

Re-examining the Referent(s) of Isaiah 49:1-13

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It is often assumed that Isaiah 49:7-13 follows 49:1-6 as something of a “tailpiece” in the sense that two divine oracles take up the Servant’s twin task to the world and to Israel which was enunciated in verses 1-6.¹ It appears that for some the continuity of the two sections is so obvious that they provide no argument for their position that the Servant is the referent of both.² Thankfully, J.L. Koole has marshalled the evidence supporting the position.³ It is this evidence I would like to challenge in this brief article and instead suggest that the referent of verses 7-9b has changed from an individual “Israel” (the Servant) to national Israel.⁴

Koole provides two arguments justifying the position that the speech of verses 7-12 is addressed to the Servant and not Israel. One argument Koole presents is that “[h]ad Israel been addressed [in xlix 7], קדוּשׁ, as in 43:1 and 48:17, would not have a 3.p. but a 2.p. suffix. True enough, a 3.p. suffix also functions in an address to Israel, but in 44:6 and 45:11 it is followed by a 2.p. plural form and a self-glorification by Yahweh, and neither applies here.”⁵

However, Koole’s argument fails on three grounds. Firstly, the argument that a second person suffix is needed is unconvincing since one actually appears at the end of the verse (ויבחרך). Secondly, it is unclear why a third person plural form or a self-glorification by Yahweh is essential anyway, especially in *this* context where they may simply be unnecessary. In any case, one could cogently argue that למען in verse 7 and its following content points to Yahweh’s glorification through his people anyway. Furthermore, the passage seems content to cast Israel in second-person masculine singular terms reminiscent of 41:8-9 rather than with plural terminology. Thirdly, the argument fails to perceive that ישראל

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 389.

² See *inter alios* J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 294-295; Motyer, *Prophecy*, 389-390; E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:277.

³ See J.L. Koole, *Isaiah: Part 3, Volume 2: Isaiah 49-55* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 28-29, 34.

⁴ I thus align myself with the “individual” view of the Servant vis-à-vis the “collective” view. However, I think the evidence is too slim to identify an historical individual, whether Cyrus or Isaiah or someone else (see H.H. Rowley, “Collective and Fluid Theories,” in *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* [London: Lutterworth, 1952], 49-53; Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 50). Thus, with a growing number of scholars, I take it that the individual servant is intentionally unidentified (see esp. D.J.A. Clines, *I, He, We, & They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* [JSOTSS 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983], *passim*; C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* [OTL; London: SCM, 1969], 93; W.M. Roth, “The Anonymity of the Suffering Servant,” *JBL* 83 [1964], 171-173; J. Goldingay, “The Arrangement of Isaiah XLI-XLV,” *VT* 29 [1979], 293; F. Landy, “The Construction of the Subject and the Symbolic Order: A Reading of the Last Three Suffering Servant Songs,” in *Among the Prophets: Language, Image and Structure in the Prophetic Writings* (P.R. Davies and D.J.A. Clines, eds.; JSOTSS 144; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 62; R.E. Watts, “Consolation or Confrontation? Isaiah 40-55 and the Delay of the New Exodus,” *TynB* 41 [1991], 50-56), casting the emphasis more onto his role or function (see esp. W.J. Dumbrell, “The Role of the Servant in Isaiah 40-55,” *RTR* 48 [1989], 105-113; WATTS, “Consolation”, 50-51).

⁵ Koole, *Isaiah*, 34.

has reverted to its usual sense. Strongly supporting this is the observation that the Servant—even as a newly designated "Israel" (49:3)—is in need of no גאל. Rather, he *is* Yahweh's ישועה—a figure of redemption (49:6d).⁶ The antecedent of the third-person masculine singular suffix of קדוֹשׁוֹ (49:7) is undoubtedly יִשְׂרָאֵל, which is itself the object of the participle גאל. As such, יִשְׂרָאֵל is best taken as referring to the nation Israel. The following five second-person masculine singular suffixes are then taken as referring to יִשְׂרָאֵל also as in 41:8-9. Thus all forms here are co-referential, i.e. all have the same referent whether designated lexically (יִשְׂרָאֵל) or pronominally (וְ- and כְ-). This understanding of verse 7, for example, may be seen in English translation with subscripted indices indicating this co-reference:

Thus YHWH has said,
the redeemer of Israel_i, his_i holy one,
to the one_i despised regarding life, to the one_i abhorred by a nation,
to the slave_i of rulers:
"Kings will see and they will stand,
princes will bow down
because of YHWH who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel_i, who has chosen you_i."

Koole's second argument justifying the consensus position that the speech of verses 7-12 is addressed to the Servant and not Israel is that this "is brought out by the repetition of עָבַד in v. 7 (cf. vv., 4 [sic], 5, 6) and יְשׁוּעָה in v. 8 (cf. v. 6), the final infinitives of v. 8 (cf. vv. 5f.), and the correspondence of the kings and princes in v. 7aBC with the nations addressed in v. 1a."⁷ Now I do not want to deny the repetition and correspondence between the two sections; rather, I want to suggest that it points in an entirely different direction.

In contrast to an explicitly named Cyrus, the identity of the Servant is never revealed.⁸ Indeed, this seems to be intentional,⁹ casting the emphasis upon the Servant's role or function.¹⁰ It is this which we find in Isaiah 49:1-6: a speaker—cast in the role of a prophet as one called before birth (cf. Jer 1:5)—who tells of his name without revealing it (49:1), but who is also designated יִשְׂרָאֵל; perhaps a title, but more likely a role. Israel herself bears the title יִשְׂרָאֵל yet cannot fulfil her calling.¹¹ Consequently, another עָבַד-figure is named יִשְׂרָאֵל (49:3).¹² This new servant is commissioned as יִשְׂרָאֵל to fulfil the role of failed Israel.¹³ His task is to restore (להשיב) the remnant of Israel (49:6). Because even a post-exilic remnant is

⁶ This is the most natural reading of the phrase להיות ישועתי (see Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 293-294; Motyer, *Prophecy*, 388-389). See below note 14.

⁷ Koole, *Isaiah*, 28-29.

⁸ Watts, "Consolation", 51-52, 55-56.

⁹ Again, see Clines, *I, He, We, They, passim*; Westermann, *Isaiah*, 93; Roth, "Anonymity", 171-73; Goldingay, "Arrangement", 293; Landy, "Construction", 62; Watts, "Consolation", 50-56.

¹⁰ So Dumbrell, "Role", 105-113.

¹¹ Indeed, although exile is seen as the refining כור עֵי (48:10) from which a purified remnant emanates, the unbelieving exiles are still described as רשעים (48:22). Watts says of 48:1 that "Jacob-Israel is declared to be Israel in name only in a statement which seems tantamount to divesting Jacob-Israel of her servant office" ("Consolation", 35; cf. Motyer, *Prophecy*, 375-376, 382). Paradoxically, the purifying exilic furnace of affliction has produced disappointing results (cf. 48:1-2, 4, 6, 8, 9-11, 18, 22). Israel still has a remaining sin-problem; something much more radical is needed than the physical redemption provided by Cyrus. See further below note 14.

¹² יִשְׂרָאֵל is best understood as a predicate parallel to עבדי and not as a vocative. אֵתָה is taken as understood in the second colon.

¹³ So *inter alios* Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 291; Motyer, *Prophecy*, 386; B. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 193-194; Watts, "Consolation", 54-55; J. Jeremias, "מִשְׁפָּטִים im ersten Gottesknechtslied (Jes. xlii 1-4)," *VT* 22 (1972), 41-42.

seen to be deaf and bearing "Israel" in name only (ch. 48), a spiritual work of restoration is needed.¹⁴ As such, Cyrus—whose work is entirely physical, centred only on a physical restoration—fades to the background and the work of a newly designated "Israel" whose task is spiritual in nature comes to the fore.¹⁵ It is this new Israel, the Servant, Yahweh's יְשׁוּעָה, who is claimed to be the continuing referent through the address of verses 7-12.

However, as we have seen the Servant is in need of no redeemer, and so another referent, national Israel, who *is* in need of a redeemer, is found in the address. For this reason the links between verses 1-6 and 7-9b instead of pertaining to the *same* referent (i.e. the Servant) closely associate *different* referents: the Servant and Israel. This is the stunning effect of לְאוֹר in 49:6 and לְבְרִית עַם in 49:8, expressions previously used solely of the Servant (cf. 42:6), but now *split* between the Servant and Israel. As Webb explains, "[n]ow, by re-using the two expressions ... Isaiah underlines the fact that God will achieve this great goal [of blessing the world he has created] both through the Servant himself and through his restored people. As they are brought back into a right relationship with God, God's people become one with God's Servant in his world-wide mission."¹⁶ As such, their mission is also לְאוֹר and those בְּחֶזֶק (49:9; cf. 42:7). They follow in the Servant's footsteps of having humble beginnings (49:4a, 7b) but a splendid future (4b, 6d, 7c-9b).¹⁷ Indeed, this is not unlike passages elsewhere (e.g. 50:4–51:11), especially in the plural עֲבָדֵי יְהוָה idea, which appears only after chapter 53 (54:17; cf. 56:6; 63:17; 65:8-14; 66:14). No doubt they are the זֶרַע of 53:10—the fruit of his work—as they are taught by Yahweh (54:13) as he was (50:4); endure suffering (54:11) as he did (53:4); and will be vindicated (54:17) as he was (50:8). They are like him, now called "servants", who enter into the work for which they have been redeemed (49:7-13). Failed Israel fulfils her calling as יִשְׂרָאֵל only because a new Servant is commissioned as יִשְׂרָאֵל and given the task of restoring Israel (49:6). As such, the difference between the referents is one of Restorer and Restored, יְשׁוּעָה and Saved. Or as in language elsewhere, between Servant and Servants, אֲשָׁם and זֶרַע (53:10).

¹⁴ See above note 11. לְהַשִּׁיב (49:6), then, is seen to be a spiritual work, a restoration of Israel's relationship with God. The Servant is neither Cyrus (note how the title עֶבֶד is strictly avoided in reference to Cyrus; see Watts, "Consolation," 52) nor is he simply repeating Cyrus' mission. For this reason the passage is not simply autobiographical (*contra, inter alios*, J. Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant: A Study in Jeremiah and Isaiah 40–55* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994], 125-133; idem, *Isaiah* [NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001], 280-283), for the Servant is not simply a herald of salvation (as the herald of ch. 50 is) nor simply a bearer of salvation (as implied by the NIV's rendering of 49:6d); rather, he *is* Yahweh's salvation (לְהוֹיֹת יְשׁוּעָתִי), a statement tantamount to ontology. For much the same reasons J.D.W. Watts' (*Isaiah 34–66* [WBC; Waco: Word, 1987], 185-190) identification of Darius is unconvincing. Furthermore, he misses (even failing to comment on) the import of 49:3 where a new figure is designated יִשְׂרָאֵל. In so doing, he applies 49:1-4 to national Israel.

¹⁵ Even in chapter 45 Cyrus plays second-fiddle to the uniqueness and majesty of the one who has elected to use him. Cf. Watts, "Consolation", 52.

¹⁶ Webb, *Message*, 194.

¹⁷ Pace Koole, the repetition of עֶבֶד in verse 7 points not to the same identity mentioned in verses 3, 5, and 6 but to another, a "slave of rulers". Read in isolation, עֶבֶד could signal "Servant", but read alongside מַתְעַב גִּי it must surely mean something different, i.e. "slave". Therefore, the context dictates that although the repetition etc. unites, it does not mean that the Servant is on view for the entirety of 49:1-9b.