

Jesus the Suffering Servant?

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT'S USE OF ISAIAH'S
FOURTH SERVANT SONG

PHILIP MAIKKULA

Introduction:

In the Orthodox liturgical tradition, the third Old Testament reading during Vespers of Holy Friday is taken from Isaiah 52.13-54.1 – often called the fourth servant song of Isaiah.¹ On the same liturgical day, in the service of Matins of Holy Friday, typically served the night before, twelve different Gospel accounts of the passion of Jesus are read.² That the Orthodox liturgical tradition would draw an interpretive link between the death of Jesus and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is not surprising.³ Such a connection is to be expected in Christian circles. Interpreting the death of Jesus through the fourth servant song, or perhaps more accurately, interpreting the fourth servant song through the death of Jesus, has a rich Christian interpretative tradition dating back to the New Testament, as articulated in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Official (Acts 8:26-35). While the interpretive link is clear, the theological meaning is less so.⁴ What meaning should be drawn from this connection? In the modern era, many interpreters have read Isaiah's fourth servant song in order to explore the theological meaning of atonement or to expound a substitutionary understanding of the death of Jesus.⁵ But is such a reading justified by the text?

¹ *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), 614. The Orthodox tradition includes Isaiah 54.1 in with this reading which is not recognized by modern scholars as part of the fourth servant song. The term servant songs comes from Bernhard Duhm's commentary on Isaiah, *Das Buch Jesaja* 4th ed., (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 311.

² For a complete list of the twelve readings see: *The Lenten Triodion*, 565-600.

³ The same readings are used in the Roman Catholic lectionary and the revised common lectionary. Cf. "Liturgical Calendar for the Dioceses of the United States of America 2019," *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Divine Worship*, accessed April 2, 2019, <http://www.usccb.org/about/divine-worship/liturgical-calendar/upload/2019cal.pdf>; "The Revised Common Lectionary," *Vanderbilt Divinity School*, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=C&season=Holy%20Week>.

⁴ For a history of interpretation see, *Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, trans. and ed., Robert Louis Wilken with Angela Russel Christman and Michael J. Hollerich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Brevard Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁵ Robert B. Chisholm Jr. "The Christological Fulfillment of Isaiah's Servant Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (October-December 2006): 387-404; Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015); Peter J. Gentry, "The Atonement in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 20-47; J.I. Packer, "What did the Cross Achieve?: The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 3-45; Thomas D. Petter, "The Meaning of Substitutionary Righteousness in ISA 53:11: A Summary of the Evidence," in *Trinity Journal* 32, no. 2 (Fall, 2011): 165-189. Particularly challenging for many people is the penal substitutionary

To answer these question, I propose we ask another: how did the New Testament authors receive and interpret the fourth servant song of Isaiah? In exploring this question, I will examine each of the instances of a direct quotation from Isaiah’s fourth servant song in the New Testament.⁶ Through a close reading of each text in context, I will demonstrate that none of the New Testament authors quoted Isaiah’s fourth servant song to articulate a substitutionary theology of atonement. Rather each had different theological points to make that were dependent largely on their context.

Exegesis:

The first instance of a quotation from Isaiah 53 is found in Matthew 8:17.⁷ The context is the second of Matthew’s different narrative sequences, this time following immediately after the Sermon on the Mount. In this section, Jesus is engaged in his healing ministry – first healing a man with leprosy (vv. 2-4), then the servant of a Roman Centurion (vv. 5-13), and finally Peter’s Mother-in-law (vv. 14-15). Verse 16 frames the immediate context of our quotation, “That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and cured all who were sick” (Matt. 8:16 NRSV). The emphasis of this section is to present Jesus as a healer with authority, who with a word heals all that come to him.⁸ It is in this context that Matthew quotes Isaiah 53:4, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, ‘He took our infirmities and bore our diseases’” (Matt. 8:17 NRSV).

atonement model in which it is assumed that God character means that he must punish someone for sins committed. In our place, Jesus takes upon himself the wrath of God that was stored up for us sinners.

⁶ This methodology rests on a more sure footing than one which also considers allusions to Isaiah 53, because in the instances of direct quotation we know the biblical authors is drawing on the text in question.

⁷ I have chosen to proceed according to the canonical order of books rather than a chronological order. This will not, however, affect the argument.

⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, in *Hermeneia*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 14.

Some scholars have seen in Matthew's use of the quotation from Isaiah 53:4, a connection between the Servant of the Lord and Jesus' healing ministry. These scholars argue that Jesus' healing ministry must be understood through the lens of the vicarious suffering of Isaiah's servant, which ultimately points to Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross.⁹ This, however, is an interpretive stretch. First, this interpretation presupposes that Matthew was intentionally drawing on the larger context of Isaiah's servant song and that Matthew alludes to this context at other places in the Gospel.¹⁰ Yet, it is just as likely that this quotation fits within early Christian exegetical practices of taking quotations out of context.¹¹ Second, this reading largely ignores Matthew's own strong emphasis on the power of Jesus' healing ministry, which Matthew stresses without any hint of a reference to the Servant of God or to suffering.¹² Additionally, Matthew quotes from the Hebrew version of Isaiah 53:4 rather than the LXX because the Hebrew text emphasizes the physical nature of Jesus healing ministry while the LXX spiritualizes it.¹³ If Matthew wanted to connect Jesus' healing ministry with his vicarious death on the cross to forgive sins, then the LXX would have made the point more clear. The point of Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 53:4 is to show that Jesus' healing ministry was endorsed by prophecy, not that it is somehow connected with his substitutionary death on the cross.

⁹ See, D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (EBC, 8; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985); R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985); R.H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel*; R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution 2nd Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Kenneth D. Litwak, "The Use of Quotations from Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the New Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 385-94; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975).

¹⁰ For a list of texts often read in light of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, see: Matt. 20:28; 26:28; 27:12; 27:57. Note that none of these texts explicitly cites Isaiah, but rather Isaiah is being read into these texts.

¹¹ Luz, *Matthew*, 14.

¹² See, Matt. 12:18-21 where Jesus is identified with the servant of God. Cf. Rick Watts, "Messianic Servant or the End of Israel's Exilic Curse? Isaiah 53.4 in Matthew 8.17," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38, no. 1 (2015): 81-95.

¹³ Cf. אָכַן תְּלַגְנוּ הוּא וּמָכָא בְּיָנוּ סְבָלִים (Isa. 53:4 BHS); οὗτος τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται (Isa. 53:4 LXX). The LXX emphasizes sins rather than diseases.

The next direct quotation of Isaiah 53 comes from Luke 22:37.¹⁴ The context for this citation is a final conversation Jesus had with his disciples following the last supper. At the end of the short conversation on Jesus' life of service and Peter's upcoming betrayal, Jesus tells the disciples that unlike in their previous missionary efforts, now they must get a money bag, a sack, and even buy a sword (Luke 22:35-36).

There is a great deal of confusion concerning the meaning of this text, especially concerning Jesus' advice to acquire swords. Bovon reads the text as teaching that different eras call for different equipment. Jesus' presence was analogous to military exercises in which minimal equipment was needed, but post-Easter, the risks will be real and the disciples need to be ready.¹⁵

Oddly, Bovon does not connect the need for swords with the quotation from Isaiah 53:12, but rather reflects on the larger theological meaning of Luke's quotation of Isaiah's fourth servant song and its connection to Jesus' "expiatory sacrifice for the sins of the people."¹⁶ Yet, if you pay attention to the text itself you can see that Bovon misses the point that Luke is drawing out. Immediately after this scene, Jesus will go to the Mount of Olives where he will be arrested. When Jesus quotes Isaiah, "And he was counted among the lawless" (Lk. 22:37 NRSV), we should not only think of Jesus' upcoming crucifixion as a criminal, but more importantly his impending arrest as one. Luke is stressing that the prophetic plan of God requires that Jesus be counted among the criminals. That is why the disciples must now carry swords.¹⁷ When the chief

¹⁴ This same text of Isaiah is quoted in Mark 15:28, however, the best manuscripts do not contain this verse and modern critical editions omit it, suggesting that it was interpolated to harmonize with Luke's Gospel.

¹⁵ Francois Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53*, in *Hermeneia*, trans. James Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 182.

¹⁶ Bovon 183-184.

¹⁷ This also explains why Jesus immediately puts an end to the violence when a disciple cuts the ear off the high priest's servant. Jesus was not telling his disciples to have swords because he was endorsing violence. Rather, Jesus was seeking to fulfill prophecy – to be considered a criminal.

priests and temple guards come to arrest Jesus, he highlights their treatment of him. “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a *bandit*?” (Lk. 22:52 NRS). In this instance, Isaiah is quoted to explain Jesus’ arrest and treatment like a criminal. It says nothing of the theological meaning of his death. Any such reading must be imported from the reader.

The next direct quotation occurs in John 12:38, quoting Isaiah 53:1. Some interpreters have gone to great lengths to connect the quotation of Isaiah with the broader themes of the suffering servant.¹⁸ While efforts like this are interesting, we should be cautious not to draw broader theological conclusions from the quotation than the Gospel writer. The explanation of this quotation is quite clear from the context. Verse 37 reads, “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him” (Jn. 12:37 NRSV). In order to explain this reality, Jesus quotes Isaiah 53:1, “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Jn. 12:38 NRSV). The disbelief of Jesus’ contemporaries was so shocking, the only explanatory recourse was to appeal to the prophetic will of God.¹⁹

The quotation of Isaiah 53:7-8 in Acts chapter 8 is perhaps the most difficult case we will consider. As we discussed in the introduction, the Ethiopian Official was reading Isaiah’s fourth servant song and upon meeting Philip invites him to help him understand the text. Philip uses the text of Isaiah to preach about Jesus. While some have attempted to see in this text, a reference to Jesus’s atoning death for sin,²⁰ it is important to note very carefully what Luke does and does not quote from Isaiah. Using the LXX almost verbatim,²¹ Luke quotes the text Isaiah 53:7b and 8a.

¹⁸ Jonathan Lett, “The Divine Identity of Jesus as the Reason for Israel’s Unbelief in John 12:26-43,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 1 (2016): 159-173.

¹⁹ Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21*, trans. Robert W. Funk, ed. Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 100-101.

²⁰ For example of an attempt to develop of Christology around the suffering servant, see: Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament Revised Edition*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A.M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

²¹ Cf. Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 225, n. 64.

He does not, however, quote Isaiah 53:4-6 or verse 8b which are of interest to interpreters looking for a theology of substitutionary atoning in the death of Jesus. As Spencer has highlighted, “Luke seems studiously to avoid any hint to atoning efficacy, highlighting instead the element of *ταπείνωσις* (vv. 7-8a).”²² The theological point of this text can be parsed in two different ways depending on the meaning of the verb *αἴρω* – either exaltation or removal. First, the passage could be drawing a contrast between the humiliation of Jesus and the reversal of that humiliation in the resurrection – exaltation. Second, the text could be highlighted that Jesus was denied justice, but accepted this humiliation in silence – removal.²³ Whichever of these meanings is preferred, the text is not suggesting a theology of substitutionary atonement.

Two times in Romans, Paul quotes from the fourth servant song of Isaiah. Both are in reference to his missionary activities. The first instance is in Romans 10:16, where Paul quotes Isaiah 53:1. The context of this quotation makes the understanding of the Paul’s use of Isaiah easily understandable. In speaking of his preaching the good news, Paul reflects, “But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’” (Rom. 10:16 NRSV). A problem faced by the early Christian community was how to explain the failure of the Jewish nation to convert in mass. If Christ was the messiah, as early Christian preaching insisted, then why did the Jews not embrace him? Paul uses this quote from Isaiah as part of an elaborate apologetic to explain this discrepancy. The second instance, is Romans 15:21, where Paul quotes from Isaiah 52:15. Again this is in relation to Paul’s missionary activity. Paul’s missionary practice was to go to those who had never heard the good news, so that he would “not build on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20 NRSV). Paul prefers to quote from the LXX

²² Scott F. Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A study of Roles and Relations*, in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series*, Vol. 67 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 175.

²³ Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, 225-226.

because it introduces the pronoun *αὐτός*, allowing Paul to more explicitly connect this text to Jesus.

The final quotation from Isaiah's fourth servant song appears in 1 Peter 2:21-25. The context of this section is 1 Peter's "household code."²⁴ Each member of the household is addressed with the proper way they ought to act within the house.²⁵ It is in this context that 1 Peter quotes from Isaiah 53. In offer his advice to slaves, the author of 1 Peter gives them an example to look up to – the suffering of Christ. This context, helps us to understand the meaning of 1 Peter's use of the Isaiah 53. Slaves would often suffer injustice (1 Pet. 2:20), but the author of 1 Peter reminds the slaves that accepting unjust suffering is part of the moral requirement of Christians because they must follow the example set by Christ.²⁶ While this text might present us with a morally objectionable ethic in relation to oppressed people, it does not suggest a theory of substitutionary atonement.

Conclusion and Reflection:

There can be little doubt that from the earliest period, Christians have seen an interpretive link between the ministry of Jesus and the fourth servant song of Isaiah. This theological link has been developed through the years and been used extensively by some to argue for a theology of substitutionary atonement. This article has challenge that link by demonstrating that while the New Testament utilized the fourth servant song, it did so in a variety of ways and always with a particular context in mind. Never does the New Testament interpret the fourth servant song of Isaiah to understand the death of Jesus in a substitutionary sense. This ought to give modern interpreters and theologians pause when they consider how they will understand Isaiah 53 in

²⁴ See, Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, in *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 50-52.

²⁵ In this instance, the typical order is reversed and children are left off the list. Cf. Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-6:9.

²⁶ Perkins 54.

light of Christ. My hope is that this article has offered some resistance to the ease with which substitutionary models of atonement – particularly the penal model – are read into the biblical text. Those who quickly turn to Isaiah 53 as a proof text in order to interpret the death of Jesus will need to reconsider how those connections are made, as the New Testament does not make the connection to substitutionary suffering.