

ISAIAH'S "OTHER" SERVANT SONGS

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The latter chapters of Isaiah contain a series of beautiful poetic prophecies about a servant who would bless the world through his life, labors, and suffering. Collectively these prophecies are known as the “Servant Songs” or the “Servant Psalms.” Though an issue of some debate, a typical list of the Servant Songs includes Isaiah 42:1–6; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–15; 53:1–12.¹

Through the centuries, scholars, saints, and students have debated the identity of the servant. Some speculate the servant is Isaiah himself. Others suggest that perhaps the servant is Cyrus, the great and magnanimous king who united the Medes and Persians, conquered Babylon, and allowed the Jews to return to Judah. One of the songs, Isaiah 49:1–7, specifically identifies Israel as the servant. Still others see Moses, Jeremiah, and Abraham as fulfillments of the prophecies.² Indeed, a case can be made for each of these individuals or entities, and others, to be a fulfillment of some of the Servant Song prophecies, but Latter-day Saints and other Christians typically identify “the Servant”

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as Jesus Christ, for it can be shown that he fulfills all the prophecies of the Servant Songs and some only he can fulfill. Thus while other individuals or entities such as Isaiah, Cyrus, or Israel appear to fulfill certain portions of the Servant Songs' prophecies, in that capacity they can appropriately be viewed as a type or a symbol for Jesus Christ—the Servant who fulfills them all.

While a study of what the Servant Songs may have meant in their ancient context in regards to these other entities who have been identified as the servant is a fascinating and worthwhile endeavor, this study will focus primarily on how, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, the Servant Songs can be applied to Christ and what important truths they can reveal about our Savior. Arguably, the best known of the Servant Songs is Isaiah 53. This beloved chapter can be understood to foretell the mortal Messiah's humble beginnings and appearance, as well as his sorrows, suffering, and ultimate atoning sacrifice. This study will not review Isaiah 53 in any detail, but rather, focus on the other, lesser-known Servant Songs that likewise can be interpreted to tell us much about the mortal Messiah's ministry and mission.

SONG 1

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.

A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

Thus saith God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.
(Isaiah 42:1–7)

The voice in this first Servant Song is Jehovah, speaking in the first person on behalf of the Father. The opening verse of the song (see Isaiah 42:1) tells us much about the sacred relationship between our Heavenly Father and the Servant, his Son, Jesus Christ. We learn from the passage that Christ serves the Father and that the Father upholds and supports the Son. We are taught that God elected or chose the Son for the work and delights in him. We are further taught that Christ has the Spirit of God upon him as he serves. The verse helps us understand that the relationship between the Father and the Son is one of unity, love, trust, and support.

This first verse of the song closes with the assurance that the Servant's labors will bring "judgment" or justice to the Gentiles.³ The Hebrew term *mishpat*, translated here as "judgment," can refer to either a favorable or unfavorable verdict or sentence.⁴ Likely those in Isaiah's day who had suffered at the hands of some of the Gentile nations preferred to understand this promised "judgment" to be a punishment to be poured down upon those who had oppressed them, but the sixth verse of the passage suggests that the justice to be given the Gentiles through the Servant would be a blessing rather than a curse, for the Servant was to be given "for a light of the Gentiles" (42:6; see also Isaiah 60:1–5). It is helpful to understand "light" in this context as truth, knowledge, and intelligence (see D&C 93:24–37). Thus the ministry of the Messiah would serve and bless all, Israel and Gentiles alike, leading both out of darkness.

The next three verses (see Isaiah 42:2–4) tell us something about the mortal ministry of Christ. In the meridian of time, when Jesus was born, many of the descendants of Israel were looking for a Messiah who would come in great power and glory, destroy the wicked, and usher in a great theocracy of peace—they were looking for the millennial Messiah.⁵ But this song speaks of a different coming of the Messiah, the coming of the mortal Messiah, whose ministry would be quiet and gentle, whose "voice" would not be "heard in the street," and whose actions would be so tender and quiet that even a delicate, bruised, or damaged reed would not be broken thereby, nor would a feeble "smoking flax" or smoldering

wick of a lamp be quenched by his passing. While those close to Jesus were deeply moved and changed by his ministry, on the worldwide stage it drew little attention. The millennial Messiah's coming would shake the earth, and every knee would bow and every tongue would confess (see Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; D&C 88:104), but the Servant's first coming would pass largely unnoticed by most of contemporary humankind. We see this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus's birth to a humble woman in simple surroundings and in his modest and quiet upbringing in an obscure village located in a relatively unremarkable part of the ancient world. His teachings were mostly unknown beyond his own people and land, and his death drew little notice in the Roman Empire.⁶

We further learn that though the Servant's ministry would be comparatively quiet and humble, he would indeed establish truth and justice on the earth. We are also assured that he would not fail (see Isaiah 42:3–4). Certainly we shared that conviction in the primordial councils when we accepted the Father's plan for our happiness and the Servant as our Savior. That faith is found and demonstrated in mortality as we become part of the "isles [that] shall wait for his law" (v. 4). The Book of Mormon teaches us that *isles* is the term Isaiah uses to refer to the scattered covenant people (see 1 Nephi 21:1).⁷ In our dispensation it includes those who recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the mortal Messiah and who anxiously anticipate the return of the servant as the millennial Messiah. In the next two verses of this song, Jehovah reminds us of his role as the Creator and giver of life (see Isaiah 42:5) and then, again speaking in the first person as the Father, addresses the Servant directly. He assures the Servant of his divine appointment and support, explaining that he has been given in fulfillment of a covenant (see v. 6).

While scholars often do not include verse 7 in this Servant Song, it seems to be a continuation of the thought in verse 6. Here we learn that in addition to bringing "light" to the Gentiles (v. 6), he will open the eyes of the blind (see v. 7), a promise fulfilled both literally as he healed the blind during his mortal ministry and figuratively as he helps us see truth. He will set prisoners free (see v. 7), another prophecy dualistically fulfilled as he frees us from sin and death through his atoning sacrifice, and as he provided for those in spirit prison to be taught the gospel (see 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6; D&C 138:18–21, 30).

Thus this doctrinally rich Servant Song can give us an inspiring glimpse of the Servant Messiah as one who is chosen, loved, and supported. It assures us that though he will have a quiet and largely unnoticed mortal ministry, he will not fail as he labors to bring light, truth, vision, and freedom to all of his Father's children.

SONG 2

And again: Hearken, O ye house of Israel, all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel. Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.

And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me;

And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.⁸

Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God.

And now, saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and my God shall be my strength.

And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.

Thus saith the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the Lord that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee.

Thus saith the Lord, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve

thee, and give thee *my servant* for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages;

That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. (Isaiah 49:1–9 and 1 Nephi 21:1–9; italicized words are unique to 1 Nephi 21)⁹

As Nephi quoted this Servant Song to his brothers, he included several lines of text in the first verse not found in other current versions of the Old Testament. These unique lines are italicized in the quote above. It is not clear whether these additional lines were in the ancient text of Isaiah that Nephi knew, or if these lines are his own commentary, added to help his brothers understand that “isles,” to whom this song is addressed, refers to that part of the house of Israel who had been “broken off,” “driven out,” and “scattered abroad” (1 Nephi 21:1)—a part of Israel that included the descendants of Lehi. As Nephi quoted the eighth verse of this passage, he also retained or added the words “my servant,” thereby helping us understand that the Servant was given “for a covenant” and that this Servant Song likely extends at least through verse 9 rather than ending at verse 7 as is commonly thought.

This song begins with the Servant speaking in the first person.¹⁰ The Servant’s words add a second witness to many of the truths taught in the first song (Isaiah 42:1–7). We are taught again that the Servant was chosen and called early, even “from the womb” (49:1, 5; see also 42:1). Jesus was not, as some early Christian sects believed, simply a man that lived such a good life in mortality that God chose to put his Spirit in him.¹¹ Rather, he was elected in the premortal life (see John 1:1; Moses 4:2). We are also taught again that the Servant would be a “light to the Gentiles” (49:6; see also 42:1, 6), that he would be supported by the Father (see 49:8; 42:1, 6), and that he would set prisoners free (see 49:9; 42:7). It is interesting to note that the Hebrew term translated as “salvation” in 49:6 is *Yeshua*, from which the Greek name Jesus is derived, further identifying the Servant as Jesus Christ.¹²

Irony and paradox flavor much of this song. The Servant explains that though he is both well prepared and powerful, having his mouth made “like a sharp sword” and being a “polished shaft,” yet he is hidden in the Father’s hand and kept in the Father’s quiver (49:2), reminding us

again that the mortal Messiah conducted his ministry humbly and quietly, in a part of the world that many of his contemporaries would have considered obscure and unimportant (see 42:2–3).

The paradox continues in the following verses as the Servant seems to present opposing perspectives on the accomplishments of his ministry. He appears to observe that while on one hand his strength and labor seem to have been spent in vain, for “Israel hath not been gathered,” on the other hand he will have accomplished God’s work and is to be judged of the Lord (49:4). In response to the Servant’s observation God assures him that though Jacob may not yet be “gathered,” his efforts would still be pleasing and “glorious” to the Lord and God will strengthen him (49:5).

These opposing perspectives of the Savior’s mortal ministry, one of failure and the other of pleasing accomplishment, can perhaps be illustrated by some of the events of the Savior’s last week in mortality. On Palm Sunday, the last Sunday before his Crucifixion, Christ made his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem for the Passover. Having endured many years of oppression and vassalage to foreign nations, the Jews at that time commonly hoped and believed that the Messiah would come at the Passover, overthrow their oppressors, and establish a theocracy of peace and prosperity.

Many at this particular Passover knew of Jesus of Nazareth and how he had recently demonstrated miraculous messianic powers by waiting until the fourth day and then raising his friend Lazarus from the tomb (see John 11:1–46). They wondered if he was indeed the hoped-for Messiah, if he would come to Jerusalem that very Passover, overthrow the Romans, and begin his messianic reign (see John 12:55–56). We can imagine the excitement that ran through the people in that climate of anxious anticipation when the word quickly spread that Jesus was indeed coming to Jerusalem. As Christ approached the city from the top of the Mount of Olives, riding on an ass in fulfillment of Zechariah’s messianic prophecy (see Zechariah 9:9), the people flocked to meet him, casting clothing and palm branches to pave his way and crying out “Hosanna in the highest” (Matthew 21:9; see also Mark 11; Luke 19; John 12).

The plea “Hosanna,” a contraction of two Hebrew words meaning “favor us, we implore” or “save us now, we pray,” reveals what the people expected of Jesus.¹³ Many likely thought he would ride into Jerusalem

through the eastern gate, go to the Antonia Fortress, that hated symbol of Roman oppression and dominance built overlooking the Temple, and destroy the Romans stationed there. They wanted their Messiah to give them deliverance and freedom now. We can imagine the people's disappointment when, rather than fulfilling their messianic hopes, Christ entered the city through the gate, went to the Temple, and, after he had "looked around," left Jerusalem for Bethany (Mark 11:11). Some must have judged him a fraud and an imposter. Perhaps some were among those who only a few days later changed their cries from "Hosanna" to "Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21). Few seemed to recognize that the mortal Servant came to conquer something far greater than Romans and political oppressors. He came to conquer sin and death. How fortunate we are that at that moment, rather than doing the will of the people, Christ chose to do the will of the Father. How blessed we are that he understood that his mission was to be "glorious in the eyes of the Lord" rather than the Jews and that his "work" was with God rather than mortal man (Isaiah 49:4-5). To some it may have appeared that he spent his labor and strength "in vain," but the Father knew that his Servant's work would bring "salvation unto the end of the earth" (vv. 4, 6). Ultimately, though he would be despised of men, he would be chosen of God, and "Kings" and "Princes" would come to worship him (v. 7).

SONG 3

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back.

I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

For the Lord God will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.

He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me.

Behold, the Lord God will help me; who is he that shall condemn me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up. (Isaiah 50:4–9)

The Servant again speaks in the first person in this song. He acknowledges God's hand in preparing for and supporting him in the work, giving him the "tongue of the learned," wakening and opening his ears so that he could learn (50:4–5). The testimony reminds us of the boy Jesus's remarkable ability to learn and understand his Father's will, even to the point of astonishing the "doctors" as he heard and questioned them in the Temple when he was just twelve years old (Luke 2:42–52). The Servant then speaks of the persecution he would endure as he would willingly allow himself to be smitten and spat upon (see Isaiah 50:5–6),¹⁴ foreshadowing the cruel treatment he would receive at the hands of Pilate and the Roman soldiers commissioned to scourge and crucify him (see Matthew 26:31). The Servant closes the song by testifying of his confidence that God would sustain and support him, while his adversaries would "wax old" and be eaten up (Isaiah 50:7–9), a prophecy fulfilled as the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders who condemned him faded in infamy, while the redeeming work of the Servant is praised and persists through eternity.

SONG 4

Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high.

As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men:

So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider. (Isaiah 52:13–15)

This song begins and ends with praise to the Servant, recognizing his wisdom, his exaltation, and the reverence he will receive from "kings" as they learn of him (52:13, 15). We see the prophecy fulfilled as we remember his role as Jehovah in the Old Testament, as we consider the wisdom manifested in his teachings and actions during his mortal ministry, as we

recognize his place with the Father in the eternities, and as we learn of kings and rulers who have placed their faith in him.

The middle of the song speaks of the Servant's "visage" or appearance being "marred" or disfigured more than that of any other man (52:14). We can see one fulfillment of this prophecy in the Savior's agony in Gethsemane. As Elder James E. Talmage explained:

He struggled and groaned under a burden such as no other being who has lived on earth might even conceive as possible. It was not physical pain, nor mental anguish alone, that caused Him to suffer such torture as to produce an extrusion of blood from every pore; but a spiritual agony of soul such as only God was capable of experiencing. No other man, however great his powers of physical or mental endurance, could have suffered so; for his human organism would have succumbed, and syncope would have produced unconsciousness and welcome oblivion. In that hour of anguish Christ met and overcame all the horrors that Satan, "the prince of this world" could inflict.¹⁵

The song then explains that the Servant would suffer and be so marred in order to "sprinkle many nations" (52:15). The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible substitutes the word "gather" for "sprinkle" in this passage. The substitution makes excellent sense to Latter-day Saints who understand that through his atoning suffering, by being marred more than any, our Savior opened the way for us to be gathered, reunited and made "at-one" with our Heavenly Father. To the Old Testament people the Hebrew word *nazah*, translated "sprinkle" in the King James Version, would have made excellent sense as well, for this verb is typically used in the context of purification rites.¹⁶ They would have understood, as do we today, that through his suffering, the Servant would purify and sanctify many.¹⁷

SUMMARY

The Servant Songs of Isaiah can be seen as a remarkable collection of prophecies about our Savior. While Isaiah 53 is perhaps the most beloved and well known by Christians, the other Servant Songs can tell us much about the mission and message of the Messiah. From them we can learn

of the unity, trust, and support shared by the Father and the Son. We can be taught of the election, preparation, and determination of Christ. In them we can find a prophecy of his powerful yet humble and quiet mortal ministry, which would bless all, Israel and Gentiles alike. We can learn of his unflinching labors to do the will of the Father, even in the face of persecution and regardless of what mortal men expected of him. We are reminded that he condescended to suffer and die for us, to provide a way for us to be purified, sanctified, and gathered back to the Father.

NOTES

1. Compare for example Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004), 327–28; and Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Platzner, *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Sacramento: McGraw Hill, 2008), 282–83.

2. For a sample and review of the debate, see Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 358; Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 352; Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*, 328–29; Harris and Platzner, *Old Testament*, 282–83.

3. In this context, Gentiles refers to nations not considered part of Israel.

4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1906; reprint by Christian Copy Rights, 1983), 1047–48.

5. For a review of Jewish messianic hope in the meridian of time, see James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 40, 452; Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethany to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 43, 258–59; Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1945), 171–72.

6. The prophecies of a relatively quiet, unnoticed mortal ministry of the Messiah apply to the Old World, for in the New World of the Nephites and Lamanites, his birth was accompanied by widely recognized signs and wonders and his death by tremendous destruction and upheaval in the land, as prophesied by Samuel the Lamanite and others (see Helaman 14; 3 Nephi 1, 8–9).

7. This verse in 1 Nephi quotes from Isaiah 49 and adds several lines of clarification concerning the identity of the “isles” to whom the prophecy is directed.

8. As translated in the King James Version, this verse appears to identify Israel as the servant, though later in the song Israel is to be gathered and saved by the Servant (see Isaiah 49:5). In the Hebrew it is unclear whether Israel is the servant or the entity that is to be glorified in this verse. Regardless, even if the servant is identified as Israel, this prophecy can, and in my view should, be understood dualistically as referring to Christ as well, for only he fulfills all the Servant prophecies.

9. While most conclude the Servant Song found in chapter 49 at verse 6 (see note 1 above), the Book of Mormon addition of the phrase “my servant” in verse 8 suggests the text is still speaking of the Servant after verse 6 and that the song can be extended through verse 9, as I have chosen to do herein.

10. The Servant speaks of the future in the past tense in these verses, employing a prophetic style called the “prophetic perfect.” Abinadi defined this style as “speaking of things to come as though they had already come” (Mosiah 16:6).

11. This was a belief held by some Gnostic Christians. For a discussion of the issue, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6–7, 191.

12. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 447.

13. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 333, 609.

14. Here again the Servant is speaking in the prophetic perfect. See note 5 above.

15. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 568–69.

16. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 633.

17. The Isaiah scroll from the Qumran corpus has a verb with the same root as “Messiah,” meaning “anointed,” in place of the verb “marred” in this passage. The teaching that the servant would be “anointed” more than any other man likewise makes excellent sense in this passage. When teaching the descendants of Lehi, the Savior used the imagery of being marred more than any other in reference to a latter-day servant that is typically understood to be the Prophet Joseph Smith (see 3 Nephi 21:10–11).