

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

philosophy.' This is her verdict on Bosanquet, and she adds some definite reasons. The conception of timelessness is a negative and, indeed, an impossible one. The concrete time notion cannot be got rid of. It is the life-blood of reality. If the riddle of existence is to be solved it must be, not by abstraction from all human reality (e.g. the consciousness of growth in spiritual experience),

but by seizing hold of that reality of which our experience may indeed be the symbol, but a true symbol, not mere illusion.

A truer conception of this reality is found in a philosophy like von Hügel's, where the Eternal is revealed in time and its reality apprehended in the durational experience of the religious life.

A New View of the Servant of the Lord.

BY PROFESSOR JOHN E. MCFADYEN, D.D., UNITED FREE CHURCH COLLEGE, GLASGOW.

It may interest the readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES, who in the present distress find it difficult to get or to keep in touch with foreign criticism, to learn of the latest solution of the difficult 'Servant of Jahweh' problem, proposed by Sigmund Mowinckel, a Norwegian scholar, and enthusiastically adopted by no less an authority than Professor Hermann Gunkel, who has sketched it in a very interesting brochure entitled *Ein Vorläufer Jesu* (Verlag Seldwyla, Bern). The passages round which the discussion turns are the famous songs in Is 42¹⁻⁷ 49¹⁻⁷ 50⁴⁻¹¹ 52¹³⁻⁵³¹², dealing with the enigmatic figure of the Servant of Jahweh.

No ambiguity, of course, attaches to the interpretation of the Servant in the body of the prophecy proper (Is 40-55): there, beyond any cavil, he is the nation (41⁸ 44¹ 45⁴ 48²⁰ etc.). But the subject of the Servant songs is a different matter, and their interpretation divides the critical camp, some—perhaps the majority—believing that here, as in the rest of the prophecy, the Servant is the nation (Jacob, or Israel, as he is alternatively called), others vehemently maintaining that, in justice to all the facts, and in particular to the very highly individualized traits of the description, the Servant can here at any rate only be fairly or naturally regarded as an individual. There are excellent scholars on both sides, so that the question cannot be decided either by the numbers or the ability of the disputants, and a new attempt at a solution should be welcome to everybody. I do not propose here to discuss the question on its merits, but simply to present the new view which, briefly stated, is that the Servant is none other than the prophet himself.

The exiles have been languishing in Babylon for half a century, and Deutero-Isaiah comforts them with the assurance that the day of their redemption draweth nigh. This is no vague promise: for in the great Cyrus, who has swept over Western Asia with his conquering hosts, and whose every step is attended with victory (41²), the prophet sees the sure and certain historical agent of that redemption. In this experience the wonders of the ancient Exodus are to be revived, and even surpassed; the whole creation is to join with Israel in the song of jubilation (44²³ 45⁶); and the poet-prophet looks forward to the time when all the nations, astonished at Jahweh's doing and ashamed of their own foolish idolatries, will be won to the worship of Israel's glorious God. Now in this magnificent programme let us consider the rôle assigned in the Songs to the Servant.

He has been chosen by Jahweh as His instrument to do *prophetic* work: like Jeremiah, he has been called from his mother's womb (49⁴). The spirit of Jahweh is upon him (42¹), and his mouth is the instrument by which his work is done, the sword by which his battle for Jahweh is fought (49²). He has a disciple's tongue, his ear is open and sensitive to the daily revelation from his God which each new morning brings (50⁴), and the words of comfort and assurance which he utters to others are the words which he has himself heard from his divine Master, listening, as he does evermore, like a true disciple. Like Paul, he delivers just what he has received. All this, it is argued, does not carry us beyond the range of an individual prophet, who in the name of God can speak an effective and even creative word.

His first commission is to his own unhappy people :

To bring from the dungeon the captives
Who sit in the darkness of prison—¹

the prison of Babylonian exile. To them his word is a promise of freedom. But more. When Jacob is brought back to Jahweh, and Israel gathered to him (49⁵), the prophet's task is to 'raise up the tribes of Israel,' that is, to fashion them anew; in this way he becomes a 'covenant of the people,' that is, he concludes and embodies in his own person a new covenant between God and the people. Like a second Moses or Joshua, he is to lead his people out of bondage into the promised land. This, however, is not enough. God, as we have already seen, is yet to be revealed, not only to Israel, but to the world; and this greater programme also is to be achieved through the Servant.

He (*i.e.* Jahweh) saith, 'It is too light a thing
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,
And Israel's dispersed to restore :
I will make thee a light to the nations,
That so My salvation may reach
To the very ends of the earth' (49⁶).²

So in 42¹⁻⁴ his outlook is upon the distant shores of the world, and foreign kings and princes, accepting his message, will pay him lowly homage as the messenger of the mighty word of God (49⁷). Here is a task and a vision greater than that of Moses. Moses' commission was to Israel, this man's to the world. Doubtless Jeremiah, too, had felt himself called to be 'a prophet to the nations' (1⁵), but never had any one before dared to claim for himself the homage of the whole world. This daring is so extravagant that it is little wonder, as Gunkel says, that throughout the centuries it has been consistently referred to any subject rather than to the prophet himself; but it begins to be justified when we remember that we have in him one of the

¹ The quotations are from my *Isaiah in Modern Speech* (James Clarke & Co.).

² As 49⁶ is in some ways the most crucial passage of the Songs, the one which seems most conclusively to distinguish between the Servant and the people, it is only fair to say that with the slight omission of 'that thou shouldst be My servant' in v.⁶, which is supported by metrical considerations, advocates of the national interpretation can, without the slightest violence, claim and use this passage in favour of their own view, as they also can 53⁸ with a very slight and probable change of text.

very greatest of the human race, and that these daring ambitions are not the effusions of vanity, but the expression of a soul that knows itself to be but the instrument of God, and that the glory he anticipates is not for his own sake, but for Jahweh's (49⁷).

But to all this anticipated glory for himself and his people there was a tragic issue. His activity had to be pursued on a humble scale: unlike his mighty predecessors, who lifted up their voices in the public places, he exercised his comforting ministry in quiet and unobtrusive ways (42^{2f}), and in his own personal appearance there was nothing to attract or win men (53²). No one believed his message; now, as always, Israel was blind and deaf, each going his own way like wandering sheep, indifferent to the prophet's good news of impending deliverance and future glory. Nor did the political situation change so rapidly as in his impatience he had anticipated; he had the sense of having laboured in vain and spent his strength for nought (49⁴). Worse still, the people whom he strove to inspire grew suspicious and afraid. What might not the Babylonians do, if they got to hear of the doom with which he threatened their empire? So they sought to silence him by violence, spat upon him, smote him on the back (50⁶), despised and rejected him. But, like Jeremiah, he was ever and anon sustained by his God, in whose eyes he was honourable (49⁵), and in his whose strength he could endure.

For the Lord Jehovah doth help me,
And so I am not confounded ;
I set my face like a flint,
And I know I shall never be shamed.
My Vindicator is nigh,
Who then dare contend with me ?
Who dare be mine opponent ?
Let him draw nigh unto me (50^{7a}).

Unlike Jeremiah, he never breaks out into imprecations upon his adversaries: his resignation amid sorrow and persecution lifts him to a lonely height among the great ones of Israel.

To persecution was added sickness and a bodily suffering which disfigured him so grievously that his contemporaries could only regard him as smitten by the wrath of God, and turned away from him in horror—an experience all the more awful that he was conscious of having been elected to so high a destiny. Yet

Though outraged, he was submissive,
He opened not his mouth (53⁷).

His sufferings, he now sees, must end in death, a death made bitter by the thought that no one will care (53⁸), and doubly bitter by the knowledge that he will be deprived even of an honourable burial (53⁹); and most bitter of all by the feeling that he dies with his mission unfulfilled.

But again his faith comes to the rescue and lifts him triumphantly over death and the grave. God owes it to him, as Job (19^{25ff.}) felt too, to vindicate him before the world. The time will come when the mighty will do him homage, 'and kings shall be silent for awe of him' (52¹⁵). But this glory can be his only through his resurrection; yet to this too—in a verse whose text is unhappily very corrupt—he looks forward with serene confidence (53¹⁰). So daring a thought is indeed a marvel, especially at the stage which Israel's religious thought had then reached. The prophet is himself very conscious of this, it is something unparalleled in the world's experience:

For what they had never been told shall they see,
They shall gaze upon things unheard of before (52¹⁶).

But his God is able to perform even this miracle of raising him again from the dead to justify and glorify him before the world.

But more. The prophet penetrated to the heart of the mystery of his suffering and death, interpreting it as a vicarious offering for the sin of his people—an offering of all the greater worth as it was voluntarily made. Further, he is convinced that this voluntary death will make a saving impression on those for whom he has suffered, and so will accomplish the purpose of God in the conversion of Israel. In the middle of the great poem which foretells his death and resurrection (52¹³–53¹²) he has inserted a penitential confession, corresponding to the customary dirge over the dead, and supposed to be sung by the repentant people, after he is risen again to glory. They do not here, as was customary, praise the departed, but they express the sorrow of their hearts at the

suffering which he bore and the death which he died for them:

But *ours* was the pain that he bore,
And the sorrows he carried were ours;
Yet by *us* he was counted as smitten
And tortured by God's own hand.
But *ours* was the sin that pierced him,
The guilt that crushed him was ours:
Yea, *he* was chastised for *our* welfare,
And *his* stripes brought healing to *us*.
We had all of us wandered like sheep,
Each turning a way of his own,
While Jehovah had laid upon *him*
The iniquity of us all (53⁴⁻⁶).

Then the dirge changes to prophecy. The wonderful poem ends with the Servant's unclouded outlook upon his own future exaltation and glory, and with this vision in his heart he goes calmly forward to tread the bitter way of death, sure beyond the shadow of a doubt that the purpose of the Lord will through him be triumphant (53¹⁰). Good Friday and Easter morning are here anticipated.

What reader, asks Gunkel in conclusion, can fail to think of that other great Servant of God, the greatest of them all, who was likewise rejected by His people—the Servant who in wonderful wise combined the mightiest consciousness of the greatness of His mission and the uniqueness of His person with humility and meekness, who vanquished the thought of death with the conviction that His blood would be a ransom for many, and with the sure expectation that He would speedily come again in the clouds of heaven? That Jesus should have cherished such thoughts of Himself is surely credible, when we find them entertained more than five centuries before by this great 'Forerunner' of His.

It is not my purpose to criticise this interpretation. At many points I do not find it convincing, and still less when its relation to the book as a whole (40–55) is considered. But readers will admit the attractiveness and skill with which Professor Gunkel has summarized Mowinckel's theory and once again laid all Old Testament students under a heavy debt.