

was to signal that 'other' Messiah, the one portrayed in Isaiah, the Suffering Servant. When Jesus failed to realise the dream of the traditional image of the conquering Messiah many of those who had welcomed him into Jerusalem became despondent and deserted him. The scene was set for what followed.



## Psalm 22

This Psalm bears a striking resemblance to the fourth Servant Song and is generally deemed to be from the exilic or post-exilic period. It is classified as an individual song of lament, although it may well have been adapted for use in the Second Temple, after the exile, as a collective lament about the suffering of the nation. Its dating suggests it is of the same provenance as the Servant Songs. It contains the famous extract quoted in Matthew's (ch.27) and John's (ch.19) Passion narratives:

**'they divide my garments amongst them and cast lots for my clothing'**

## The Suffering Servant Theme in the New Testament

Jesus was clearly identified with the Suffering Servant in the early Church (e.g. Acts ch.3 and 4). The Gospel of Matthew quotes the entire first servant song (ch.12) and part of the fourth (ch.8), and Luke quotes part of the first (ch.2), with both indirectly using 'servant' quotations in their Passion narratives. The synoptic Gospels' accounts of Jesus' baptism interestingly quote the first verse of the first song, but with the replacement of servant by 'son'.

The Gospel of John (ch.10) alludes to the fourth song with his image of the Good Shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep.



# Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

## 9

### Who is the Suffering Servant?

*The most remarkable passages in the Old Testament?*



### Questions for Reflection

1. Are not the Suffering Servant songs examples of a genuine foretelling of the future?
2. Why did the Jews include them in their scriptures but then not believe in Jesus as the Messiah?
3. If the Jews were punished for their continual breaches of the Covenant by having their kingdom destroyed and being sent into exile, why is the Servant portrayed as a 'sin offering' for their guilt?

## What are the Suffering Servant Passages or Songs?

The Suffering Servant figure appears in the Book of Isaiah in four separate passages.

- Chapter 42: verses 1-4 and 6
- Chapter 49: verses 1-6
- Chapter 50: verses 4-9
- Chapter 52: verse 13, to chapter 53: verse 12



The Book of Isaiah covers 3 distinct periods of Jewish history each of which has a separate author. The Servant Songs occur in the second portion, whose author is termed Deutero-Isaiah, when the Jews were in exile in Babylon (587-538BC) after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Although the passages appear separately, it is generally accepted that they are a unified literary composition.

## What Do the Passages Say?

*The first song* has God as the speaker. He expresses his pleasure at a special servant chosen by Him to judge the world and bring it into righteousness. Significantly, the servant is described as a Covenant.

*The second song* has the servant as the speaker. He recognises his unique position, being called to serve God before he was even born. He also realises he has special talents to preach God's Word to Israel but, after initially considering his mission as a failure, is revitalised by God who reveals to him an even wider mission to all nations.

*The third song* again has the servant as the speaker. He tells how he has readily followed God's calling as a teacher although this has led him to be mocked and insulted. He has confidence that, with God to help him, no-one will be able to shame him.

*The fourth song* begins with God as the speaker and continues with a community response. God foretells how His servant, now dead and disfigured, will be exalted before all nations. The community then accepts God's revelation in the form of the dead servant. However, it does so by also recognising its own guilt in rebelling against God's will, a guilt it now knows was expunged by the servant's death.

## What is the Significance of the Servant Songs?

The Servant Songs are some of the most fascinating passages in the whole of the Old Testament. They are exceptional in several ways:

- They can not be identified with any contemporary historical person or event
- The Servant's mission of hope takes a completely different direction than that ever offered before
- The Servant is a complete contrast to the expected nature of any Messiah
- The Servant is revealed as a sacrifice to God

There are many occasions in the Bible when people are addressed as servants of God, particularly Moses and David. The term is also often applied in a collective sense to Israel itself. Deutero-Isaiah himself uses the word 'servant' in this way, including once within the second song. However, the subject of the Servant Songs can not be Israel itself: The servant clearly has a mission *to* Israel, while the community speaking in the fourth song is meant to be Israel itself.



Some see the servant as a secular king. He is portrayed as judging and bringing salvation, qualities that may be attributed to a king. But, he is also described as a teacher and someone who is sent to bring salvation to other nations. The community in the fourth song calls him the lowest of men for whom they had no regard. This is not something usually associated with a secular king.

With the exception of the Servant Songs, Old Testament classical prophecy is always concerned with the situation facing the prophet at the time of his calling. He is God's mouthpiece to the people to warn, admonish, call to repentance and give hope. Where hope is offered it is usually in the form of a renewal of the Covenant relationship accompanied by a return to general happiness and good fortune. The Servant Songs depart significantly from this formula.

Jewish Messianism is the hope that God will restore the kingdom of Judah, free it from its enemies and fulfil a destiny of peace and salvation under God. It originated with the promise to Abraham, was invigorated with the Covenant on Sinai, and found fruition with the Davidic Covenant and the promise of an eternal Kingly dynasty of 'anointed' ones (Messiah means 'anointed'), the so-called Royal Messianism. After the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah, and the return from exile, hope remained that a Messianic king would be sent to restore the nation's fortunes.

So, the Servant as a suffering redeemer was a complete contrast to prevalent expectations of a victorious secular Messianic king. Above all, the Servant is shown as a *sin offering*. The Jews had a complex system of offerings to God, described in the Book of Leviticus (ch.1 to 4). Offerings to atone for sins were called sin offerings. The Servant is presented in this context, and so the people are saved not by military conquest but by the suffering and death of a single special person. This concept is unique in the Old Testament. It is a recognition both of the guilt of the Jews, as accepted in Psalm 51, and the need for their great sin to be expunged.

## Who is the Suffering Servant?

With Christian hindsight, the Servant Songs point directly to Christ with incredible accuracy. Within the Songs are descriptive sections that mirror the mission and sufferings of Christ given in the Gospels.

The personality, teaching and miracles of Jesus gave hope to many of the Jews that He was the expected secular Messiah. This seemed to be realised when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but in reality it

