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Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME X

January 1958

No 9

THE FOURTH SONG OF THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH: IS. 52:13-53:12

In the second part of the book of Isaias there are four passages (42:1-4 ; 49:1-4 ; 50:4-9 ; 52:13-53:12) which deal with a mysterious 'servant of Yahweh,' and which seem by their content and treatment to be different in their literary origin from their surrounding context. The fourth of these passages, commonly called 'songs' because of their lyrical character, is by far the most important, and certainly the richest in religious teaching, and for that reason we have chosen to treat it particularly in this article.

A brief word of introduction is needed to set this passage and the preceding three songs in their greater context. It must be remembered that we are dealing here with highly controversial matter ; probable views alone can be put forward ; there are various trends of opinion, but none of them has any claim to certainty.

The background, style and message of the second part of the book of Isaias (chs. 40-66) form a very marked contrast with the characteristics of the first part of the book. A gap of two centuries has intervened—we have jumped from the eighth to the sixth century ; Jerusalem has been captured and its inhabitants deported to Babylon ; the precise historical references of the first part disappear, and now Cyrus, the Persian conqueror, dominates the scene ; all other historical and geographical references are missing. The contrast in style is not less marked : the vigorous, powerful style of the first part of the book changes to flowing, rounded rhetoric, abounding in repetitions and exhortations, and the vocabulary has notable differences. Finally, there is a great advance in the religious teaching of the book : the universal scope of Yahweh's designs is stressed more strongly ; the unicity and transcendence of God is more formally developed ; the whole treatment is optimistic, for God appears above all as the redeemer of Israel and of the world.

These differences have led almost all non-Catholic scholars and a growing number of modern Catholic exegetes to postulate a different author for the second half of Isaias. Others, such as Dr Kissane, have

tried to explain the differences in style by assigning the actual writing of the second part to a Jew or Jews of the exile, who re-treated matter already written by the prophet Isaias. This last theory would account better for the traditional linking of the second part of the book with the great prophet of the eighth century, but raises new and formidable problems. Despite the decree of the Biblical Commission of 1908, Catholic scholars of today are certainly free to hold the later interpretation. No fundamental point of Catholic teaching is involved; all Catholics certainly hold the *inspiration* of the second part of Isaias; it is merely a matter in which the evidence, from tradition on one hand, and from literary and historical analysis on the other hand, must be weighed and appreciated. The last word on this difficult question has probably not yet been said, but, if the writer holds that the second part of Isaias was not written by the prophet bearing that name, but by another, anonymous prophet, equally inspired, of the exile, who owed much to Jeremias and Ezechiel, then it should be realised that he is merely sharing a view which is rapidly becoming the common opinion among modern Catholic exegetes.¹

The next question which must be at least touched upon concerns the relationship between these songs and their contexts. The more common view, shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, is that the four passages develop the same theme, and are not closely related to their particular contexts, where they have been inserted somewhat arbitrarily by a later hand, possibly by a disciple of the first writer. In other words, they form a unity among themselves rather than with their contexts. Thus the 'servant of Yahweh' in every case retains the same general meaning, individual or collective or verging from collective to individual, according to the various schools of opinion. This mode of interpretation is strongly opposed by Dr Kissane, who insists that in each case the songs are to be interpreted in conjunction with their immediate context. For him the songs do not form a literary unity, and the meaning of the term 'servant of Yahweh' varies, sometimes referring to an individual, as in the third and fourth songs (to different individuals according to Dr Kissane), but earlier referring quite distinctly to Israel as a whole. Despite the critical acumen and erudition of his commentary as a whole, this view, linked as it is with an understanding of the whole of Second Isaias as a close literary unity consisting of ten sections, each with three poems and a conclusion, does not seem to have won much approval from scholars. An interesting compromise, in which the thought of the various songs, while presenting a definite unity and progression,

¹ cf. the *Bibel-Lexikon*, edited by Haag, in the article on *Isaias*, col. 751-4

is still affected by the corresponding contexts, has been recently proposed by Père Tournay.¹

With the majority of exegetes, the writer prefers to see a unity in the four songs themselves, where a development of thought can be seen, and to separate them from their immediate contexts. The rule of interpretation according to context, normally valid in itself, should not be too rigidly used, especially in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, in which methods of literary composition differ so much from our own.

The next point, which must be at least summarily dealt with, has given rise to a whole library of books and provoked a host of solutions : it is the question, ' Who is, in fact, the servant of Yahweh in the four songs ? ' Those who want a full discussion of the various opinions and the elements of a satisfactory solution cannot do better than read the work of Christopher R. North² : for him the Servant appears, with increasing clarity as the songs progress, as a real but mysterious figure of the future, a figure who emerges finally into history as Jesus of Nazareth.

The songs, therefore, are Messianic, and in the fourth song especially we have a prophecy of the redemptive sufferings and glorification of Jesus Christ. This is the universally accepted Catholic interpretation, the only interpretation which does justice to the evidence. But we shall leave further discussion on the meaning and doctrine of this fourth song to the end of this essay.

After these preliminary notes, let us now look more closely at the text of our passage, Is. 52:13-53:12. What follows is a translation which remains substantially faithful to the Massoretic text, but in a few places deserts it where it is clearly corrupt : in these cases the readings of the Septuagint and of the recently discovered Qumran manuscripts are of value.

52:13 : Behold my servant will succeed,
 He will arise and be exalted and be high indeed.
 14 : Just as many were appalled at him,
 So disfigured was he in appearance—
 His form was scarcely human any longer,
 15 : And likewise, many nations shall be amazed at him,
 And kings shall stand in silent awe before him ;
 For they shall see something they had never been told of,
 And what they had never heard of they shall observe, (saying)
 53:1 : ' Who would believe what we have heard,
 To whom has the power of Yahweh been so revealed ? '

¹ *Revue Biblique*, 1952, pp. 355-84, 481-512

² C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah : an Historical and Critical Study*, London, rev. ed. 1956

At the beginning it is God who speaks. The final triumph of the Servant is insisted upon. In the earlier songs, the vocation, mission and suffering of the Servant have been the themes ; the third song ended with a cry of confidence in God uttered by the Servant despite his sufferings. That cry is answered by God in the first words of this last song. Then follows a summary of the whole theme of the songs : the Servant's deep humiliation and his subsequent glorification. This section (52:14-53:1) is either part of God's speech, or possibly the words of the prophet himself. The 'many' who were appalled at the Servant could include both his fellow-countrymen and the Gentiles, but it is the Gentiles alone who are brought forward as the witnesses of his glory. We have here perhaps an indication that the Jews will not be included among those who accept him.

53:2 : And he grew up before him like a sapling,
 And like a root from thirsty soil ;
 He had no beauty, no majesty to attract our gaze,
 No comeliness to make us delight in him.
 3 : He was despised and shunned by men,
 A man of pain, one who has experience of sufferings,
 Like one from whom men turn with shuddering ;
 He was despised, and we took no heed of him.

This section gives the reactions of those who witnessed the humiliation of the Servant. The past tense is that of prophetic vision. It is not clear who the speakers are. Some see in them the Jews ; others see the kings and the Gentiles mentioned above. Perhaps it is better to take the speaker as the prophet himself, who identifies himself with the witnesses of the Servant's sufferings. So far the extreme nature of the Servant's passion is depicted, but no explanation is given.

53:4 : Yet it was our sufferings that he bore,
 Ours the pain with which he was burdened.
 We, it is true, thought him stricken,
 Afflicted by God and humbled ;
 5 : But he was pierced for our sins,
 Crushed because of our iniquities.
 On him fell the chastisement which saved us,
 And by his bruises came our healing.

Here we have the explanation of the Servant's sufferings. The traditional Jewish explanation of misfortune put personal sin at the root of it all : this is what the witnesses of the Servant's passion took for granted. But they were wrong : it was because of the sins of others that he suffered, and it was to save sinners that he endured such agony.

THE FOURTH SONG OF THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH

53:6 : Like sheep we had all gone astray,
 Each one had taken his own way,
 And Yahweh made to fall on him the iniquity of us all.
 7 : He was ill-treated, yet he humbled himself ;
 He did not even open his mouth.
 Like a lamb led to the slaughter,
 Like a ewe dumb before its shearer,
 Even so he opened not his mouth.

The prophet continues with the contrast between the sinfulness of men (among whom he includes himself) and the innocent sufferings of the Servant. Although he was conscious of his innocence, he did not complain ; he accepted his sufferings heroically from the hand of God in order to bring salvation to men. It is hinted that his sufferings constituted a sacrifice : the comparison of the lamb calls to mind the role of the Paschal lamb in the great redemptive act of God in freeing His people from the slavery of Egypt.

53:8 : Through force and sentence he was seized—
 Who cared about his fate ?
 Yes, he was torn from the land of the living,
 For our sins he was stricken to death.
 9 : And they made his grave with the wicked,
 And in his death he was with the rich,
 Although he had done no wrong,
 And there was no deceit in his mouth.

The translation above implies that the Servant was the victim of an unjust judicial sentence, but the rendering is far from certain. The Vulgate's *Generationem eius quis enarrabit ?* for v. 8b can scarcely stand, since *dôr* does not give this meaning. The first of the Qumran manuscripts of Isaias supports the 'rich' of v. 9. From the whole passage it is clear that the sufferings of the Servant went as far as death itself.

53:10 : And Yahweh was pleased to crush him with suffering.
 If he offers his life in expiation,
 He will see his posterity, he will prolong his days,
 And the purpose of Yahweh shall be accomplished by his hand.
 11 : After his soul's sorrow
 He shall see the light and be satisfied ;
 By his sufferings my servant shall make many just,
 And their iniquities he shall bear.

We are led a step further in the explanation of the Servant's activity. We are told explicitly that his is a work of 'expiation' (*'ašam*). From v. 11 it is God who speaks : His Servant is to have a spiritual posterity as the result of his sacrifice ; and he himself is to be greatly rewarded. According to the Septuagint reading and that of the two Qumran

manuscripts, one should translate the sentence in v. 11a : ' He shall see the light.' Thus the Servant will enter into a new and glorious life.

53:12 : Therefore I shall give him multitudes as his portion,
 And with the mighty he shall share the spoil ;
 Because he delivered himself to death,
 And was reckoned with the rebellious ;
 It was he who took away the sins of many,
 And made intercession for the rebellious.

The song ends with the words of Yahweh ; He stresses the freedom and initiative of His Servant in delivering himself to death ; and one notes the contrast between the *one* who died and the *many* (the numerous totality) who benefited by his death.

We have seen something of the background of this fourth song, and we have glanced briefly at the text itself. It is now time to examine its religious teaching.

It can be said with justice that we have in this passage the high-water mark of all the religious thought of the Old Testament. Two elements are combined here in a synthesis which comes from divine revelation : the role of the just man, especially the prophet, in interceding for others, and, secondly, the part played by human suffering in God's redemptive economy.

The theme of the intercession of the just on behalf of the wicked is a constant one in the Old Testament. Abraham and above all Moses and the great prophets played this role over and over again. It is due, too, to Job's intercession that his friends are forgiven by God. This work of intercession is regarded by Ezechiel as the essential work of the true prophet, who should ' build up the wall and man the breach, on behalf of the land, that I (God) should not destroy it ' (22:30). It can be taken for granted that the Servant, being a true prophet, would intercede for his fellow-countrymen, and even for the whole world ; for, as prophetic inspiration continued, the universal scope of God's redemptive plan became more and more apparent. But what is new and altogether admirable is the light thrown on human suffering, on the possibility of a human being, a prophet, interceding by means of sacrificial suffering and death.

Here we certainly have a new and almost startling revelation. God's rejection of human sacrifice, shown in the heroic test of Abraham's faith, does not exclude this new sacrificial act. But God, who condescends to adapt the flood of His supernatural light to our feeble eyes, had prepared the way somewhat in the life and writings of His great servant and prophet Jeremias. In all this, of course, we are

taking for granted that the second part of Isaias was written towards the end of the exile, a view which, as we have said, is commending itself more and more to modern Catholic scholars.

In fact, there is a remarkable parallel between Jeremias and the Servant of Yahweh. Both were selected from their birth for the work of a missionary, both were destined to be prophets to the nations; both, despite their innocence, suffered intensely in their work of preaching—and all this was according to God's plan. Jeremias can cry out: 'I am wounded with the wounding of the daughter of his people' (8:2). Both were regarded as traitors, persecuted and condemned to death. Jeremias too was 'like a gentle lamb that is led to the slaughter' (11:19).

The prophet of Anathoth plays too the heroic role of mediator. As prophet he speaks for God and fearlessly proclaims the punishment of his people's sins and infidelities; but as a man, as a Jew, he takes the part of his fellow-countrymen, feels to his heart's core their bitter sufferings, and pleads for their release.

It is to be noted that the thought of Jeremias never reaches the point where suffering, patiently borne, becomes an expiation of other men's sins; but in his life and prophecies some foreshadowing of the fuller revelation of the Servant of Yahweh can certainly be found.

Ezechiel, to a lesser degree, prepared the way by insisting that the religion of Yahweh did not depend on the material temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians: God required His people's homage even in captivity. Thus the stage was set for wider perspectives of universal salvation. Ezechiel insisted too on individual responsibility before God, and this is echoed in the fourth song of the Servant: 'All we had gone astray, everyone in his own way . . .'

We have seen that the prophets who preceded Second Isaias provide a background to the songs of the Servant of Yahweh; but typical of a completely different approach is the theory proposed recently by one of the better-known representatives of the so-called Scandinavian school, Ivan Engnell. After restudying ancient Oriental mythology and reviewing its traces in the religious epics of Ugarit, he sees in the Servant of Yahweh songs a 'prophetic remodelling of a liturgical composition belonging to the Annual Festival' of the Sumero-Accadian ritual. In this the king was ritually humiliated, being liturgically identified with the dying god Tammuz, only to be restored to his former dignity, just as Tammuz came back to the land of the living again. By this ritual humiliation or death of the king expiation was offered for the sins of the people.

Engnell has amassed an impressive series of correspondences to the Servant of Yahweh songs in the ancient Sumerian, Accadian and

Ugaritic religious writings. It would be too long to discuss these in detail; an account can be found in an article of Engnell.¹

These parallels, interesting as they may be, cannot explain the songs of the Servant of Yahweh. The religion of Israel is not an evolution from the common Semitic fund of myth and legend. And the Israelites, being conscious of the unique nature of their faith, despised and abhorred the religion of the pagans who lived among and around them. If they did ever adopt their practices, they realised, in their moments of enlightenment, that this was a fall from their vocation, a sin against Yahweh. It cannot be admitted that a nature myth of this kind should find a home in the family of Israelite beliefs: the God of Israel was not a nature god, bound within the sphere of the universe, but Yahweh, He who causes all things to be, enthroned above nature, dominating men and things.

It is, of course, inevitable that in the many gropings of the pagan mind after God, where truth and falsehood are mingled in a thousand different proportions, we should find some parallels, either close or distant, to the revealed truth of God's own word. It is understandable too that in the Bible we should have certain literary affinities to pagan religious literature. Thus, it would be difficult or impossible to disprove all such extrinsic influence on the songs of the Servant of Yahweh. But, for all this, the religion of Yahweh, in meaning and in essence, is dominated and determined by a divinely given revelation about God and His ways with men: it is this revelation which underlies the songs of the Servant of Yahweh as well as all the other writings of the Bible.

As a matter of fact, the kingship of the Servant is only hinted at in the songs. He is presented rather as the prophet, the teacher of wisdom, after the model of Moses as he is pictured above all in Deuteronomy. Like Moses, the Servant is to be ruled by the Spirit of God, to spread abroad the *torah*, the divine teaching, to teach *mišpat*, the true religion. But the Servant is to go beyond the confines of the chosen people, bringing the message of God to the Gentiles without the Law.

It would be wrong to expect in this passage a sort of photographic anticipation of the Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord. Some of the most striking points are very doubtful: the reference to a juridical sentence is by no means admitted by all; the Servant's burial with the rich is also a doubtful reading. Again, the resurrection of the Servant is implied rather than stated. The reading, 'He will see light,' is probable, but by no means certain. At best, the whole treatment of the Servant's lot after his death is vague.

¹ *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library*, 1948, pp. 54-93

It is of importance, too, to exercise a certain reserve in drawing from the passage theological conclusions about the nature of Christ's redemptive work. We must remember that we are dealing with poetry, not a theological treatise, and Semitic poetry at that. If this had been always kept in mind, we might have been spared some of those violent and exaggerated Passion sermons, which are based on a too wooden and literal interpretation of this text.

Some commentators push altogether too far the idea of penal substitution. They find here an echo of the ritual of the Scapegoat. In this, the doomed animal received by imposition of hands the sins of the people upon its head, and so, as a thing accursed, was driven out into the desert to die. But to apply this to the suffering Servant seems quite unwarranted, not to say abhorrent. In fact the symbolism of the Scapegoat is the opposite to that of sacrifice—and the sufferings of the Servant are certainly sacrificial. In sacrifice, the victim enters into the sphere of the divine, and, if partaken of in the rite of communion, unites the communicant with God. Far from being regarded as defiled or accursed, the victim, in the symbolism of the sacrificial rite, shares the holiness of God Himself. There may be verbal similarities between this fourth song and the account of the Scapegoat, but the inner meaning is totally different.

Thus, the innocence and holiness of the Servant is stressed throughout. At no point is he anything but the object of God's love. If God is said to strike him, to afflict him, it is merely a case of that Semitic idiom where all actions, even those which God merely permits, are directly attributed to God.

The Servant's sufferings do not receive their value merely from their extent, from their heart-reaching depths. His is not a mere *satis-passio*; nor is he an object against which the divine wrath is unleashed. In fact, there is no question of divine wrath in the Servant songs; there is question rather of divine love and mercy, love for sinners and love for the Servant himself. Both loves are beautifully expressed in the New Testament, the first from the first letter of St John: 'In this has the love of God been shown in our case, that God has sent His only-begotten Son into the world that we may live through Him. In this is the love, not that we have loved God, but that He has first loved us, and sent His Son a propitiation for our sins' (4:9-10). The second love receives its commentary from Our Lord's own lips: 'Therefore doth the Father love me, because I lay down my life' (John 10:17).

The Servant's role is to some extent passive: it consists of sufferings inflicted by his enemies and permitted by God; but it is also intensively active. At least seven times in the passage is his part in

the drama expressed by an active verb : he submits, he lays down his life in expiation, he pours out his soul in death.

The hero of the Servant songs is no mere substitute for sinners, receiving from God the punishment due to them. The kernel and essence of his redemptive work is to be found rather in his super-human love and obedience, qualities which in the language of human experience are expressed and proved above all by suffering and death. Suffering and death came to him because it was God's will that he should drink to the dregs the consequences of his solidarity with sinful humanity. The further revelation of the New Testament makes it clear that it is only because the Servant is constituted head of the human race that his passion and sacrifice have any value for us. It is not so much *in our place* as *on our behalf* that he suffered and died and rose from the dead ; we, too, in our turn, and in our degree, are to follow his path of redemptive suffering, death and finally resurrection.

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PRIESTLY VIRTUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Translated from the French by B. Dickinson)

Under the title of this article you would expect a whole book, if one were to give exhaustive treatment to the subject. However, we intend rather to extract from the inspired writings the key qualities demanded from priests, by Christ our Lord or the Holy Ghost. If we can mention only briefly each of these virtues, it will be the reader's task to meditate further on the texts quoted and plumb their meaning.

These priestly virtues are drawn from three passages of major theological importance : 1. The 'Conference after the Last Supper,' namely chapters 13 to 18 of the fourth Gospel, in which Jesus, after making his chosen disciples priests, gave them instructions on the spirit in which they should exercise their new powers ; 2. The Epistle to the Hebrews, which defines the virtues proper to the High Priest of the New Covenant, virtues which consequently all those who have received the sacrament of the priesthood should possess ; 3. The Epistles to Timothy and Titus, in which St Paul delineates for the shepherds of the Churches of Ephesus and Crete qualities that are indispensable for carrying out their duties.