Divine Justice Found in

Isaiah 53:4-8

Mitchell Amago

BI 102 IP Introduction to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Part 2:

Latter Prophets and Writings

May 2, 2025

Featured in Isaiah 53 is the narrative of the suffering servant. Throughout history, arguments have been made about who this servant is and what this servant's role means in relation to themes of justice in the Old Testament. This discussion stems from some scholars asking, "Who is the suffering servant?"[1] Some scholars state that the author of Second Isaiah or "Deutero-Isaiah" is the suffering servant that is being referenced. [2] Other scholars state that the suffering servant is Israel itself.[3] Still, some interpreters state that the suffering servant is Jesus Christ.[3] Some commentators point out that Isaiah's descriptions here could be a prophecy of Jesus's trial; however, others will point out that the "Christian reading is surely a belated extrapolation."[4] Isaiah 53 is not, contrary to some Christian theologians, Jesus, but rather metaphorically is a servant that carried Israel's metaphorical suffering. This metaphorical suffering servant has broad implications on the theology concerning Yahweh's divine justice.

Divine justice is portrayed in a variety of ways throughout the Old Testament. In many instances within the Old Testament, justice is often closely tied to Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel. For the people of Israel, justice is expected as the lived expression of covenantal faithfulness. Arnold writes, "The most distinctive aspect of the Israelite sacrificial system is the way it was linked to the covenantal relationship with God."[3] On many occasions, it is emphasized in the Hebrew scriptures that if Israel remains faithful to their covenant with Yahweh, life will go well for them.[4] If they do not maintain the covenant, there is a loss of blessings, curses, and even exile could occur.[4] For example, in Judges, "obedience to Yahweh is

---

[1] Cho, Paul, "Esther and Daniel", Wesley Theological Seminary, 24 April 2025).
[2] Collins, John J., A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014)
[3] Arnold, Bill T., and Bryan E. Beyer, Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015),
[4] Birch, Bruce, et al., A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament, 2nd ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.

a condition of land possession; conversely, disobedience to Yahweh's Torah is a sure way to lose land."[4]

The Torah lays out legal and ethical frameworks in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy through various laws and commandments that guide Israel toward building, creating, and sustaining a just society. When the Israelites act in a way that goes against the commandments, individuals must engage in the temple sacrificial system to achieve the justice that restores a right relationship with Yahweh.[3] Justice is often seen as relational- rooted in Yahweh's covenant with Israel, moral- reflecting Yahweh's righteousness, holistic- it addresses the personal, social and spiritual life of the community, prophetic- demands societal reform, and merciful- offering space for repentance and restoration. Throughout the Old Testament, including in Isaiah, Israel would sin, atonement would be made through the temple sacrifice system, and they would be made right with Yahweh because "in the sacrifices, provision is made for the forgiveness of one's own sin."[4] This system would continue for centuries.

One implication of the theology concerning Yahweh's divine justice, as seen through the metaphorical suffering servant, can be seen in the concept of justice as an alternative to the status quo. In Isaiah 53:5, it is written, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."[5] There is an allusion to the temple sacrifice system and its substitutionary atonement-like reference. According to this verse, the servants took the transgressions and iniquities upon themselves. As stated previously, the temple sacrificial system was certainly known when Isaiah was written. The Isaiahian author writes in Isaiah 53:7 about the suffering servant that is "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter."[5] The author is aware of this system but recognizes that the

[5] The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

status quo is insufficient. The author "presents an alternative to the pattern of crime and commensurate punishment of the guilty party, an alternative so new that it has never been heard or even thought of."[6]

The author, while highlighting the system, is recognizing that the animal sacrifices are not working because Israel has lost their land and is in exile. In order to understand the context of this passage, it is important to note that "Deutero-Isaiah is believed to have been written over one hundred years after the first section of Isaiah was completed.[7] The Jewish people are no longer in Judah and are now exiled in Babylon. This exile is a central theme throughout the Old Testament and marks a shift in Israel's relationship with Yahweh.[7] For the Isaiahian author, "the central tragedy of Israel's history: the refusal of the people to obey Yahweh's will that has led to a web of sin that degrades not only the life of the offending generation but also the life of their posterity.[6] This "central tragedy" results in the loss of land and a divide between the people of Israel and Yahweh. Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen point out that "the crisis of the exile has remained powerfully contemporary in the life of faith, and therefore continued grappling with this theological literature is urgent."[4]

It is in this "central tragedy" that it is "precisely in loss where this God may be astonishingly generative of new historical possibility, a willingness of God to create "a way out of no way."[4] The remedy or "way out of no way" to this "central tragedy" is provided by the author of Isaiah who appears to create this suffering servant as a means to provide an alternative to the failed animal sacrifices and offer a metaphorical suffering servant, in the form of a person, to take on the iniquities for Israel as a means to atone for their sin and be restored to their land.

---

[6] Hanson, Paul D. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Isaiah 40-66. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
[7] Cho, Paul, "Second and Third Isaiah," Wesley Theological Seminary, 6 February 2025).

As stated previously, "obedience to Yahweh is a condition of land possession," and Israel is no longer in possession of the land.[4] The alternative to the status quo is the metaphorical servant over an animal. The animal sacrifices are a temporary solution until the next time a person or the nation of Israel sins. According to Hanson, “Although priests have performed the atoning sacrifices year after year and prophets have preached repentance and threatened punishment day in and day out, the pattern persists unchanged.”[6]

The sacrificial system is only effective to atone for each sin in that particular moment, not for an enduring period of time. The Isaiahian author alludes in the text to this idea of an enduring sacrifice when the author writes, “he borne our infirmities and carried our diseases…he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.”[5] The author thinks "out of the box" and "aims to arrest the listeners' attention by introducing something so startling that it causes nations and kings to shut their mouths.”[6]

Another implication of the theology concerning Yahweh's divine justice, as seen through the metaphorical suffering servant, can be seen in the concept of justice as a form of healing. Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen point out that “what counts here is not the identification of the servant, but the affirmation that the vicious cycles of displacement can be broken and healing made possible.”[4] This healing can be seen in verse 5, stating that "upon him was the punishment that made us whole."[5] If the suffering servant is metaphorically Israel, then the “us” in this verse is assumed to be Israel itself. If the suffering servant were Jesus, the “us” referred to could be all of humanity. Regardless of whom, "more important is the awareness, shared by Jews and Christians, that thus much-discussed chapter probes a fresh and radical way whereby healing, perhaps healing among exiles, may be accomplished.”[4]

Within this passage, we encounter this paradox- justice not through an immediate vindication but through vicarious or second-hand suffering that ultimately leads to healing. This metaphorical suffering servant, "borne our infirmities and carried our diseases… was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities."[5] The result of bearing, carrying, and wounding is that "upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."[5] The "us" in this passage receive immense healing as a result of this vicarious suffering. This healing is a form of justice because there is restoration and reconciliation.

Modern and ancient views and ideas associated with justice vary but can include those who commit wrongs being held accountable. We see this in the temple sacrificial system of Israel- wrongs were committed, and an act had to be committed in order to be restored. That is a form of justice. In this passage, justice in the prophetic imagination of the "Deutrero" Isaiah author is not only the guilty's punishment, the offender's accountability, or the retribution against wrongdoers. Here, there is a different version of justice, namely, that justice is restorative and redemptive. It moves toward healing broken relationships between humanity and God and within the human community. Lyke states that "to the degree that one understands this servant song in the context in which it was written, it provides a moving account of tragedy and redemption of a Servant, group or community that was as good as dead."[8]

In verse 5, it is again stated that "upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."[5] This verse of justice goes against views of justice as a form of retaliation. This form of justice can be seen as justice as healing. Albeit, this is a costly restoration and is only achieved through this suffering servant's solidarity with those wounded

[8] Bartlett, David L., and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

and deemed to be wayward. In this verse, the servant's bruises become the source of wholeness, restoration, and reconciliation.

Going back to the paradox of justice not through an immediate vindication, but rather justice through vicarious or second-hand suffering that ultimately leads to healing, we see that not only is this through second-hand suffering but that this suffering was completed according to Isaiah 53:8, "By a perversion of justice."[5] Justice was not only not a form of retaliation but was also achieved through a corrupt process. Here, Yahweh accomplishes divine justice by setting a proverbial record straight and a recreation of life where death reigned. To borrow the phrase from Lyke, the recreation of life was through the "redemption of a Servant, group or community that was as good as dead."[8] Thus, Isaiah 53 not only views justice as an alternative to the status quo, it also invites a theological vision where true justice does not end with punishment. True justice in this context culminates in a form of healing, reconciliation, and new life for the community. The suffering servant models a form of "justice" that ultimately serves the wholeness of others, healing the world's brokenness through self-giving love.

In the end, the question of who the suffering servant is, while an important question, misses what is being said in the passage of Isaiah 53:4-8. Some scholars conclude that "the text is not interested in telling you" who the suffering servant is and that it "doesn't tell you what it doesn't want to tell you," meaning that there may be an interpretation as to the "intentions behind not telling."[1] Whether a person or a metaphor, this metaphorical suffering servant has broad implications on the theology concerning Yahweh's divine justice. One implication of the theology concerning divine justice is that it is an alternative to the status quo. As stated earlier, the temple sacrificial system was not enough for the author of Deutero-Isaiah, and an alternative

that was so jarring was proposed. Another implication of the theology concerning divine justice is that it is seen in the idea of justice as healing.

References

Arnold, Bill T., and Bryan E. Beyer, Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015),

Bartlett, David L., and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

Birch, Bruce, et al., A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament, 2nd ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005.

Cho, Paul, "Esther and Daniel", Wesley Theological Seminary, 24 April 2025).

Cho, Paul, "Second and Third Isaiah", Wesley Theological Seminary, 6 February 2025).

Collins, John J., A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014)

Hanson, Paul D. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching - Isaiah 40-66. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.