

**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Isa. 49:1-6**  
 by Lorin L. Cranford  
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**God's Servant (2)**



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**This study focuses on the second Servant Song in [Isa. 49:1-6](#). The study is the second of four studies 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](#). For the study of the first one see [God's Servant](#) at Cranfordville.com in the Old Testament Bible studies section. Much of the background material in that study will apply to our present study. The differing thrusts of each of these songs about God's Servant is summarized well 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 affirmatives" 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.

**The point of view in this second poem shifts and centers on the Servant's calling to restore Israel and to be a light to the nations. This shift provides new insight and perspective on the mission of God's Servant.**

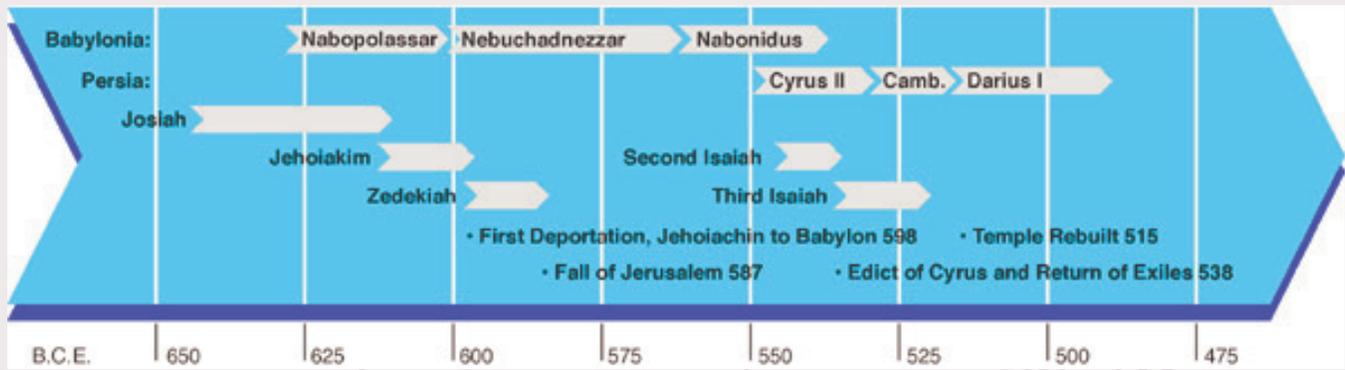
**I. Context**

Relevant parts of the first study will either be assumed (and hyperlinks to that study provided) or else will be summarized in the background materials for this study.

**a. Historical**

**External History.** Much of the background of the compositional history for our passage was covered in [the first study](#) of 42:1-4. You are referred to that study at Cranfordville for the details. In summary, the view adopted is that chapters 40-55 constitute Second Isaiah, with chaps. 56-66 as Trito

Isaiah. This mid section of Isaiah comes out of the Isaiah of Jerusalem during the Babylonian Exile. This unknown prophet who becomes the "Isaiah" to the Israelites in captivity voices hope for a brighter day. Out of the ashes of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 582 BCE will



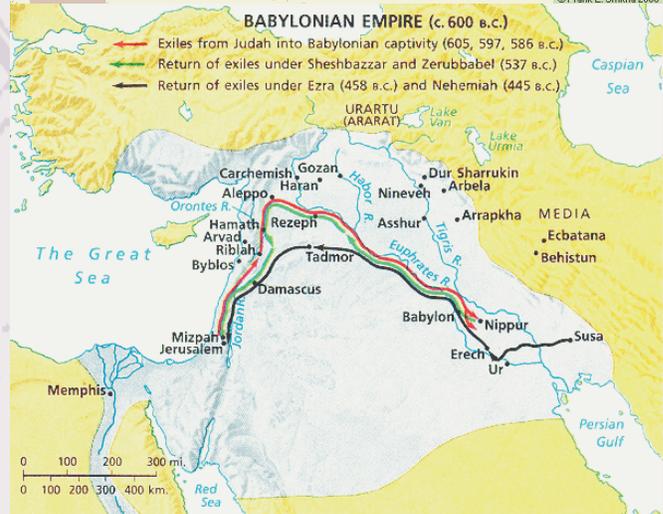
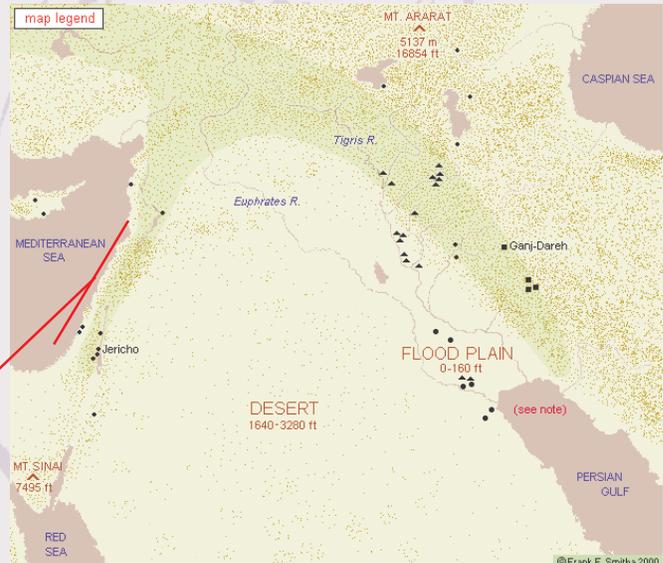
from Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament*, Table 10.5

come a renewed nation and new place of worship of the God for the children of Abraham. As the above chart illustrates, this ministry took place approximately 546-538 BCE. This was a chaotic time for God's people with the upper segments of Israelite society from the southern kingdom now displaced in a foreign city on the east side of the fertile crescent hundreds of miles from their homeland on the western side of the fertile crescent in Palestine. Had God abandoned them in His wrath? Was there any hope left for the future? The prophet was called by God to deliver a divine message to these people. The essence of that calling is set forth in [Isa. 40:1-2](#):

1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

**Internal History.** The time/place references inside 49:1-6 are not many, but do need consideration for better understanding of the text.

The first spatial reference comes in verse one with the designation **"O coastlands."** The designation [shows up mostly](#) in Isaiah. It refers literally to those countries on the western side of Israel / Judah whose western border was the Mediterranean Sea. At this point people from all these countries were also captives in Babylonia just like the Israelites. Consequently, some competitiveness among these varying national groups for the Babylonian king's favor existed. Whoever gained his attention and favor enjoyed an easier experience in captivity. In this context the reference to **"the nations"** and its parallel **"the end of the earth"** in verse 6 stands with the same meaning as "coastlands." For the Israelites the Mediterranean Sea defined the end of the world as they knew it when one was going westward. While standing on the coast of the sea looking westward, one would see, to be sure, nothing but water. What might lie beyond it was unclear and forboding.



In verse 5 the personal name **"Jacob"** shows up, as well as in verse 2 in the phrase **"the tribes of Jacob."** In this context Jacob doesn't refer primarily to the patriarch whose life story is found in Genesis. Rather, it is a reference to the Israelite people who have descended from Jacob, i.e., the covenant people of God. In the synonymous parallelism of 5b the name **"Israel"** surfaces. This is but another designation of the covenant people of God living in Baby-

lon with emphasis upon their descendency from Jacob whose name was changed to Israel after his experience with God at Peniel ([Gen. 32:28](#)): “Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Its meaning is made clearer in verse 6 in the phrase “the survivors of Israel.”

In verse three another occurrence of “Israel” shows up. In its usage, it becomes the identifier of the Servant about whom the passage is speaking. The problem here is that this name doesn’t consistently show up in ancient Hebrew manuscripts of Isaiah. Thus this leads to differing views about its appropriateness in being used in English translations. One side of the discussion is the advocacy to leave it out (Gregory Mobley, “Isaiah,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed, pl 1046):

Israel, the word, absent from some Heb manuscripts, is probably a gloss. Since the servant’s mission is on behalf of Israel, its reunification and restoration, the reference must be to an individual or group within Israel.

But on the other side of the discussion is Seitz (*New Interpreters Bible*, iPreach):

“Israel” in v. 3 cannot be an interpolation, but belongs inextricably to the text in its present and previous life (if such there be).<sup>105</sup> Williamson’s argument that “Israel” is not to be taken as vocative, indicating the addressee (“you are my servant, O Israel”), but as predicative, making a statement (“you are my servant, [you are] Israel”) is also convincing.<sup>106</sup> This frees the unit (and a syntactically problematic v. 4) for a fresh interpretation, which has as an additional benefit the possibility of coordinating this poem with preceding and ensuing discussions of the role of the servant. The servant presented by God before the divine council in 42:1-4 was the same Jacob/Israel servant consistently addressed that way in chaps. 40–48. Now the speaker—who nowhere explicitly adopts the title “prophet” (נָבִיא nAbī), nor is it applied to him—accepts as an individual the role set forth by God for the nation Israel.

In either instance Israel, the people, ultimately come center stage in the identification. Whether they are the “speakers” or the “audience” is the heart of the issue. The insertion of the personal name in many of the Hebrew manuscripts is followed by the LXX (μοι δοῦλος μου εἶ σύ Ἰσραηλ), and thus by a majority of the English translations.

The **time references** in the

passage primarily move back and forth from the present to the time prior to the Servant’s birth. Indirect implication about **the future** is present in the expression of the Servant’s calling stated in the purpose statements: **1**) “to be his servant” (v. 5); **2**) “to bring Jacob back to him” (v. 5); **3**) “to raise up the tribes of Jacob” (v. 6); **4**) “to restore the survivors of Israel” (v. 6); **5**) “as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6). Nothing is said directly or even indirectly about how long this mission was going to take before being completed. This left open the possibility of multiple “fulfillments” or applications. The NT application will be considered in the exegesis of the passage below. Note the dual nature of this calling: **a**) to bring the chosen people back to God, and **b**) to bear witness to God’s deliverance to the nations of Palestine. There is both the inward responsibility to the Israelites, and the outward, universal obligation to others beyond the chosen people.

The **present time** frame at the writing of this passage was the [Babylonian exile](#) from 546 - 538 BCE. For the Servant that time was not pleasant, as is made clear in verse four: “But I said, ‘I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.’” Note the tension expressed here. His ministry had been highly frustrating because of its lack of success. Yet, his hope lay with God’s promises of success eventually.

The **past time** references allude back to a time prior to the birth of the Servant, “before I was born” (v. 1); “while I was in my mother’s womb” (v. 1); “who formed me in the womb” (v. 5). Here is an important reflection of the sense of God’s providential movement through time. In the time of his mother’s pregnancy, in regard to the Servant, God “called” him (v. 1); “named” him (v. 1); assigned him the mission “to bring Jacob back to him” (v. 5). In other words, God pegged the Servant before his birth to be His Servant with an assigned mission. This was long before the Servant had any awareness of this divine purpose over his life. The essential point is that those things that take place in our life are not accidents of nature, nor ultimately of our own spontaneous choosing. God is at work in our life long before our birth. This same principle is expressed later on by the apostle Paul in Gal. 1:15-16a: “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so



that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,..." Such stands as a foundational conviction all through the Bible: God is at work in our lives a long time before we realize it. As such, his providential care provides

encouragement and hope. For a modern generation who often struggle with a sense of purpose and meaning in life, this spiritual principle of scripture gives an anchor point to life.

## b. Literary

**Genre.** Again, we are dealing in the larger literary form issues with ancient Israelite *prophecy*. As was noted in the first study, the biblical idea of prophecy differs considerably from the modern popular notion of prophecy, even the view of biblical prophecy in certain circles. The online [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#) gives three meanings to the English word "prophecy":

- 1: an inspired utterance of a [prophet](#)
- 2: the function or vocation of a [prophet](#); specifically, the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose
- 3: a prediction of something to come

Generally, to most modern readers the word "prophecy" means definition 3 and nothing else. Yet, biblical prophecy is overwhelmingly meanings 1 and 2. The predictive element is a very minor concern with the prophets of the Bible. And when such does surface, future events are described in broad, generalized terms rather than in specific, precise details. To be a [prophet](#) meant to be a proclaimer of God's will and desire. The heart of that message centered in declaring God's response to the behavior and spiritual commitment of His people.

This second Servant Song, more than the others, stands as prophecy in the sense that the prophet is speaking of God's calling of His servant. The eloquence of this expression of divine calling is great and inspiring, as well as challenging.

Another aspect of genre is the form of our text as *prophetic oracle*, which is cast in [Hebrew poetry](#). As was noted in [the first study](#) under Literary Genre, poetry in the Bible doesn't follow patterns of modern English poetry. The central identifying clue to biblical poetry, in [Hebrew especially](#), is the presence of parallelism. Other aspects can and do surface, but parallelism stands as the central identifying mark.

The prophetic oracle in so far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned represents the poetic structure in which most of the prophets delivered their messages to the people. The term oracle has many shades of meaning both inside and outside the Bible, as [the definitions](#) in the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary suggest. In early Israelite history, the idea of oracle followed the pattern more common in the rest of the

ancient world: a question was put to a religious person who in turn laid it before God for an answer, normally in the form of a yes/no reply - [Urim / Thummin](#) in the Hebrew Bible. The question usually came from an individual about a specific problem or issue. One instance of this is found in [1 Sam. 23:9-13](#) (NRSV)

9 When David learned that Saul was plotting evil against him, he said to the priest Abiathar, "Bring the ephod here." 10 David said, "O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. 11 And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant." The Lord said, "He will come down." 12 Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" The Lord said, "They will surrender you." 13 Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, set out and left Keilah; they wandered wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition.:

By the time of the writing prophets, beginning with Amos in the eight century BCE, the idea of oracle had migrated to a different meaning to become the divinely inspired message given to the prophet by God and then preserved in poetic written expression after having been delivered orally to its targeted audience. The poetic structure could have been the form of the original oral expression, or could have become the form for preserving the words of the prophet.

Such is not real clear, although the former seems to have been more likely. This literary form encouraged memorization of the material. Both prose and poetry materials can be clearly found in the writings of these prophets, suggesting that they preached in both styles. In modern study of the Hebrew Bible, only the poetic segments tend to be labeled prophetic oracles, although I've noticed a lot of inconsistency in tracing down different scholarly sources. The most significant aspect, however, is that the term oracle reflects the belief that this prophet's message originated with God, and that the prophet was divinely commissioned to deliver it to the nation. Unlike the earlier pattern, oracles are now addressed to God's



people, and that without God being asked a question, and the message is given not in reply to a individual problem but addresses general problems found among God's people.

**Literary Setting.** The literary context of Isa. 49:1-6 has several aspects. Paul Hanson (*Interpretation Commentary*, iPreach) provides helpful insight regarding the connection of 49:1-6 to chap. 48:

The preceding chapter opened with a command to Israel to listen and then delved into the convolutions of Israel's stinging response to God's initiatives in its past. Foreign nations came into that discussion only as they impinged on Israelite history.

In contrast, chapter 49 opens with a command to foreign peoples to listen and then describes Servant Israel as one bearing a commission that extends beyond domestic affairs to the welfare of the nations. Taken together, 49:1-6 and chapter 48 construct a pattern that is basic to Second Isaiah's thought. Israel is precious to God and the object of God's compassionate justice. But Israel's responsibilities extend beyond its borders to reach out to the nations of the earth.

The struggle for the heart of Israel in chapter 48 thus relates directly to the daunting task assigned to Servant Israel in chapter 49. By being a faithful partner in the covenant relationship with Yahweh, Israel equips itself to be an instrument of God's saving acts on behalf of the whole world.

Christopher Seitz (*New Interpreters Bible*, iPreach) provides similar help for the forward connection of 49:1-6 to 49:7-26:

The division of chap. 49 into units is comparatively easy. Commentators are in general agreement about the assignment of these, and the form-critical task of describing genres is also relatively uncontroversial. This is true even as one encounters a fair degree of creative freedom on the part of the author

in modifying and adapting older forms to his specific purpose. So, for example, there is general agreement that 49:1-6 constitutes a "servant song" and that, as with 42:1-4 and 42:5-9, we find an elaboration appended to the main unit at 49:7-12. This is then followed by a hymn (49:13), in the same manner observed at 42:10-13. The remainder of the chapter is taken up with the response to Zion, as one specific case of uncomforted existence, over against the people at large (49:13b). This rather lengthy unit is composed of smaller rhetorical strophes (vv. 14-18, 19-21, 22-23, 24-26) instead of discrete form-critical units.<sup>101</sup>

The larger picture of context for the entire book has been set forth helpfully by Barry L. Bandstra (*Reading the Old Testament*) along the following lines:

#### Outline of Isaiah

1. Isaiah of Jerusalem--First Isaiah (8th century B.C.E.) (1-39)
  1. Series of oracles, all but twelve by Isaiah of Jerusalem (1-12)
  2. Oracles against foreign nations, many composed after the 8th century (13-23)
  3. The Isaiah Apocalypse, from the Persian period (24-27)
  4. Prophecies by Isaiah (28-33)
  5. Late additions (34-35)
  6. Historical narrative section, parallel to 2 Kings 18-20 (36-39)
2. Isaiah of the Exile--Second Isaiah (mid 6th century B.C.E.) (40-55)
  1. Concerning the Fall of Babylon (40-48)
  2. *The pursuit of justice (49-55)*
3. Isaiah of the Restoration--Third Isaiah (late 6th century B.C.E.) (56-66)

Thus in the second section of the book (chaps 40-55), chapter 49 begins the second major section (chaps 49-55) with the general theme of justice dominating.

## II. Message

**Literary Structure.** The internal organization of thoughts in verses 1-6 is rather easy to determine. Verses 1-4 reflect one voice calling the nations to pay attention to God's voice. Verses 5-6 reflect a second voice focusing attention on the magnitude of his calling by God. We will approach our study from this structural understanding.

### a. Pay attention, people, vv. 1-4

#### LXX

ἀκούσατέ μου νῆσοι  
καὶ προσέχετε ἔθνη διὰ  
χρόνου πολλοῦ στήσεται  
λέγει κύριος ἐκ κοιλίας  
μητρός μου ἐκάλεσεν τὸ  
ὄνομά μου <sup>2</sup>καὶ ἔθηκεν τὸ

#### NASB

1 Listen to Me, O islands,  
And pay attention,  
you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called Me  
from the womb; From  
the body of My mother He

#### NRSV

1 Listen to me, O  
coastlands, pay attention,  
you peoples from  
far away! The Lord called  
me before I was born,  
while I was in my

#### NLT

1 Listen to me, all of  
you in far-off lands! The  
LORD called me before  
my birth; from within the  
womb he called me by  
name. 2 He made my

στόμα μου ὡσεὶ μάχαιραν ὀξεῖαν καὶ ὑπὸ τὴν σκέπην τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ ἔκρυψέν με ἔθηκέν με ὡς βέλος ἐκλεκτὸν καὶ ἐν τῇ φαρέτρᾳ αὐτοῦ ἐσκέπασέν με <sup>3</sup>καὶ εἶπέν μοι δοῦλός μου εἶ σύ Ἰσραηλ καὶ ἐν σοὶ δοξασθήσομαι <sup>4</sup>καὶ ἐγὼ εἶπα κενῶς ἐκοπίασα καὶ εἰς μάταιον καὶ εἰς οὐδέν ἔδωκα τὴν ἰσχύν μου διὰ τοῦτο ἡ κρίσις μου παρὰ κυρίῳ καὶ ὁ πόνος μου ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ μου

named Me. 2 He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. 3 He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory." 4 But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; Yet surely the justice *due* to Me is with the LORD, And My reward with My God."

mother's womb he named me. 2 He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God."

words of judgment as sharp as a sword. He has hidden me in the shadow of his hand. I am like a sharp arrow in his quiver. 3 He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, and you will bring me glory." 4 I replied, "But my work all seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose at all. Yet I leave it all in the LORD's hand; I will trust God for my reward."

### Notes:

The internal poetic structure of these verses revolves around several sets of parallel lines or strophes of thought expression. This provides the progression of thought in the verses.

**First** is the call to attention in verse one:

Listen to me, O coastlands,  
pay attention, you peoples from far away!

Clearly these lines stand in synonymous parallel to one another. The prophet is calling not the Israelites to listen, but peoples beyond the covenant people. The people of the "coastlands" that we explored above in the [Internal History](#) section point to the nations along the Mediterranean coastal region to the west of the Promised Land. The second direct address, "you peoples from far away," refers most likely to the same groups as does "o coastlands." The significant aspect here is the realization of the work of God reaching beyond the Israelites and having importance beyond the chosen people. In 48:1 the speech had been directed to "Hear this, O house of Jacob..." Now the target audience goes beyond to the representatives of those nations around Israel's homeland who are also captive in Babylon.

**Second** is the action of the Lord toward the Servant stated in a series of strophes (vv. 1b-2):

- The Lord called me* before I was born, (1)
- while I was in my mother's womb *he named me*. (2)
- He made my mouth* like a sharp sword, (3)
- in the shadow of his hand *he hid me*; (4)
- he made me* a polished arrow, (5)
- in his quiver *he hid me* away. (6)

The poetic pattern reproduced by the NRSV translators in English expression highlights the sequential

pattern of the biblical text:

- Main clause* > modifying expression (1)
- Modifying expression > *main clause* (2)
- Main clause* > modifying expression (3)
- Modifying expression > *main clause* (4)
- Main clause* > modifying expression (5)
- Modifying expression > *main clause* (6)

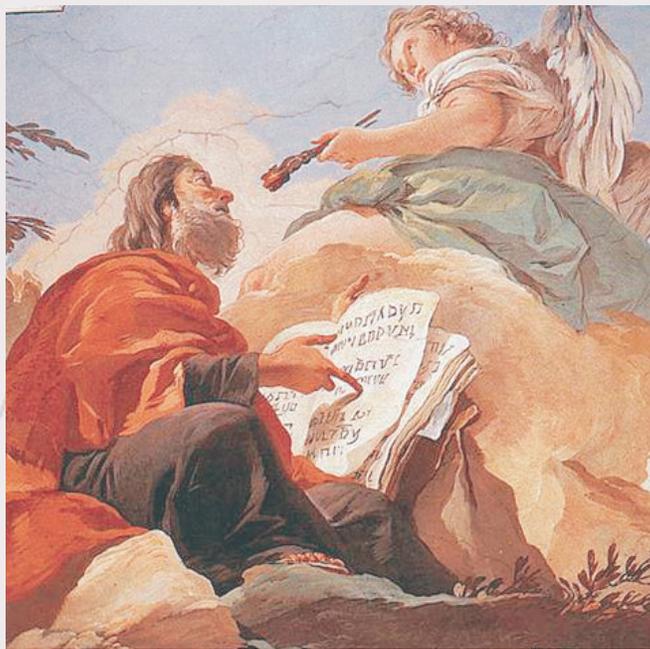
Lines 1 and 2 stress God's speech, while lines 3 through 6 emphasize God's action. This provides us a way to get into the thought structure of the text. The inner connection of each set of the three sets is basically a step parallelism, where the second line moves the idea of the first line "a step" forward. The legitimacy of the second line rests on the foundation of the first line.

God has called "me", i.e., his people, before they came into existence, to be His Servant. On the basis of this calling, He even gave them a name, covenant people of God descended from Abraham. Thus in the heart of God this group of Semitic people were clearly identified and set apart for God's own purposes long before they came into existence. For those Israelites in captivity such affirmation served both as a comfort and challenge. God had not forgotten them. But neither had their divine assignment changed from what it had always been. These people were supposed to serve God from beginning to end of their existence. One major focus of that service will be explored and reaffirmed in the second voice below.

This sense of divine calling can also function on an individual level across the Bible as [Jer. 1:5](#) and [Gal. 1:15-17](#) illustrate.

Jer. 1:5 - "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (NRSV).

Gal. 1:15-17 - "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus."



God first speaks ("He said...") and then the Servant responds ("But I said...").

God's word to the Servant is a reaffirmation and identification of Israel as a servant. As such Israel belongs to God in the same way an ancient slave belonged to his master. In the "step forward" (line 2), this servanthood means that God's glory will be made known in and through the Servant. The sense here is that God's presence, His glory, will be both re-

In the second set of divine actions in lines 3 through 6, we see how the calling and the creating are linked hand in hand.

Two figurative images provide the thought expression: the sword and the arrow. These images highlight action, interestingly in the mode of a soldier confronting an enemy. God created His servant as a soldier and well equipped him for the divine task. The irony of the image of soldier is that his weapon is his mouth, thus signifying that his mission is going to be carried out not by his hand holding a metal sword. Rather, his mouth will speak God's message to the nations. He himself will become a "polished arrow" in communicating that divine message.

Additionally these two "weapons," the sword and the arrow, are first hidden in God's hand, and second hidden in God's quiver of arrows. Thus, as the Servant voices God's message to the nations, he does so in the strength of God. And that he is God's messenger is not readily known or understood, but is clearly the case from God's perspective.

The **third** set of parallel lines are found in verses three and four. They take the form of a dialogue between God and His Servant.

- He said to Me,
- " You are My Servant,
- Israel, in Whom I will show My glory." (1)
- But I said,
- "I have toiled in vain,
- I have spent My strength for nothing
- and vanity; (2)
- Yet surely the justice *due* to Me is with the
- LORD, (3)
- And My reward with My God. (4)

vealed to the Servant and through the Servant to others. These nations called to listen (v. 1) will recognize that the presence of the God of the universe resides in the Servant Israel.

The reply of the Servant is a combination of frustration and confidence. The frustration comes in lines 3 and 4 as synonymous parallels.

- "I have toiled in vain, (3)
- I have spent My strength for nothing
- and vanity; (4)

The Babylonian Jewish captives could certainly identify with this frustration. As beaten down captives, how could they become messengers of Yahweh to the nations, especially those so far away as Palestine? Even to the captive representatives of those nations living under the iron fist of the Babylonian rulers in Babylon like they were?

But their bottom line confidence was the conviction of God's justice and God's reward (lines 5 & 6). In some way not yet understood God would treat them righteously and justly. That would ultimately bring the blessing of divine reward. Thus the first voice of the Servant (vv. 1-4) ends on a note of optimism and conviction.

How does all this reach beyond the initial application to Israel? Although the first application is clearly collective and refers to the remnant of God's chosen people of Second Isaiah's day, additional applications, often on an individual basis, can certainly take place, and have over time. The spiritual principles underlying this passage clearly have timeless truth and relevancy.

The core spiritual thought is the relevancy of God's

message to all nations, not just to His chosen people. God works in His people, collectively and/or individually, long before they come into existence. At the heart of their servanthood is to carry God's message to the nations. In this they function as God's sword and arrow; that is, they are instruments in God's hand, rather than on their own. God's presence in their ministry will be made clear with their faithfulness in serving. Frustration will come in such service but the bottom line is always God's glory in their life.

These motifs present here will be picked up in many places and applied both to the life and ministry of Jesus, as well as to the work of several of the

apostles, especially Paul.

Do they continue to be relevant to us today? I'm convinced that they do. We as God's new covenant people in Christian commitment are God's dwelling place on earth as affirmed in John 1:14 et al. Thus, His glory is present in our midst. We stand in relationship with God as servant in the full sense of obligation solely to our Heavenly Father. We become the mouthpiece for carrying God's Word to the nations. As messengers, we stand dependent on Him as he holds us as His sword and arrow. These verses affirm basic spiritual principles by which we can serve our God.

## b. A light to the nations, vv. 5-6

### LXX

ἤκαὶ νῦν οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ πλάσας με ἐκ κοιλίας δοῦλον ἑαυτῷ τοῦ συναγαγεῖν τὸν Ἰακωβ καὶ Ἰσραὴλ πρὸς αὐτόν συναχθήσομαι καὶ δοξασθήσομαι ἐναντίον κυρίου καὶ ὁ θεός μου ἔσται μου ἰσχύς ἡκαὶ εἶπέν μοι μέγα σοί ἐστιν τοῦ κληθῆναι σε παῖδά μου τοῦ στήσαι τὰς φυλάς Ἰακωβ καὶ τὴν διασπορὰν τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ἐπιστρέψαι ἰδοὺ τέθεικά σε εἰς διαθήκην γένους εἰς φῶς ἔθνῶν τοῦ εἶναί σε εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς

### NASB

5 And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength), 6 He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

### NRSV

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— 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."

### NLT

5 And now the LORD speaks – he who formed me in my mother's womb to be his servant, who commissioned me to bring his people of Israel back to him. The LORD has honored me, and my God has given me strength. 6 He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

### Notes:

The second voice surfaces in verses five and six. This time it's God speaking to the Servant. But the introduction of the Voice is elaborate in verse five: "the Lord says....he says...." Between these two affirmations of God speaking lies a powerful self declaration of mission given to the Servant. A part of that mission is then repeated in the direct discourse from God's voice in verse six.

Foundationally, the voice of the Servant is still speaking, but now is narrating God's speaking to him. Thus a slight shift from verses one through four takes place in the final two verses. What seems to be happening with this second voice of the Servant is that

the Servant has become a voice *to* Israel, rather than Israel being God's voice to the nations. Thus many see here a shift in the Servant from the collective designation of Israel to an individual inside Israel speaking to her. The narrational view of the text does seem to support this understanding. Yet, with the collective and individual angles on the Servant floating back and forth in the four Servant Songs, we should probably not read too much into this shift here. An additional view found among a few OT scholars such as John Watts (*WBC*) is that, in light of the mentioning of the Persian ruler Cyrus in 45:1 as the anointed servant, we should understand this sec-

ond Servant reference here to be Cyrus. This presupposes that the Servant is dominately Cyrus in chapters 45-48, with overlap into chapter 49 here. Although theoretically possible, not many OT scholars adopt this view.

What is frequently debated among OT scholars is where this second voice terminates. Some will argue at verse six, but many will see verse twelve as the terminus point. The “thus says the Lord...” in verse seven does seem to be extending the Servant Song which most will see as ending with verse six. But the editorial blending of external source (vv. 1-6) with other material (vv. 7-13) is done quite skillfully by the editors of this text. So much so that detecting clearly a seam between materials can’t be done with absolute certainty. Since our focus is on the Servant Song, we will end our study with verse six, although the general motif of God speaking continues through verse twelve.

The motif of the Servant in the womb of his mother is repeated from verse one but with a different emphasis. Before the reference was mainly temporal, “while I was in my mother’s womb...” Now the emphasis is upon God as shaping the Servant while he was in his mother’s womb. But what shape? That of a Servant is the answer. But not just any servant. “To be *his* servant” is the point. This takes the reference to the mother’s womb in verse one a bit further and affirms God’s providential activity over the servant during his mother’s pregnancy.

But he was formed to be a servant with a specific job. In synonymous parallel expression it is defined as:

to bring Jacob back to him,

and that Israel might be gathered to him.

The covenant people are to be returned to God by the work of the Servant. Although the task is daunting and humanly impossible, this mission is achievable since the servant works under God’s strength. This “thanksgiving” expression is seen in the next two synonymous lines of verse five:

I am honored in the sight of the Lord,

and my God has become my strength

The Servant feels honored by being given such an assignment. That sense of honor means the recognition that God’s strength comes with the job.

The connecting link “for” in the NRSV at the beginning of these two lines is supplied in the English translation as an assumed connection. This implies that the sense of being honored stands as the basis of being given the task of restoring Israel. In the Hebrew text, and as reflected in the LXX, these two

lines of being honored grow out of the realization of having being shaped as a servant in his mother’s womb for this task of restoring Israel. Put another way, the result of being given a job is the sense of being honored.

Put together this perspective of the Servant is profound. He came to realize just how deeply and wonderfully God had been at work in his life, even before it began in birth. Such a deep appreciation for how God has worked in our life can sustain and guide us in the most difficult of tasks we face.

What God says to the Servant (v. 6) is in part a reaction to the Servant’s reflection in introducing the voice of God. It almost seems to imply a lack of appreciation for how God had worked, but I suspect that is reading too much out of the first lines of God speaking. Walter Brueggemann (*Westminster Bible Commentary*, iPreach) helps us here:

But now, in verse 6, in one of the oddest verses in exilic Isaiah, it is as though Yahweh has second thoughts contradicting verse 5. The servant is to restore the remnant of Israel, but that is too “light,” too trivial. The servant is now assigned a greater task. The servant is now dispatched to “the nations,” “the end of the earth.” It is possible that these phrases continue to refer to scattered Jews; it is also possible, however, that in this remarkable phrasing Israel’s exilic horizon is pushed beyond the needful Jewish community to a concern for Gentiles. One way or the other—to Jews or also to Gentiles—the servant is to be “light” and “salvation” (victory).

Perhaps some intentional irony is intended. Restoring Israel is after all a “light” job; now I’m giving you the really hard job: “be a light to the nations” of my salvation.

The first task, which the Servant has already acknowledged, is set forth in the same terms as his previous acknowledgment in verse five.

my servant

to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to restore the survivors of Israel.

Most likely this is intended as synonymous parallel. Thus raising up Jacob and restoring the survivors of Israel alludes to the restoration in the return of the exiles back to Jerusalem at the end of the captivity. Thus God’s deliverance (= His salvation) of the exiles from captivity would become known to the nations around Palestine. They would be forced to acknowledge that God had not abandoned His covenant people Israel in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple some 70 years before.

The harder job was to be a light to the nations of God’s deliverance of His people. If this implies that

the Servant is the remnant of Israel through whom God promised to continue working, then the reference is an allusion to how hard the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple was going to be. The biblical history of Ezra - Nehemiah (during [the time of Cyrus the Great](#) [559-530 BCE]) bears this out in the early stages of that rebuilding. The intertestamental history found in documents such as 1 Maccabees affirms the enormous difficulty of that restoration.

But God promises His presence and help with such a difficult task.

If the Servant here is an individual within Israel, then his task is to spread this message to the surrounding nations forcing them to see how God was at work in rebuilding his people in the Promised Land after captivity in Babylon. This servant would come after Deutero-Isaiah and minister during the early phases of the restoration. This is the ministry of [Third Isaiah](#) (appx. 538 - 520 BCE), but the theme here doesn't fit the orientation of Isa. chaps. 56-66, which focus on encouraging Israel.

Aspects of Jewish tradition see a realization of this in part by [Judas Maccabeus](#) in his restoration of Jerusalem and worship in the temple in 164 BCE.

But ultimately for Christians the identification of this servant becomes Christ. Several passages in the New Testament allude to verse six in application of the servant to Christ as the light to the Gentiles: Luke 2:32; John 8:12, 9:5; and Acts 26:23. In [Acts 13:47](#), Luke records Paul as referring to Isa. 49:6 being extended by Jesus as an obligation placed on his followers: "[For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'](#)" (NRSV). Certainly, Paul saw an

obligation to the Gentiles in his calling by God ([Gal. 1:15-16](#)): "[But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,...](#)" (NRSV). The phrase "[light of the world](#)" seen in application both to Jesus and to his followers has its roots in this motif in verse six.

Thus the realization of the role of the Servant ultimately depends on the follows of Christ who understand their calling as Servants who are commissioned by God and by Christ to be a light to the nations so that God's salvation may reach the end of the earth. For us as Christians, the "end of the earth" extends way beyond the countries around Palestine, as was the original designation in verse six. The definition now via [Matt. 28:19-20](#) has expanded: "[Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them](#)



[in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.](#)"

The "lesson" of Isa. 49:1-6 ultimately turns into the commission of Matt. 28:19-20. Between is the obligation of the Israelite captives to be a light, and most importantly, Jesus stood as that light. Now the torch has been passed into our hands. We must carry that light throughout our world.

**LXX**

ἰακούσατέ μου νῆσοι  
καὶ προσέχετε ἔθνη διὰ  
χρόνου πολλοῦ στήσεται  
λέγει κύριος ἐκ κοιλίας  
μητρός μου ἐκάλεσεν τὸ  
ὄνομά μου <sup>2</sup>καὶ ἔθηκεν τὸ  
στόμα μου ὡσεὶ μάχαιραν  
ὀξεῖαν καὶ ὑπὸ τὴν σκέπην  
τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ ἔκρυψέν  
με ἔθηκεν με ὡς βέλος  
ἐκλεκτὸν καὶ ἐν τῇ φαρέτρᾳ  
αὐτοῦ ἐσκέπασέν με <sup>3</sup>καὶ  
εἶπέν μοι δοῦλός μου εἶ  
σύ Ἰσραηλ καὶ ἐν σοὶ  
δοξασθήσομαι <sup>4</sup>καὶ ἐγὼ  
εἶπα κενῶς ἐκοπίασα καὶ  
εἰς μάταιον καὶ εἰς οὐδὲν  
ἔδωκα τὴν ἰσχύν μου διὰ  
τοῦτο ἡ κρίσις μου παρὰ  
κυρίῳ καὶ ὁ πόνος μου  
ἐναντίον τοῦ θεοῦ μου <sup>5</sup>καὶ  
νῦν οὕτως λέγει κύριος ὁ  
πλάσας με ἐκ κοιλίας δοῦ  
λον ἑαυτῷ τοῦ συναγαγεῖν  
ν τὸν Ἰακωβ καὶ Ἰσραηλ  
πρὸς αὐτόν συναχθήσομαι  
καὶ δοξασθήσομαι ἐναντίον  
κυρίου καὶ ὁ θεός μου ἔσται  
μου ἰσχὺς <sup>6</sup>καὶ εἶπέν μοι  
μέγα σοὶ ἐστὶν τοῦ κληθῆ  
ναί σε παιδὰ μου τοῦ στή  
σαι τὰς φυλὰς Ἰακωβ καὶ  
τὴν διασπορὰν τοῦ Ἰσραηλ  
ἐπιστρέψαι ἰδοὺ τέθεικά  
σε εἰς διαθήκην γένους εἰς  
φῶς ἐθνῶν τοῦ εἶναί σε  
εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου  
τῆς γῆς

**NASB**

1 Listen to Me, O is-  
lands, And pay attention,  
you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called Me  
from the womb; From the  
body of My mother He  
named Me. 2 He has  
made My mouth like a  
sharp sword, In the  
shadow of His hand He  
has concealed Me; And  
He has also made Me a  
select arrow, He has hid-  
den Me in His quiver. 3 He  
said to Me, " You are My  
Servant, Israel, In Whom  
I will show My glory." 4  
But I said, "I have toiled  
in vain, I have spent My  
strength for nothing and  
vanity; Yet surely the jus-  
tice *due* to Me is with the  
LORD, And My reward  
with My God." 5 And now  
says the LORD, who  
formed Me from the  
womb to be His Servant,  
To bring Jacob back to  
Him, so that Israel might  
be gathered to Him (For I  
am honored in the sight  
of the LORD, And My  
God is My strength), 6 He  
says, "It is too small a  
thing that You should be  
My Servant To raise up  
the tribes of Jacob and to  
restore the preserved  
ones of Israel; I will also  
make You a light of the  
nations So that My salva-  
tion may reach to the end  
of the earth."

**NRSV**

1 Listen to me, O  
coastlands, pay atten-  
tion, you peoples from  
far away! The Lord called  
me before I was born,  
while I was in my  
mother's womb he  
named me. 2 He made  
my mouth like a sharp  
sword, in the shadow of  
his hand he hid me; he  
made me a polished ar-  
row, in his quiver he hid  
me away. 3 And he said  
to me, "You are my ser-  
vant, Israel, in whom I will  
be glorified." 4 But I said,  
"I have labored in vain, I  
have spent my strength  
for nothing and vanity; yet  
surely my cause is with  
the Lord, and my reward  
with my God." 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 gath-  
ered to him, for I am hon-  
ored in the sight of the  
Lord, and my God has  
become my strength— 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."

**NLT**

1 Listen to me, all of  
you in far-off lands! The  
LORD called me before  
my birth; from within the  
womb he called me by  
name. 2 He made my  
words of judgment as  
sharp as a sword. He  
has hidden me in the  
shadow of his hand. I am  
like a sharp arrow in his  
quiver. 3 He said to me,  
"You are my servant, Is-  
rael, and you will bring me  
glory." 4 I replied, "But my  
work all seems so use-  
less! I have spent my  
strength for nothing and  
to no purpose at all. Yet I  
leave it all in the LORD's  
hand; I will trust God for  
my reward." 5 And now  
the LORD speaks – he  
who formed me in my  
mother's womb to be his  
servant, who commis-  
sioned me to bring his  
people of Israel back to  
him. The LORD has hon-  
ored me, and my God  
has given me strength. 6  
He says, "You will do  
more than restore the  
people of Israel to me. I  
will make you a light to the  
Gentiles, and you will  
bring my salvation to the  
ends of the earth."

Hebrew Text

Isaiah 49:1-6

שְׁמַעוּ אַיִּים אֵלַי וְהִקְשִׁיבוּ לְאָמִים מִרְחֹק  
 יְהוָה מִבֶּטֶן קָרָאֲנִי מִמְעַי אָמַן הַזְכִּיר שְׁמִי  
 וַיִּשָּׂם פִּי כְּחֶרֶב חֲדָה בְּצַל יָדוֹ הִחְבִּיאֲנִי וַיְשִׁימֵנִי לְחַץ  
 בְּרוּר בְּאַשְׁפְּתוֹ הַסְתִּירָנִי  
 וַיֹּאמֶר לִי עַבְדֵי־אֲתָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־בָּךְ אֲתַפְאֹר  
 וַאֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי לְרִיק יִנְעַמְתִּי לְתַהוֹ וְהִבֵּל כַּחַץ כִּלִּיתִי אֲכֵן  
 מִשְׁפָּטִי אֶת־יְהוָה וּפְעֻלָּתִי אֶת־אֱלֹהֵי  
 וַעֲתָה אֲמַר יְהוָה יִצְרֵי מִבֶּטֶן לְעַבְדֹּ לֹא לְשׁוֹבֵב יַעֲקֹב  
 אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל (לֹא) [לֹא] יֵאָסֶף וְאֶכְבֵּד בְּעֵינַי יְהוָה וְאֵלֵהֶי  
 הִיָּה עֵינִי  
 וַיֹּאמֶר נִקַּל מִהַיּוֹתֶךָ לִי עֲבַד לְהַקִּים אֶת־שְׁבָטֵי יַעֲקֹב  
 (וַנְצִירֵי) [וַנְצִירֵי] יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַשִּׁיב וּנְתִתִּיךָ לְאֹר גּוֹיִם לְהַיּוֹת  
 יְשׁוּעָתִי עַד־קֶצֶה הָאָרֶץ ס

<sup>BHT</sup> Isaiah 49:1 šim ū <sup>1</sup>iyyîm <sup>2</sup>ēlay wəhaqšîbû lə<sup>3</sup>ummîm mērāḥôq yhwh(ʔādōnāy)  
 mibbēṭen qerāʔānî mimmə ê <sup>4</sup>immî hizkîr šəmî <sup>5</sup>wayyāsem pî kəḥereb  
 ḥaddā<sup>h</sup> bašēl yādô heḥbiʔānî wayəšimēnî ləḥeš bārûr bəʔašpātô histîrānî <sup>6</sup>  
 wayyōʔmer lî abdî-ʔattā<sup>h</sup> yiśrāʔēl ʔāšer-bəkā <sup>7</sup>etpāʔar <sup>8</sup>waʔānî ʔamartî ləriq  
 yāgā tî ləṭōhû wəhebel kōḥî killētî ʔākēn mišpātî <sup>9</sup>et-yhwh(ʔādōnāy)  
 ūpə ullātî <sup>10</sup>et-ʔēlohāy <sup>11</sup>wə attā<sup>h</sup> ʔamar yhwh(ʔādōnāy) yōšrî mibbēṭen  
 lə ʔebed lō ləšōbēb ya ʔqōb <sup>12</sup>ēlāyw wəyiśrāʔēl (lōʔ) [lô] yeʔasēp wəʔekkābēd  
 bə ʔenē yhwh(ʔādōnāy) wəʔlohay hāyā<sup>h</sup> uzzî <sup>13</sup>wayyōʔmer nāqēl miḥyōtkā lî  
 ʔebed ləḥāqîm <sup>14</sup>et-šibtē ya ʔqōb (ūnəšîrê) [ūnəšûrê] yiśrāʔēl ləḥāšîb  
 ūnəṭattîkā ləʔôr gōyîm liḥyōt yəšû ātî ad-qəšē<sup>h</sup> hāʔāreš s