

**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Isaiah 41:1-4**  
 by Lorin L. Cranford  
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**God's Servant**



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**Quick Links to the Study**

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This study begins a four part study of the Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah. These are found in Isa. [42:1-4](#), [49:1-6](#), [50:4-11](#), [52:13-53:13](#). Use of verses from this material is extensive in the New Testament and will be explored as a part of the studies. A part of the challenge of these songs is highlighted in the [Wikipedia article](#) on Isaiah

Songs of the Suffering Servant or Servant poems are four poems taken from the Book of Isaiah written about a certain "servant of Yahweh". The first poem describes God's selection for the Servant who will bring justice to earth. The second poem, written from the Servant's point of view, is an account of having been called by God to lead the nations. The third poem has a darker tone than the others, with a first-person description of how the Servant was beaten and abused. The last and longest Servant poem, Isaiah 53, which is also the most famous, is a declaration that the Servant has "lifted our iniquities" and was "crushed for our iniquities", which many Christians believe to be Messianic prophecies of Jesus. Another interpretation is that the Servant is a metaphor for the Hebrew people.



These studies will provide us an opportunity to step into the biblical world of "prophecy" and try to understand the nature of such material in the Bible. Hopefully, the shallow pitfalls of much of modern discussion where prophecy is understood merely as predicting an event in the future can be avoided. The biblical subject is much too rich to be reduced down to something little more than "palm reading."

How ancient Israelites understood these songs is the beginning point of any study. Then the interpretative traditions in both intertestamental Judaism and early Christianity provide the legitimate extension of this understanding. Only from such an analysis can one glean relevance and significance of this scripture material for our day.

**I Context**

The historical and literary background for our passage take on particular significance. Thus careful attention will be given to each because of their impact on the interpretation of the passage.

**a. Historical**

**External History.** The modern discussion about the origin of the book of Isaiah revolves around

the issue of the literary unity of this lengthy document. Central to this discussion is the question of a single or multiple origin. That is, do the contents of the entire document go back to the prophet Isaiah, who preached (742-701 BCE) in the southern kingdom of Judah during the critical years of the Assyrian crisis? Or, do only chapters 1-39 relate to this Isaiah of Jerusalem? That leaves chapters forty through sixty-six. The question of the origin of these chapters is somewhat divided over whether they come from a single prophet, deutero-Isaiah, or

tributed to Isaiah ben-Amoz (not to be confused with the prophet Amos) by the editorial superscription in 1:1. But in fact, the book contains prophetic material spanning more than two hundred years. A nucleus of materia is attributable to **Isaiah of Jerusalem**, a citizen of Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C.E. The remainder comes from a series of anonymous disciples (see 8:16, which mentions his followers) and prophets who saw themselves, or were seen by editors, as coming out of the Isaiah mold.

The book of Isaiah is widely recognized to consist of three sub-collections (see Table 10.1). Chapters 1-

**Table 10.1 The Three Isaiahs** (from [Bandstra](#))

Chapters	Book	Title	Period	B.C.E.
1-39	First Isaiah	Isaiah of Jerusalem	Assyrian	742-701
40-55	Second Isaiah	Isaiah of the exile	Babyloneian exile	546-538
56-66	Third Isaiah	Isaiah of the restoration	Restoration of Judah	538-520

whether two prophets or prophetic traditions account for the origin of these chapters. If so, then chapters forty through fifty-five trace back to a “Isaiah of the exile” (546-538 BCE), and chapters fifty-six through sixty-six go back to a “Isaiah of the restoration” (538-520 BCE).

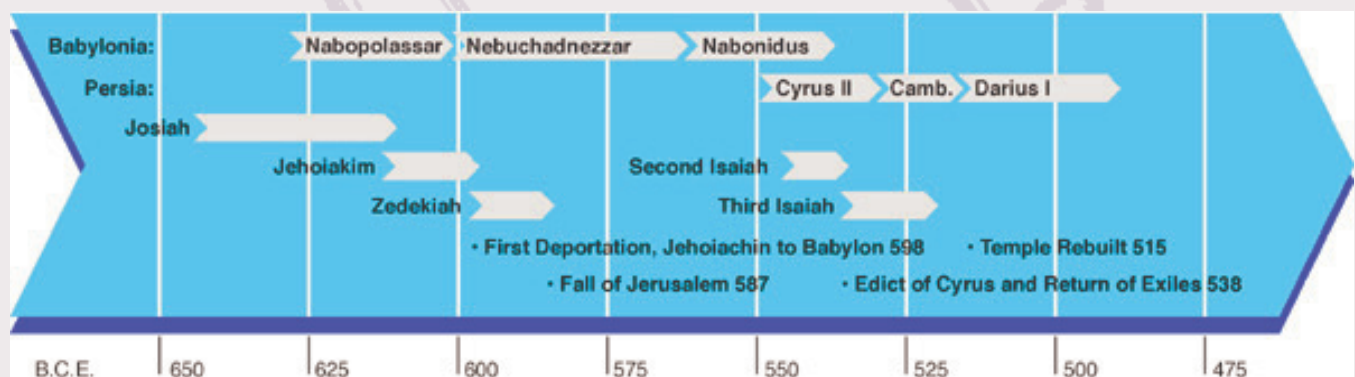
Most contemporary Old Testament scholars will see the discussion as revolving around this latter issue, and that Isa. 40-66 come from the period of the exile and restoration, which was some two hundred years after the ministry of the prophet Isaiah who worked in Jerusalem. Whether this material comes from a single or multiple traditions is the focal point of the discussion. That is, is there a twofold source for the book, or a threefold origin?

Barry L. Bandstra (*Reading the Old Testament*, 3rd ed., pp. 316ff) effectively summarizes this latter view:

The book of Isaiah is a collection of Isaiah’s many sayings, and provides a fine illustration of the growth of prophetic traditions. The entire book of Isaiah is at-

39 make up **First Isaiah**. The core of this collection is prophecies from the namesake of the book who lived in the eighth century B.C.E. In this period Israel and Judah were threatened by the Assyrian empire. Chapters 40-55 make up **Second Isaiah**, also called Deutero-Isaiah. This collection consists largely of salvation oracles applying to the situation of exile in Babylonia dating to the mid-sixth century B.C.E. Chapters 56-66 make up **Third Isaiah**, which also is called Trito-Isaiah and which applies to the late sixth century in Judah where the Jewish community was struggling to rebuild itself.

Of course, this issue diminishes in importance with the realization of the work of editors who took earlier traditions from both written and oral sources and reworked the material into the form that we know today. The impact on interpretation will largely revolve around whether the “Isaiahs” were ministering to the people of their own day, or addressing issues related only to future generations of the Jewish people. The first view is more consistent with the



From Barry Bandstra, [Reading the Old Testament](#), p. 325

prophetic materials generally in the Old Testament.

**Internal History.** Given the above view of multiple origins of the material, our text comes in the Deutero-Isaiah section where the prophecies are addressing concerns of those Jewish exiles living in Babylonia in the mid-sixth century B.C.E. The background of this prophet is unknown. He lived in exile and ministered along side Ezekiel to those Jewish captives living in Babylonia. He clearly considered himself in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem who had spoken to the nation of Judah a century before. His mission was to offer these Jewish captives a reason to continue believing in the God of Israel in

spite of the destruction of their homeland. Thus, a basic theme of chaps. 40-55 is hope and affirmation that God still cares for His people. God's intention is to provide deliverance to those who love and serve Him.

Again, Bandsta (p. 324) provides a helpful summation:

This prophet, though nameless, is one of the most inspiring of all time. And judging by the synthesis of traditions he was able to pull together, his originality, and his brilliant poetry, he was tremendously gifted. He drew from Israel's historic faith and reapplied it to the new setting of exile, giving the people reason for hope.

## b. Literary

**Genre.** At the larger level of literary form, this text is a part of *prophecy*. As a literary form, as well as a religious expression, prophecy has taken on many different meanings over the centuries. These meanings have both positive and negative tones.

As a background reference with much more detail, let me list several important web sites that contain detailed discussions, and that also reflect a wide range of viewpoint about the subject: For those using the internet version of this study, the hyperlink to the internet source is found in the underlining of the source title. All of these sources have free access on the internet. Others could be cited but are not available in free access on the internet.

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Prophet, Prophetess, Prophecy," [Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#) Kaiser will represent a conservative evangelical view on this topic of biblical prophecy.

Jean Calès, "Prophecy, Prophet, and Prophetess," [Catholic Encyclopedia](#). A very extensive presentation of biblical concepts representing a conservative Roman Catholic perspective.

"Prophecy," [Wikipedia](#). A wide ranging discussion of prophecy in Christian, and non-Christian traditions.

Emil G. Hirsch, J. Frederic McCurdy, and Joseph Jacobs, "Prophets and Prophecy," [Jewish Encyclopedia](#). An extensive tracing of the history of the idea of prophecy in Judaism from the Old Testament to modern times.

Although very interesting, the idea of prophecy and prophets outside the Christian Bible goes beyond our concern here. We will give consideration to biblical prophecy. Other aspects will come into the picture as they relate to this focus.

The article on prophecy in the [Wikipedia](#) source does provide a helpful background summary of the idea of prophecy generally:

Throughout history, some individuals or groups have actively sought foreknowledge of future events from individuals or groups who promoted themselves as agents of prophecy, such as Oracles at Delphi in ancient Greece. Usually this practice was accompanied by divination ritual, and a fee, payment or donation expected by the agent or group. Cultures in which active prophecy played an important role include the Assyrians, Celts, Chaldeans, Chinese, Druids, Egyptians, Greeks, Indians, indigenous North Americans, Mayans, Tibetans, and many in the Christian and Muslim traditions, among others.

In general consideration of biblical prophecy, one has to look first at the Hebrew Bible on its own terms. Next, the issue of the connection of the New Testament to the Old Testament by way of OT prophecy fulfilled in the NT needs examination. Finally, the issue of prophecy in the NT looking forward in time concludes the topic. The first two of these are more significant for our study of Isaiah 42.

**OT prophecy.** The idea of prophecy and prophets in the Old Testament is a developing concept, rather than a static idea. It functioned at different levels. This is reflected first of all in the variety of Hebrew words that can be translated as prophecy and prophet. The [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) article has a helpful summary:

**Terms Used for the Prophetic Function.** The name "prophet," from the Greek meaning "forespeaker" ( $\pi\rho\omicron$  being used in the original local sense), is an equivalent of the Hebrew  $\text{נְבִיא}$ , which signifies properly a delegate or mouthpiece of another (see Ex. vii. 1), from the general Semitic sense of the root, "to declare," "announce." Synonymous to a certain degree was the word "seer" ( $\text{תוֹזֵה רְיָאֵת}$ ), which, as I Sam. ix. 9 indicates, was an earlier designation than "prophet,"

at least in popular speech. The usage of these words gives the historical starting-point for inquiring as to the development of true prophetism in Israel. But there is an earlier stage still than that of “seeing,” for it may be observed that while Samuel was currently called “the seer,” a prominent part of his manifold work was divining. There are several Hebrew terms for divination of one kind or another; but none of these is used as a synonym for “prophesying.” Moreover, the words for “seer” are used quite rarely, the probable explanation being that the bulk of the canonical writings proceed from a time when it was considered that the special function of declaring or announcing characterized prophecy in Israel better than the elementary offices of divining or seeing. At the same time it must be remembered that “seeing” is always an essential condition of true prophecy; hence the continued use of the term “vision” to the last days of prophetic history, long after the time when seeing had ceased to be the most distinctive function of the prophet.

“Prophesying” in the early stages had more to do with predicting the future for individuals, or for finding hidden things. But the larger sense of the term had to do with a divinely anointed person making known the will of God to His people inclusively. In this sense Moses stands as the first “prophet.” Samuel and then Elijah and Elisha follow in this tradition. But beginning with the eighth century prophets something changes. Amos stands as the fountain head of the writing prophets and thus as a model for all who came after him. These individuals stand apart from the priesthood in the temple. They play no political role as did Samuel on occasion. Many of them have no formal religious training other than what any Hebrew boy would have received during his growing up years. They express a sense of divine calling to deliver God’s message to His people. This becomes central to their justifying a harsh message of impending judgment from God. Often in modern description, the label “forth teller” is used rather than “fore teller.” [Kaiser](#) puts it well with his summary:

However, in spite of the absence of any definitive consensus on the real meaning of the word “prophet” there are at least two classical texts that demonstrate the usage of this term and its meaning in the biblical texts. The first is Exodus 7:1-2 (cf. [Exod 4:15-16](#)):



“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh.’” What could be clearer? A prophet (*nabi* [נָבִיא]) is one who receives a word from God, just as Moses acted in the place of God in passing on the divine revelations he received from the Lord to his brother Aaron, now functioning as a prophet. Moreover, a prophet is authorized to communicate this divine message to another. Thus Aaron was to function as Moses’ mouthpiece.

The second classical text is Numbers 12:6-8: “When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord.” In the case of Moses, vis-a-vis all other prophets, God would speak in direct conversation—“face to face.” Other prophets would receive no less a revelation from God, but in their case the means God would use to communicate his word would be the less direct, somewhat enigmatic form of dreams and visions.

Clearly, then, a prophet is an authorized spokesperson for God with a message that originated with God and was communicated through a number of means. When God spoke to these spokespersons, they had no choice but to deliver that word to those to whom God directed it.

The message delivered by the prophet had immediate application to his targeted audience. But it also had relevance and application to subsequent audiences over time. Multiple “fulfillments” or applications exist in the prophet’s message. This became

the basis of the enduring value of his message long after the prophet had passed from the scene. From Amos on this enduring message was captured in the written expression of his message, and that lasting value played an important role in the creation of the written expression of his preaching.

Gradually in the intertestamental period the Israelites realized that predictive prophecy as reflected in the OT had ceased (cf. 1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41). Yet, Judaism from the Exile onward continued to believe that God was speaking through individuals to the people, just not at the same level as the proph-

ets of the Old Testament. The focus mostly shifted to those who interpreted the Old Testament text.

**NT use of OT prophecy.** One of the major links of the Christian gospel to the Old Testament is the view that Jesus stood as a “fulfillment” of various Old Testament prophecies. In particular, this centered on the expectation of a coming deliverer of the Jewish people from oppression. This “anointed one” or Messiah (equals Christ [Χριστός] in Greek) was understood from a number of sources in the writing prophets.

The expectation of a future king who would deliver Israel had developed extensively during the intertestamental era, mostly in the writings that fall under the general label of apocalyptic Judaism. Wide diversity of view point is traceable in these writings. Typically, the model of King David stands as a definition. Some of the material sees Judas Maccabee as helping to shape the image, at least in the minds of many beginning in the period just prior to the launching of the Christian era. Thus the identification of Jesus as the realization of this deliverer had to overcome the obstacles of the political aspect of this expectation. This was one of the challenges that Jesus constantly faced during his public ministry. As the temptation narratives in the synoptic gospels underscore, Satan’s essential temptation was to lure Jesus into adopting the Jewish model of Messiah and abandon His own understanding of God’s mission for Him as Messiah.

**Christian prophets and prophecy.** Prophecy in the NT also focuses on the OT idea of one divinely called to deliver God’s message. Thus John the Baptist along with Jesus are labeled prophets. For a detailed concordance listing see “prophet” as it shows up in the [NRSV translation](#) of the New Testament; some 64 instances. Also, the noun “prophecy” underscores another dimension, that of Christian prophets. It shows up [some 16 times](#) in the NRSV mostly referring to Christian expressions of God’s message. Hotly debated in some Christian circles is whether or not the ministry of Christian prophets, i.e., the gift of prophecy, ceased with the end of the apostolic era at the close of the first Christian century. The historical reality is that the contribution of Christian prophets rapidly declined in the

post-apostolic era of the second Christian century. Most likely the prevalence of so-called false prophets beginning in the second half of the first Christian century (cf. the pastoral epistles of Paul, 2 Peter and Jude as sources condemning them) and their spreading influence in the second century helped contribute to the demise of the idea of a Christian prophet during the second century.

Thus Isa. 42:1-4 must be understood against the backdrop of OT prophecy, and in particular the understanding of this found in the book of Isaiah. Deutero-Isaiah stands squarely in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem, and seeks to continue his message to

a later generation of Jews struggling during the Babylonian captivity with their homeland in shambles and ruin. Hope for the future is counter balanced against the reality of God’s wrath poured out on the nation for its sinfulness. God’s displeasure doesn’t mean that He has abandoned His people and His centuries old promises to the descendants of Moses and David.

At a smaller level of genre these four verses are expressed in **Hebrew poetry**. The major distinguishing mark of ancient Hebrew poetry is parallelism. This can vary in concept. Sometimes the second line (strophe) repeats the idea of the first line using different words (synonymous parallelism). Sometimes the essential idea of the first line is repeated in the second line from the opposite idea (antithetical parallelism). Also, the second line can build on the idea of the first line as it moves the idea forward (step parallelism). These basic building blocks can then be arranged in structural parallelism with one another to form a chiasmus (e.g., A B // B’ A’). All three types of building blocks are found in these four verses, but they are not arranged in any chiastic structure.

The challenge of poetry in this form is to identify it in a text where both prose and poetry stand together. The dividing line between these two literary forms in ancient Hebrew is not clear. For our passage, this is not the challenge. Rather, the difficulty is determining the termini of the poem. Thus, in commentaries you will find differing views about the content of this Servant Song. They range from the short-

Biblical prophecy, by the close of the Old Testament and continuing into the New Testament, centers on the communicating of God’s message to His people by an individual who is divinely commissioned to deliver that message. Although predictive elements are sometimes present, mostly this message expresses either God’s pleasure or displeasure with how His people are living at that moment. Important to this message, typically, is a call to repentance and obedience.

est form, verses 1-4, to a longer content, verses 1-6, and finally to the most inclusive understanding, verses 1-9. The two more likely possibilities are the first and the last views. If one takes verses 1-9 as the poem, then a twofold division naturally opens up. Verses 1-4 focus on God's servant, while verses 5-9 focus on God Himself. Closely connected is the conviction that these Servant Songs existed outside the original text and were inserted by Deutero-Isaiah. But this insertion is very skillfully done.

Within the poetic structure one finds a variety of speech forms in the prophetic materials especially. Barry Bandstra ([Reading the Old Testament](#)) identifies five types in Second Isaiah: Oracle of Salvation, Proclamation of Salvation, hymn of praise or eschatological hymn, trial speech and disputation speech. Several of these forms surface around 42:1-4 but the passage itself doesn't fall into any of these categories.

**Literary Setting.** Literary context here stands at two levels. First, our passage plays a role as the first of the four Servant Songs. Next, it contributes to Isaiah 40-66. Bandstra has a helpful [summation of the content](#) of chapters 40-55:

Second Isaiah consists almost entirely of poetic passages, with little of the narrative type material found in First Isaiah. Many scholars have tried to determine the boundaries of these poems, and the logic and flow of chapters 40-55 as a whole, with varying success. The most recognizable division within the text is between chapters 40-48 and 49-55. The first subsection addresses its audience as Jacob and Israel. It deals with the fall of Babylon and the new exodus. The second subsection addresses its audience as Zion and Jerusalem, and deals with the issue of social justice. Beyond this basic division though, little else is agreed upon.

Isa. 40:1-11 constitutes a calling of Second Isaiah in a similar fashion to that in Isa. 6 of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isa. 40:12-31 focuses on the greatness of God



Isaiah Scroll

Himself. Isa. 41:1-7 issues a challenge to the nations to acknowledge God, while 41:8-29 call upon His servant Israel to suffer judgment as the nations watch. Isa. 41:8-13 is parallel to 42:1-4 and serves as an important backdrop for understanding 42:1-4. The focus on God's greatness resurfaces in 42:5-9 and is followed by an exhortation to sing a hymn of praise to this wonderful God (42:10-13). The motifs of God's greatness, emphasis upon His servant, and calls to worship God are interwoven through chapters 40-44. The Cyrus oracle follows in 44:24-45:25, where Cyrus is identified as God's anointed servant (cf. 45:1). God's greatness in comparison to the Babylonian deities is asserted in chapters 46-48. A strong emphasis is made in all these chapters between the past and the present. With Jerusalem in shambles and many of God's people now in exile in Babylon, a new day has dawned. With it comes hope for what God is able to do in restoring His people as well as sustaining them during this hard time they now face.

Central to this assurance for the present and hope for tomorrow is the role of God's Servant. The Servant Songs contribute significantly to this positive message of the prophet to those in exile.

## II. Message

**Literary Structure.** When verses 1-4 are considered as a literary unit, the internal structure is rather clear. First the Lord's Servant is identified in the first part of verse one. Then the Servant's mission is laid out in the remaining verses. The second set of strophes in verse one represent the transition point from identity to mission:

I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Line one completes the identification of the Servant as anointed with God's spirit. In a step parallelism structure, line two advances the idea of identity to that of his mission to bring justice. For the sake of simplicity of study and unity of poetic structure in the underlying Hebrew text, we will consider these two lines in the first section.

Were verses 1-9 considered together, then the division of the text follows in a twofold division of verses

1-4 and 5-9. The first segment emphasizes the Servant and the second part stresses God's greatness.

### a. His Identity, v. 1

#### LXX

<sup>1</sup> Ἰακωβ ὁ παῖς μου  
ἀντιλήψομαι αὐτοῦ  
Ἰσραηλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου  
προσεδέξατο αὐτὸν ἡ ψυχὴ  
μου ἔδωκα τὸ πνεῦμά μου  
ἐπ' αὐτόν κρίσιν τοῖς  
ἔθνεσιν ἐξοίσει

#### NASB

1 Behold, My Servant,  
whom I uphold; my cho-  
sen one *in whom* My soul  
delights. I have put My  
Spirit upon Him; He will  
bring forth justice to the  
nations.

#### NRSV

1 Here is my servant,  
whom I uphold, my cho-  
sen, in whom my soul  
delights; I have put my  
spirit upon him; he will  
bring forth justice to the  
nations.

#### NLT

1 Look at my servant,  
whom I strengthen. He is  
my chosen one, and I am  
pleased with him. I have  
put my Spirit upon him.  
He will reveal justice to  
the nations.

#### Notes:

Verse one is made up of two sets of poetic ex-  
pressions. This can be visually emphasized in the  
following format.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

The first set form a synonymous parallel in which  
the second line says the same essential thing as  
the first, but with different words. The second set  
follows a step parallelism structure in which the sec-  
ond line builds off the idea in the first line in advanc-  
ing the idea.

One of the challenging issues in interpreting the  
entire passage, but especially the word 'servant' is  
to identify whom the prophet is talking about. The  
LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew text done  
in the second century BCE) clearly identifies the  
Servant as Jacob (Ἰακωβ ὁ παῖς μου) in following the  
pattern in the parallel of [41:8](#): "But you, Israel, my ser-  
vant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abra-  
ham, my friend" (NRSV). But the original Hebrew text  
doesn't contain the word 'Jacob' and thus leaves the  
identity of the servant undefined. The contextual link  
to the other Servant Songs raises the question of  
identity in a serious manner.

The second Servant Song ([49:1-6](#)) identifies the  
servant as both Israel (v. 5) and one who is to bring  
Jacob back to God (v. 5) and to make the tribes of  
Jacob a "light to the nations" (v. 6). The third Servant  
Song ([50:4-11](#)) identifies the servant as a teacher  
(v. 4). The fourth Servant Song ([52:13-53:12](#)) identi-  
fies the servant as one who, although he suffers,  
will be exalted by God. In some instances, the ser-  
vant is equated with the Jewish exiles, but in other  
instances he is left undefined. Interestingly, this same  
Hebrew term for servant is later applied to the Per-  
sian ruler Cyrus who allowed the Jewish exiles to

return home to Palestine after overthrowing the Baby-  
lonian rulers (cf. [45:1](#)): "Thus says the Lord to his  
anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to  
subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes,  
to open doors before him— and the gates shall not be  
closed" (NRSV).

To complicate matters, [Matt. 12:17-21](#) quotes  
Isa. 42:1-4 in identifying this servant with Christ:

17 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through  
the prophet Isaiah: 18 "Here is my servant, whom I  
have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well  
pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will pro-  
claim justice to the Gentiles. 19 He will not wrangle or  
cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.  
20 He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smol-  
dering wick until he brings justice to victory. 21 And in  
his name the Gentiles will hope."

In the Dead Sea scrolls some indication exists  
that the Essenes expected an anointed Teacher of  
Righteousness who would appear in the end times  
and purge the Covenant people Israel of their way-  
wardness in order to bring forth the true Israel as the  
true people of God. This expectation was possibly  
rooted in an interpretation of messianic prophecies  
in Isaiah, including the Servant Songs. Although this  
is not clear, some signals do point this direction.

Scribal and later on rabbinic Judaism have con-  
sistently understood the Servant in Isaiah to point  
collectively to the nation of Israel.

Thus the identification debate has revolved  
around exclusive categories: 1) the nation of Israel  
in a collective view, or 2) an individual whose identity  
has ranged from Jesus to other messianic type fig-  
ures in Judaism.

Paul Hanson (*Interpretation Commentary*, iP-  
reach) proposes a better view, given our consider-  
ation of ancient Israelite prophecy discussed above:

In both cases [[41:8-10](#) & [42:1](#)] we find title, for-  
mula of election, and assurance of divine support. In

the former case, the Servant is explicitly identified with Israel, as is true also in the second of the so-called Servant passages in chapter 49. In this the first Servant Song, the referent is unspecified. What should be obvious through the comparison, however, is that the election is presented in terms apropos of both an individual such as prophet or king and the faithful community.

The intentionally vague defining of the Servant in chapter 42 allows for application to multiple situations over time. Most likely, the initial application focused on those exiled Jews who sought to be faithful to God while in Babylonian captivity. Through them God would work to bless and bear witness to His presence and His greatness. Those who concluded that the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple indicated God's abandonment of His covenant people would be proven wrong.

The immediate context of chapters 41 and 42 certainly point this direction. The prophet's own calling in [40:3](#) was to be a voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord. That preparation would result in the glory of the Lord being revealed for all peoples to see it (40:5). God's greatness is described with powerful imagery (40:12-31) and is followed by a call to all nations to come to court to watch God judge His people (41:1-29) in righteousness and justice. God's Servant then will be anointed to bring forth justice to the nations (42:1-4). The Servant is the very people being judged who then become testimony to the nations of God's righteousness and demand for righteousness.

Note J.D. Watt's comments (Word Biblical Commentary, Logos Systems):

Yahweh's עַבְדּוֹ "servant" was identified as Jacob/Israel in 41:8-10 and was named "messenger to Zion" in 41:7. Now a servant is presented as the messenger of the heavenly court to bring notice of decisions reached there *to the nations* and to establish them as *the verdict in the land*. The verdict that has now emerged from the trial that tested the claims of the idols and those who believed in them is the verdict announced in 40:1-5, 9-10.

But such initial application does not preclude subsequent applications to individuals or groups of individuals. Thus Matthew ([12:18-21](#)) could correctly say that, through Jesus as God's Servant, testimony would be given calling all nations to righteousness and obedience to God. And he based that conviction on Isa. 42:1-4.

Who is this Servant? His identity revolves around his relationship with God.

First, he is a servant and is chosen:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

His connection to God is that of servant and chosen one. Thus his obligation is to God, not himself or anyone else. He is to serve God's pleasure. He has been divinely chosen for this.

Additionally, he is supported by God and God delights in this servant. That is, the servant's strength to carry out his mission comes from God's support. And God takes enormous pleasure in supporting this delightful servant.

Idealized Israel in the prophet's mind would find such a place in God's heart as they sought to carry forth God's message of His supremacy over dead idols found in Babylon and elsewhere. But a larger fulfilling of this model would come later in the life and ministry of Christ. As the representative of God's people, Christ would become God's chosen Servant who found support and delight from God in carrying out his mission.

The second set of strophes further identify this Servant:

I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

The two lines form a step parallelism with the mission in line two depending on the anointing of God's spirit in line one. The connection of this second set of lines to the first set above is mostly step parallelism, particularly in the relation of line one here to the previous two lines in the first set.

Being God's servant and God's chosen one leads to the divine anointing of God's spirit. Hanson (*Interpretation*, iPreach) helpfully underscores the importance of this point:

That the Servant is not left to his own cleverness is further emphasized by God's next pronouncement: "I have put my spirit upon him." The spirit in the Old Testament is the power and wisdom of God with which those called to serve are endowed (Is. 11:2), including the judges of the League period, Israel's kings, and the prophets. Through the empowerment of God's spirit, weak and ordinary human beings rise up to accomplish daunting tasks on behalf of God's reign of justice, as seen in the case of Gideon (Judg. 6:34), David (2 Sam. 23:2), and Ezekiel (Ezek. 8:3).

Only after this anointing by God can the Servant move forward to carrying out his mission. And that mission is setting forth of God's justice among the nations. Key here is the Hebrew term for 'justice.' John Watts (*WBC*, Logos Systems) notes:

מִשְׁפֵּט "verdict" occurs three times in these verses. The word, without the article, could mean "justice." But the context calls for something much more



specific. The legal setting of the trial that preceded this suggests that it means “the decision reached by the heavenly court (i.e., by Yahweh) before witnesses.” That verdict is to become the basis for policy, and needs to be known and acknowledged by all concerned.

God is just and functions in a just manner. His wrath on sinful Israel is just; His condemnation of idols and idolatry is just; His anticipated destruction of Babylonia by the Persians is just. That message needs to be spread to everyone. Additionally, His justice is to be the source of justice among people. He defines the meaning of justice in human relations. The task of the Servant is to spread this message, and to establish this among the nations.

The exiled Jews faced a huge challenge in spreading this message. Additionally, as chapter 45 indicates, Cyrus the Persian would become God’s servant in carrying out God’s justice in the destruction of the old Babylonian empire, even though Cyrus had no knowledge of God (cf. 45:4): “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you [Cyrus] by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.”

But again, as Mt. 12 suggests, the ultimate messenger of God’s justice is none other than Christ himself. His death on the cross became the ultimate expression of God’s justice, His *mišpat*. God treated sin as sin must be treated; Christ’s atoning death provides redemption from its eternal penalty.



Salvation is thus made available to all who will come to Christ the Savior.

The Servant stands as a challenging model to all who would serve Almighty God. He raised the standard high for the exiled Jews. They could only become the divine messenger to the nations while in captivity by finding God’s delight in obedience and faithfulness to Him. God had not abandoned them in Babylon. Rather, He had a mission for them, a powerful mission. Would they rise to the challenge?

Yet, for us as Christians, this model was best fulfilled in the life and ministry of Christ. This Servant described by the prophet would only be ultimately realized by Jesus of Nazareth. He alone could rise up to the standards of the demands of the Servant. And then these standards as realized by Jesus become our challenge as followers of Christ (cf. John 13:15): “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Several challenges to us emerge from this identification of the Servant as it filters through the example of Christ. 1) We are chosen servants. Our calling is to do God’s bidding, and no one else’s -- not our own nor any other person’s. In obedience to God through Christ we find ourselves as objects of God’s pleasure and delight. Instead of His wrath, we experience His liberating love and mercy. Our task is to be His messenger carrying the word of God’s justice and righteousness to all the nations. The carrying out of that task depends upon God’s support which comes through the presence of His Spirit in our lives.

### b. His Mission, vv. 2-4

#### LXX

2 οὐ κερᾶζεται οὐδὲ ἀνήσει οὐδὲ ἀκουσθήσεται ἔξω ἢ φωνὴ αὐτοῦ 3 κάλαμον τεθλασμένον οὐ συντρίψει καὶ λίνον καπνίζόμενον οὐ σβέσει ἀλλὰ εἰς ἀλήθειαν ἔξοίσει κρίσιν 4 ἀναλάμψει καὶ

#### NASB

2 He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. 3 A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not be disheartened or crushed

#### NRSV

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has es-

#### NLT

2 He will be gentle – he will not shout or raise his voice in public. 3 He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged. 4 He will not stop until truth and righteousness pre-

οὐ θραυσθήσεται ἕως ἄν  
θη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κρίσις  
καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ  
ἔθνη ἐλπιούσιν

Until He has established  
justice in the earth; And  
the coastlands will wait  
expectantly for His law.

established justice in the  
earth; and the coastlands  
wait for his teaching.

vail throughout the earth.  
Even distant lands be-  
yond the sea will wait for  
his instruction.

### Notes:

Three sets of strophes comprise these verses:

He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

The first is a double line synonymous parallelism. The second and third are triple line expressions. In the second set the three lines are synonymous expressions. In the third set, the first line is foundational and lines 2 and 3 represent synonymous expressions of advanced thought building off the foundation of the first line.

The central theme of these expressions is the importance of the character of the Servant to the carrying out of his mission. He cannot be the divinely appointed messenger unless his life exemplifies certain traits of righteousness. This point underscores one of the central emphases in the entire Bible: being is inseparably connected to doing. Who we are shapes what we do.

How is the Servant to establish justice among the nations? Historically, nations and often times religions have sought to use force to establish justice. Christianity and Judaism both have adopted these tactics across the centuries. But the method of the Servant is stated dramatically different from the use of force and violence. Hanson (*Interpretation*, iPerach) has an excellent summation of these verses:

The style of witness of the Servant stands so starkly in contrast to the ways of the nations and their leaders that it must be regarded either as foolishness or as an intriguing alternative to a failed strategy. What sort of agent can this be, described in terms not of conqueror but of victim! Is it possible that the reign of justice can be promoted by submission and the express renunciation of force, even by special attention and care to fellow victims who are on the edge of collapse and death? Here we encounter one of the mysterious novelties of Second Isaiah's universal vision. It is pregnant with possibilities that have never been exhausted but nevertheless have inspired the godly of every age. The Servant does not cry out when oppressed, does not move through the streets calling for pity, does not push aside the weak in the hope of win-

ning conventional power to his cause. The Servant, rather, bears witness with quiet, patient gentleness, confident that the nations will be drawn to God's reign of justice not by dint of human force but by attraction to embodied compassion and righteousness. The source of that attraction is not within the Servant but points to the reality that transcends all flesh. To live consistently in the service of the justice of God is to pattern one's life on the nature of God. Only in this way is a mortal empowered faithfully to bring forth justice.

The Servant's pattern is not the boisterous battle cry striking terror into the hearts of the hearers. Nor is it the way of crushing the poor and helpless, the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick. Rather, his approach is to faithfully establish the justice of God. His determination to accomplish this mission is unshakable. No discouragement will deter him. No crushing opposition will stop him. He will establish justice no matter what. The parallelism between "justice" and "teaching" in the last two lines of verse four suggest that through spreading the teaching of God justice becomes possible. To be sure, the word תורה can be translated as Law, but Torah in the formal sense of this word did not come about until a time much later than the writing of Second Isaiah.

In Christ's ministry we find the exemplary fulfillment of this, as Matthew noted in 12:19-21 with his use of this passage in Isaiah: "19 He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. 20 He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. 21 And in his name the Gentiles will hope" (NRSV).

This picture of the Servant challenges us in so many ways. Christ's example reinforces the challenge by his own life. We must care for the poor and seek justice for them, as well as for all. No other option exists for those walking in the footsteps of the Servant and of Christ. Violence can never be a legitimate tool for seeking this justice. The powerful witness of our life lived out in caring for such people is the major tool. Most recently we have witnessed how powerful such can be with the [Amish reaction](#) to the murder of the school children. What a challenge to us!



**LXX**

<sup>1</sup> Ἰακωβ ὁ παῖς μου ἀντιλήμψομαι αὐτοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου προσεδέξατο αὐτὸν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἔδωκα τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐπ’ αὐτόν κρίσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐξοίσει <sup>2</sup> οὐ κεκράξεται οὐδὲ ἀνήσει οὐδὲ ἀκουσθήσεται ἕξω ἡ φωνὴ αὐτοῦ <sup>3</sup> κάλαμον τεθλασμένον οὐ συντρίψει καὶ λίνον καπνιζόμενον οὐ σβέσει ἀλλὰ εἰς ἀλήθειαν ἐξοίσει κρίσιν <sup>4</sup> ἀναλάμψει καὶ οὐ θραυσθήσεται ἕως ἂν θῆ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς κρίσιν καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ ἔθνη ἐλπιούσιν

**NASB**

1 Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one *in whom* My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry out or raise *His voice*, Nor make His voice heard in the street. 3 A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.

**NRSV**

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

**NLT**

1 Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, and I am pleased with him. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will reveal justice to the nations. 2 He will be gentle – he will not shout or raise his voice in public. 3 He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope. He will bring full justice to all who have been wronged. 4 He will not stop until truth and righteousness prevail throughout the earth. Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction.

**Isaiah 42:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> הֵן עַבְדִּי אֶתְמַדְּבֹוּ בְּחִירִי רִצְתָהּ נַפְשִׁי נַתְתִּי  
רוּחִי עָלָיו מִשְׁפָּט לְגוֹיִם יוֹצִיא<sup>2</sup> לֹא יִצְעַק וְלֹא יִשָּׂא  
וְלֹא־יִשְׁמִיעַ בְּחוּץ קוֹלוֹ  
<sup>3</sup> קָנָה רִצּוֹן לֹא יִשְׁבֹּר וּפְשֵׁתָהּ כִּהְיָה לֹא יִכְבְּנָה לְאַמֶּת  
יוֹצִיא מִשְׁפָּט  
<sup>4</sup> לֹא יִכְהָה וְלֹא יִרְוֶן עַד־יִשְׁיִם בְּאַרְץ מִשְׁפָּט וּלְתוֹרָתוֹ  
אֵיִם יִתְחַלְּלוּ פ

Isaiah 42:1-4 <sup>BHT</sup> <sup>1</sup> hēn abḏî ʔetmāk-bô bəḥîrî rāṣṭā<sup>h</sup> napšî nātattî rūḥî ālāyw mišpāt laggōyīm yôṣî<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup> lōʔ yiš aq wəlōʔ yiśśāʔ wəlōʔ-yašmî<sup>a</sup> baḥûṣ qôlô <sup>3</sup> qāne<sup>h</sup> rāṣûṣ lōʔ yišbôr ûpištā<sup>h</sup> kēhā<sup>h</sup> lōʔ yəḵabbennā<sup>h</sup> leʔemet yôṣî<sup>3</sup> mišpāt <sup>4</sup> lōʔ yikḥe<sup>h</sup> wəlōʔ yārûṣ ad-yāśîm bāʔareṣ mišpāt ûləṭōrātô ʔiyyîm yəyahélû p

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Isa 20:3

Then the Lord said, "Just as **my servant** Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia,

prediction of his messengers; who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the cities of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins";

Isa 22:20 -

On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiyah,

Isa 45:4 -

For the sake of **my servant** Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.

Isa 37:35

For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David."

Isa 48:20 -

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it forth to the end of the earth; say, "The Lord has redeemed **his servant** Jacob!"

Isa 41:8 -

But you, Israel, my **servant**, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend;

Isa 49:3 -

And he said to me, "You are **my servant**, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

Isa 41:9 -

you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are **my servant**, I have chosen you and not cast you off";

Isa 49:5 -

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be **his servant**, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength—

Isa 42:1 -

Here is **my servant**, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

Isa 49:6 -

he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be **my servant** to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Isa 42:19 -

Who is blind but **my servant**, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the Lord?

Isa 43:10 -

You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and **my servant** whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

Isa 50:10 -

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of **his servant**, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?

Isa 44:1 -

But now hear, O Jacob **my servant**, Israel whom I have chosen!

Isa 52:13 -

See, **my servant** shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

Isa 44:2 -

Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob **my servant**, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

Isa 53:11 -

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, **my servant**, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Isa 44:21 -

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are **my servant**; I formed you, you are **my servant**; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

Isa 63:11 -

Then they remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant. Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is the one who put within them his holy spirit,

Isa 44:26 -

who confirms the word of his servant, and fulfills the