

THE "SERVANT" OF ISAIAH IS BOTH AN INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE NATION OF ISRAEL¹

(Michael S. Heiser)

We immediately think of the Messiah at the mention of the servant in the book of Isaiah. This is natural, since the one whom the prophet said would be led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isa. 53:7) and have our sins placed upon him (Isa. 53:6) is called God's servant twice (Isa. 52:13; 53:11). But the servant of Isaiah is often not an individual messianic figure. In several passages, Israel is that servant. For example, in Isaiah 41:8 God speaks to "Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen." But in the very next chapter, God sends a servant to the nation of Israel (Isa. 42:1,18-25). Then the prophet moves back to the corporate servant of Israel in the chapters that immediately follow:

But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!
Thus says the LORD who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you:
Fear not, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen. (Isa. 44:1-2)

Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you; you are my servant. (Isa. 44:21)

For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen... (Isa. 45:4)

And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified." (Isa. 49:3)

Oddly enough, the final reference sets up a transition back to the individual servant whom God sends to Israel:

And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him. (Isa. 49:5)

Why the back-and-forth? Can't Isaiah make up his mind? There's a good reason. Both portraits are in Isaiah. Throughout the Old Testament, the nation was represented by a single individual, and by language describing a single figure. Israel is called God's son (Ex. 4:22-23). Later, the king of Israel will be called God's son (Ps. 2:7). King David was called God's servant (Ps. 89:3, 20). This royal son of God was, of course, from the line of David, the line that would produce the Messiah—Jesus, God's Son, (John 3:16).

The logic here is that Israel was supposed to be God's offspring (his "son") through Abraham. Israel was supposed to be above all nations since her king was above all kings. (Ps. 89:27). Israel failed, and so God had to accomplish his plan himself. He would come as a man to fulfill the role of son, servant, Messiah, and King. The back-and-forth portrait shows us that God knew all along he would have to fulfill his own expectations to redeem humanity.



¹ This is taken from a book I highly recommend, *Brief Insights on Mastering the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), pp.121-122.