* that was especially intimate during the years of COVID lockdown! She has been unfailingly supportive and is entitled now to look forward to Isaiah's retirement.

Gordon Wenham was my doctoral supervisor, my first and most important guide in the arts of biblical research, later a colleague at the University of Gloucestershire, and for many years has remained a firm friend. He is a model of both deep scholarship and humble service, and as he approaches (I believe!) his eightieth birthday, I dedicate this volume to him in fond gratitude.

■ A Note on Presentation

The exposition of a biblical text is inevitably indebted to a massive history of scholarship and translation. I set out in chapter 1

some of the implications of this for the interpretation that follows. The translation of the text of Isaiah 53 in chapter 3 is my own. Any fresh translation of a biblical book in English enjoys the luxury of knowing that many others are also available to the reader for comparison. Apart from chapter 3, I have in general defaulted to NRSV.

Biblical chapter and verse references are according to standard English versions. Where the Hebrew numbering varies from the English, this is indicated in the format Isa. 9:2–7 [9:1–6].



Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Exod.	Exodus	Song	Song of Songs
Lev.	Leviticus	Isa.	Isaiah
Num.	Numbers	Jer.	Jeremiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Lam.	Lamentations
Josh.	Joshua	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Judg.	Judges	Dan.	Daniel
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hosea
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Joel	Joel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jon.	Jonah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Mic.	Micah
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Nah.	Nahum
Ezra	Ezra	Hab.	Habakkuk
Neh.	Nehemiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Esther	Esther	Hagg.	Haggai
Job	Job	Zech.	Zechariah
Ps(s).	Psalms	Mal.	Malachi
Prov.	Proverbs		

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Acts	Acts
Mark	Mark	Rom.	Romans
Luke	Luke	1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
John	John	2 Cor.	2 Corinthians

Gal.	Galatians	Heb.	Hebrews
Eph.	Ephesians	James	James
Phil.	Philippians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Col.	Colossians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	2 John	2 John
1 Tim.	1 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Tim.	2 Timothy	Jude	Jude
Titus	Titus	Rev.	Revelation
Philem.	Philemon		

General

BCOT	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament	esp.	especially
ca.	<i>circa</i> , about, approximately	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	no.	number
chap(s).	chapter(s)	Syr.	Syriac
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	Tg.	Targum
		v(v).	verse(s)

Bible Versions

BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>	NIV	New International Version
CEB	Common English Bible	NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
ESV	English Standard Version		
JPS	Jewish Publication Society Tanakh	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
KJV	King James Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version
LXX	Septuagint	Vg.	Latin Vulgate
MT	Masoretic Text		
NASB	New American Standard Bible		

Qumran / Dead Sea Scrolls

1QIsa^a Great Isaiah Scroll

Rabbinic Works and Tractates

b. Babylonian Talmud
Ber. Berakhot



1

Introduction

The text before us is properly designated as Isaiah 52:13–53:12. I will explain why this is so in due course. Mostly, we will refer to it as Isaiah 53, which is a convenient and recognizable shorthand. So when you see “Isaiah 53,” please take it to mean Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

Isaiah 53 contains a stunning portrayal of a man who has suffered beyond measure. He was so scarred by his torments that other people could barely look at him, and they turned away. We are given no clue as to what had reduced him to this state, but his wretched appearance made his isolation even worse. Surely, people thought, someone so extraordinarily marred must have been singled out by God for terrible punishment. This image of a human person in great affliction is rivaled in the Old Testament perhaps only by Job, whose friends thought he too was being punished by God. There are also expressions of extreme distress in certain psalms, in which sufferers speak in their own voices; Psalm 88 is a prime example, with its terrible closing cry of abandonment to lonely darkness. But Isaiah 53 gives us a view from outside, as it were. On the part of the speakers who saw him in his anguish, it is retrospective, for they have

come to realize that they had catastrophically misunderstood him (53:4). Far from indicating God’s displeasure, his suffering actually had a profound purpose in God’s mind: nothing less than the salvation of those who had spurned him.

What changed their minds? The story unfolded in Isaiah 53 does not stop with the image of dereliction in verses 2–3; rather, it has a remarkable outcome. The unfortunate victim is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (53:7 RSV), and he has evidently suffered to the point of death (vv. 8–9). Whether he actually died is implied rather than explicitly stated, a point to which we will return in due course. But he does, unexpectedly, have an afterlife: “He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days” (v. 10 RSV). And there is more to this than mere survival—or even resurrection. For those who once thought him a reprobate have also begun to penetrate into the meaning of his life. This unlikely man has been made “an offering for guilt,” a kind of sacrifice; he will “make many righteous” and even “bear their iniquities” (53:10–11). The whole picture, indeed, is framed with assertions of his exaltation and reward: “He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high” (52:13 RSV); and “[the LORD] will divide him a portion with the great” (53:12 RSV).

This, then, is the man introduced to the reader only as the LORD’s “servant” (52:13). Resemblances to the story of Jesus will be obvious to any who know the Gospels, and it is no surprise that the earliest Christians, who knew this text as part of their Scripture, should have taken it to point to him. It has even been doubly canonized in Christian thought and worship, not least through George Frideric Handel’s great oratorio *Messiah*. Perhaps more than any other single part of Scripture, Isaiah 53 has taught Christians who Jesus was and how he became the savior of the world. In the present volume, we aim to consider how the great poem helps unfold this central theme of Christian belief.

To that end, however, we hope to read it, not simply as a stepping stone on the way to the revelation of Christ, but also for its enormous power of expression and its sheer impact on the reader.

■ Isaiah 53 and Jesus

When the risen Jesus walked with two disciples to the village of Emmaus, “he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27 NRSV). They did not recognize him as they had talked along the way, but only when he broke bread with them in a house in the village. Then they reflected on how deeply moved they had been as he had expounded Scripture to them. Their glad recognition of the risen Christ was bound up with their realization that their Scriptures, which they certainly knew well, had come to a wonderful fulfillment in him.

Is it possible that Isaiah 53 was one of the texts Jesus used in explaining to them the real significance of who he was? A number of New Testament pointers show how important it became to the early Christians in helping them understand who Jesus was and what he had done. Prominent among them is the apostle Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian royal official returning home after worshiping in Jerusalem, whom Philip finds puzzling over Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:26–40). What had brought this highly placed Ethiopian to worship in Jerusalem, and how he came to be reading Isaiah, are intriguing questions that the text leaves unanswered, apart from the clear indication that the Spirit of God was somehow in these events. So here is this foreigner reading about a person he knows nothing about:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth. (Acts 8:32–33 NRSV;
Isa. 53:7)

Just as we do not hear the words of Jesus on the Emmaus road, we do not hear how Philip explained the text. But Philip was living in the searching light of the recent resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and we read that “he told [the official] the good news of Jesus” (*euēngelisato autō ton Iēsoun*; Acts 8:35). For him, this text was “gospel,” or “good news” (*euangelion*), about the “sheep led to the slaughter,” which spoke powerfully to him about these overwhelming events and told him that they had always been in the mind of God.¹

So the episode casts a bright light on how the Spirit of God worked in deepening the disciples’ understanding of their vocation to bring the gospel of Christ to the whole world. It is the Spirit who prompts Philip to go to the man in the chariot and ask him, not what he is reading, but if he understands it. And when the man has been baptized and has gone on his way rejoicing, the Spirit takes Philip further on his missionary journey. At the heart of this transformational moment is the interpretation of Scripture and its focus on the man Jesus.

Luke (the author of Acts) also tells in his Gospel of the wise old Israelite Simeon. It is Simeon who, when Mary and Joseph bring the child Jesus to the temple for his dedication, takes him in his arms and declares his joy at having witnessed for himself, in this child, the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise of salvation to Israel. His sense of completion is such that he utters the prayer that has become known to the church as the *Nunc Dimittis*, a supreme expression of a life fulfilled and a readiness for death (Luke 2:29–32). Most importantly, the prayer shows how Simeon’s deep knowledge of Scripture, hand in hand with

1. There is a scholarly question about the ways in which New Testament texts refer or allude to Isa. 53 and how they interpret it. For example, does Luke’s citation of Isa. 53:7 imply that he meant the whole context to be understood by the reader, including Christ’s atoning death for sin? Questions of this sort will be addressed in chap. 4 below.

revelation by the Holy Spirit (2:26), is brought to bear on his intense experience of the work of God. The words of the prayer have strong resonances with Isaiah 40–55, and most notably 52:10, part of the immediate prelude to chapter 53.

What these three stories have in common (all, as it happens, from the writings of Luke) is their testimony to how the first Christians came to a new understanding of their familiar Scriptures, finding their deepest meaning in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How did this happen? Crucially, they were rereading their Bible in the light of Jesus’s resurrection and ascension. They had come to believe that their crucified and risen Lord was indeed the Christ. And this set them on the challenging path of reading the Scriptures from a Christian point of view. They did not yet call that Scripture the “Old Testament”; it was still simply their Bible, which had taught them everything they knew about God. But now their understanding, led by the Spirit of God, had irrevocably changed. This did not mean that it was suddenly fully formed, however. These disciples had merely set out on what would be a long journey of reflection and learning. The fulfillment of the Scriptures in Jesus would have the effect of driving them back to those Scriptures, to keep deepening and feeding their apprehension of him. Traces of their growing understanding of the “suffering servant” are heard in other parts of the New Testament, such as 1 Peter 2:23–24. And this path of deepening perception continues still.

So is the servant figure at the center of Isaiah 53 to be identified as Jesus? When these verses were first penned, they had no such reference. The book of Isaiah was written for audiences who lived several hundred years before Jesus, and for whom it was intended to make sense in their own world. To say, therefore, that Isaiah 53 speaks about Jesus raises unavoidable questions about how the Old Testament became Scripture for