

THE SUFFERING SERVANT AND THE PASSION OF JESUS

• Christoph Dohmen •

“In Isaiah 53, the bond between act and worldly fate begins to dissolve. The speakers come to recognize and confess that what the *servant* undergoes—grief and sorrow—is not bound up with his deeds but rather with their own.”



For Christianity, the philosophical axiom of God’s impassibility (*apatheia*)¹ first became relevant to the issue of Jesus’ Passion and death during the controversies surrounding christological (trinitarian) doctrine in the early Church. However, it is well to remember that the biblical tradition was already long aware of the problems inherent in any human speech about God,² as Scripture’s reflective use of anthropomorphic or metaphorical literary figures confirms. Nevertheless, the violent end of Jesus’ life posed a huge problem for the first disciples, who evidently had trouble reconciling his fate with their own hopes and expectations, which culminated in their faith that this Jesus was the Messiah of Israel.³

¹Cf. F. Meessen, “Leiden Gottes,” *LThK*³ 6: 787.

²Cf. C. Dohmen, “Vom Gottesbild zum Menschenbild,” *LZ* 50 (1995): 245–252.

³For the background of this confession, cf. F. Mussner, “Der Messias Jesus,” *Die Kraft der Wurzel* (Freiburg, 1997), 75–88.

1. A path into the Scriptures

The Emmaus pericope (Lk 24:13–35), with the disciples' dawning realization that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, goes straight to the heart of Christian theology. The disciples' difficulty does not seem to be with the identity or proclamation⁴ of Jesus as Messiah, but rather with discerning what its connection with his painful death might be. In relating their doubts to the stranger the disciples on the road to Emmaus bring to light one of the fundamental issues in early Christianity: the question "concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:19–21).

At the center of the stranger's response, which takes the form of a comprehensive scriptural exegesis, the problem of suffering reappears, this time in the form of a question: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?" This question later came to be seen as merely rhetorical, but Luke frames it with references to the Scriptures as a whole (here, as in other New Testament passages, the expression "the prophets" in verse 25 refers to the entirety of Israel's Scriptures,⁵ and so corresponds to the more specific phrases "Moses and all the prophets" and "all the Scriptures" in verse 27). Now, it is clear that the heart of the question is not the possibility or impossibility of a connection between the Messiah and suffering: extensive discussions of the suffering Messiah traditions are out of place here. The decisive issue is rather the *necessity* of the Passion, which the phrase "was it not necessary," together with the final clause ("and so enter into his glory") brings to expression.⁶ The hearers or readers of the story do not know exactly which texts Jesus refers to himself here in order to

⁴On this problem, see especially the contributions of O. Hofius and P. Stuhlmacher in *JBTh* 8 (1993); also see H.-J. Fabry and K. Scholtissek, *Der Messias* (Würzburg, 2002).

⁵On the various meanings here, cf. C. Dohmen/G. Stemberger, *Hermeneutik der Jüdischen Bibel und des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart, 1996), 152.

⁶W. Stegemann speaks of the "messianization of Jesus' death." See "Jesus als Messias in der Theologie des Lukas," in *Messias-Vorstellungen bei Juden und Christen*, ed. W. Stegemann (Stuttgart, 1993), 21ff.

help the disciples to understand his Passion as something willed by God. Somewhat later, in the company of the Eleven and the disciples, Jesus again links his Passion to God's will written in the Scriptures in order to underscore once more that this Passion was willed by God: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead" (Lk 24:46).⁷ Again, the hearer or reader gets only the outcome—certainly the essential thing for them—not the direct scriptural reference or the move from the biblical texts to the insight that the Messiah's Passion is in some way God-intended. It is only later that the reader encounters the specific references, namely, in Acts 8:26–40, where the question of the Emmaus drama is addressed again in the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian.

The parallels and similarities between Luke 24:13ff and Acts 8:26ff have long been noted. In a valuable study, A. von Dobbeler presents and discusses the similarities (and the differences) between the two passages.⁸ He warns, however, and rightly so, against a too-automatic alignment of the texts solely on the basis of their common elements. But the differences between the two stories actually provide a guarantee against their mutual isolation. Viewed within the entire *Gestalt* of the New Testament as it actually exists, each story clearly, intertextually, points to the other.⁹ The episode in Luke 24 gives an exegesis without the citation of a specific text, while the story in Acts 8 revolves around a specific passage, but is somewhat reserved about its interpretation. In both accounts what emerges is the connection between the Scriptures (whether in a specific text or in its entirety) and Jesus' destiny. The problem behind this connection clearly emerges when, in response to the question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30), the Ethiopian eunuch answers that he has no one to "show him the way," as the literal meaning of the Greek verb "*hodegeo*" has it. Philip proclaims the Gospel of Jesus to the Ethiopian when he indirectly answers the

⁷On the Old Testament witness to the Passion as willed by God, cf. 1 Cor 15:3–5 and C. Dohmen/F. Mussner, *Nur die halbe Wahrheit?* (Freiburg, 1993), 87f; see also R. Liebers, "Wie geschrieben steht." *Studien zu einer besonderen Art frühchristlichen Schriftzeugnis* (Berlin-New York, 1993).

⁸A. von Dobbeler, *Der Evangelist Philippus in der Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Tübingen, 2000), 109ff.

⁹Cf. P. Müller, "Verstehst du auch, was du liest?" in *Lesen und Verstehen im Neuen Testament* (Darmstadt, 1994), 139f.

Ethiopian's question, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this?" (Acts 8:34) by saying, "of Jesus" (8:35). Philip thus identifies Jesus' suffering with the suffering of the "servant of the Lord" in Isaiah 52–53. The reader coming from the account of the Emmaus encounter now has the scriptural references he needs to understand the question in Luke 24:26: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so come into his glory?" The "*hodegesis*," then, does not simply point out a connection linking the event with Scripture; much more, it itself gives a path through the Scriptures.

2. The Servant of the Lord in Isaiah

It is not enough, however, to examine Isaiah 53 in isolation. Like every biblical text, it, too must be viewed within its context. The first step in drawing out this context is to examine the four poetic passages that B. Duhm calls "Servant of the Lord Songs" (=SLS) or, from the Hebrew, "Ebed-YHWH-Songs" (=EYS).

Specifically, these passages are Is 42:1–4 (SLS I); Is 49:1–6 (SLS II); Is 50:4–9 (SLS III); and Is 52:13–53, 12 (SLS IV). Through the shared motifs of "the nations," of lamentation, of confidence, and the formula, "Behold," the songs are bound together on many levels and so have an inner connection that B. Janowski claims is a constitutive element for interpreting the fourth "servant song":

The first three EYS, then, recount the path of *God's servant* into the world of the nations and of Israel: from the presentation of the *servant* in the heavenly council and the bestowal of his universal mission (EYS I), it leads to the proclamation of his installation before the nations in connection with the heavy task of Israel (EYS II), and includes his painful encounter with Israel (EYS III)—an Israel whose opposition to him is such that he is left humanly isolated and radically thrown back upon YHWH's help (50:4–9). If the servant was with YHWH in the first EYS—"Behold my servant, whom I uphold" (42:1a)—the same is true at the end of the third EYS: "Behold, the Lord God helps me" (50:9a). The shift in perspective, however, is striking: it changes from being *presented as the chosen one* to being *the persecuted and suffering one*; from intimacy with God to being the target of man's enmity—which is made "bearable" only by the certainty of God's nearness. The third EYS essentially ends with an open question: Is the servant whose future rests in the hands

of YHWH thwarted in his task, which is to restore Israel and become the “light to the nations,” or are his existence and function confirmed in their truth? But what would this confirmation look like? In any case it would have to be more than a simple confirmation of his individual certainty of salvation: it must encompass not only his person, but also his task, because the two belong together. This open question at the end of the third EYS is one of the impulses which bring forth the fourth.¹⁰

But the questions at issue are actually a bit more complicated. The question of the Lord’s servant is not settled solely by showing a connection among the four servant songs. Neither the Ethiopian’s question in Acts 8, whether the prophet speaks of himself or another, or the frequently raised question of whether we are to understand the figure of the servant in an individual or a collective sense goes quite far enough because we encounter the “title” and the figure of the “servant of the Lord” also in a more immediate context outside of the four songs. Here the “servant of the Lord” is sometimes linked to Jacob/Israel (e.g., 41:8f; 44:1f, etc.), but also to someone who stands outside and above Israel (e.g., 43:10; 44:26). Central for the figure of the servant of the Lord is the element of relation. In the first place, as his title makes clear, he is in a direct relationship with God (YHWH). But he is also drawn into the opposition between Israel and “the nations” that runs throughout the Bible. In this way he is able to stand on the side of YHWH vis-à-vis Israel and the nations, while at the same time standing on Israel’s side, insofar as he represents what Israel is meant to be by virtue of its election as the chosen people. The upshot is that he represents the *true* (ideal) Israel before the *actual* Israel. The figure behind the four servant songs is not one that can be identified in an overly concrete or univocal way; instead, what emerges at the end is a dramatic event woven of the representations we have mentioned, pointing us onward, as it were, to the fourth and final song.¹¹

The question of whether the servant, whose fate is related to YHWH, ultimately fails in the face of Israel and the nations (cf.

¹⁰B. Janowski, *Stellvertretung* (Stuttgart, 1997), 74f.

¹¹The contextual embedding of the fourth EYS and the wide potential for meaning that emerges are clearly presented by U. Berger, *Das Buch Jesaja. Komposition und Endgestalt* (Freiburg, 1998), 403ff; see also O. H. Steck, *Gottesknecht und Zion* (Tübingen, 1992).

50:4–9), is the starting point for the fourth servant song, which comes at the question from a variety of perspectives. The following text (with reference to the German text of B. Janowski¹²) indicates the different perspectives.

3. *The fate of the “Servant of the Lord”*: Is 52:13–53:12

- 13 Behold, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.
- 14 As many were astonished at him—
he was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the sons of men—
- 15 so shall he startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they shall see,
and that which they have not heard they shall understand.
- 1 Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
- 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
- 3 He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as the one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
- 4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
- 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
- 6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;

¹²B. Janowski, *Stellvertretung*, 70–73. The text also includes footnotes and explanations of his translation.

- and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth.
- 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
- 9 And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
- 10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him;
he has put him to grief;
when he makes himself an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand;
- 11 he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous;
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out his soul to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many

This fourth song is framed entirely within God's perspective (Is 52:13–53:1; 53:11b–13). In God's sight, and for his purpose, the servant has not failed. Thus, the question of the third song is already answered at the beginning of the fourth by God's statement that his servant "shall prosper." This proclamation of what is to come is characterized as an ongoing event: the earlier horror is compared with the astonishment of "this" moment. This comparison between what happened before and what is now transpiring makes it clear that something unforeseen, even unimaginable, has come to pass through the agency of God himself. The term "the many" vaguely applies to the addressees of the song, or else those involved in the

event itself, and comes up again in the final oracle (Is 53:12).¹³ The significance of the event for “the many” emerges from the central section of this fourth servant song (Isaiah 53:2–11a), where the perspective changes to “we.” This “we,” which is not otherwise further identified, witnesses the event itself.

4. Recognition and confession

The entire piece is characterized by a dynamism that develops from an initial sketch of the servant’s prehistory (v. 2f) to a final narration of his subsequent history (10a–11a). The text thus traces a path from death to life; it begins in deadly revilement and ends in a promise of new life through YHWH. At the basis of this reversal from death to life is a process of *recognition* and *confession*. The speakers contrast a “before” and a “now” that form a parallel with God’s perspective in 52:13–53:1. The decisive difference between their own opinion and reasoning and the actual reality of the event depends on God’s revelation (Is 53:1). In this connection, it is important that the speakers appropriate the recognition of this reality through a confession (v. 4–6). The recognition that this confessional statement formulates strikes a mortal wound at what has been called the “connection between act and fate [*Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*],” inasmuch as it calls into question the inner logic of this mindset and finally destroys it.

5. The connection between a person’s acts and his fortunes in the world

Belief in a connection between a man’s deeds and his worldly fate is surely not restricted to ancient Israel: it was a common enough concept, not only throughout the entire ancient East, but also far and wide throughout the world. The automatic linking of

¹³The kings mentioned in the parallel text of verse 15 do not help us identify the speakers. Rather, they serve to increase the sense of uniqueness of the event, also highlighted by the text’s “mirroring” of Isaiah 15:14f. Cf. K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Jesaja* (KAT) (Gütersloh, 1999), 503f.

each deed to corresponding “consequences” presupposes what we might call in K. Koch’s words a “fate-producing sphere of action”: “Every morally specified act works back onto its agent: it creates around his person, especially his head, an invisible aura that accompanies him along his way and at some point ‘strikes him back’ in a corresponding suffering, that is, the act establishes a fate-producing sphere of action.”¹⁴

Here we should emphasize that this automatic correlation between a person’s deeds and his fate is not at all the same thing as divine punishment.¹⁵ The concept underlying the act-fate-connection comes up originally in the form of admonitions, guidelines, etc., which contain within themselves an implicit imperative. Examples of these are found in the classic texts of Proverbs 21:21, “He who pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor,” or Proverbs 26:27, “He who digs a pit will fall into it.” Such formulations are really intended as an exhortation to good acts and are not problematic. The trouble starts when the sequence is viewed in reverse. As soon as the concept is turned around, when a person’s situation is seen as a judgment upon a previous act, then the results can be disastrous. If we automatically assume that a person’s suffering is an indication that he must have sinned, the act-fate connection immediately raises the question of suffering (why?). Thus, behind such conundrums as, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” lurks precisely this belief in a direct connection between a person’s acts and the events that later befall him. We certainly do not need to demonstrate the crisis that inevitably awaits this concept: the flourishing of the godless in the world poses as great a challenge to it as the suffering of the just.

6. Substitutionary suffering?

In Isaiah 53, the bond between act and worldly fate begins to dissolve. The speakers come to recognize and confess that what the

¹⁴K. Koch, *Tat-Ergehen-Zusammenhang* (Stuttgart, 1992), 493f.

¹⁵Naturally, the two areas are not completely divorced. Various questions remain open, such as those B. Janowski has formulated as a query to K. Koch’s concept of a “fate-producing sphere of action”; cf. B. Janowski, “Die Tat kehrt zum Täter zurück. Offene Fragen im Umkreis des ‘Tun-Ergehen-Zusammengangs,’” in *ZThK* 91 (1994): 247–271.

servant undergoes—grief and sorrow—is not bound up with his deeds but rather with their own: “surely he has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows . . . he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities” (v. 4–5).¹⁶

The realization of one’s own sin, which ought to call down on itself a fate such as the *servant* suffered, without having done anything to deserve it, is a complete breakthrough and revolution that is in no way self-evident or self-originating. Rather, it is due instead to God’s action (v. 6) and to his revelation (52:14–53:1). The text repeatedly emphasizes God’s active part in this exchange of roles: “It was the will of the Lord to bruise him . . . the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand” (v. 10). The object of the Lord’s plan and will is not the *fact* of his servant’s suffering, but rather its goal: the salvation of Israel. For the sake of Israel’s hope for a new future, God’s plan arranges for another to bear the full repayment of Israel’s sin.¹⁷ The Servant of God is thus not a sacrificial victim (scapegoat); rather, he “bears” (v. 11) the consequences of others’ acts. It is only in this way that his giving over of his life can cancel the guilt of others. What this recognition brings home is that there is no longer any room for inferences from a person’s fate to his actions. By contrast, the fate of the servant of the Lord makes it clear that the suffering of an individual can be for the salvation of the many, if God desires it.¹⁸ God now appears in a new light in terms of the “will” described in the servant song: he is not the God who wills (men’s) suffering, or the God who overtops or glorifies this suffering. Nor is he a God who helplessly looks on human suffering from a distance because it is alien to his nature. Instead, he reveals himself

¹⁶A. Schenker rightfully speaks of “the beginning of the awareness of sin,” in *Knecht und Lamm Gottes (Jes 53)* (Stuttgart, 2002), 76.

¹⁷Although we cannot elaborate on this subject here, it should be noted that the passage in question does not deal either terminologically or thematically with biblical concepts of sacrifice. On this subject, see B. Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982), as well as B. Janowski and M. Welker, eds., *Opfer* (Frankfurt, 2000).

¹⁸Matthew also takes up this concept with respect to Jesus’ fate when he interprets the death of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem *for the one* through a reference to Jeremiah 31, in order to have Jesus himself declare in the Passion narrative that his blood “is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28). See H. Frankemölle, *Matthäus-Kommentär 2* (Düsseldorf, 1997), 449f.

as a God to whom man, in the midst of his pain, can and should turn with his lamenting question as to the sense of it all: “why?”¹⁹

7. *The nearness of God*

Luke has the disciples on the road to Emmaus say, “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.” In the risen Lord’s own scriptural exegesis—and in its further development in the pericope in Acts 8—Luke suggests that God is able to save precisely through pain and suffering. All of this amounts to a great confession of the God to whom Israel’s scriptures testify, who wishes to give a future to Israel and to the nations. The “Gospel of Jesus” that Philip proclaims to the Ethiopian, and that gave hope to the early Christians, consists of the tidings that God has drawn near to man and desires intimacy with him. The early Christians—and we, along with them—could recognize and understand these tidings by embracing the Old Testament, which forms the “theo-logical” foundation of the Christian Bible. “The texts on the Passion and death of Jesus Christ are to a certain extent the pivotal point of the christological professions found in the Apostle’s Creed.”²⁰ If, however, the center of Christian faith first becomes comprehensible from and through the Scriptures of Israel, as we have attempted to illustrate in the present essay, what is decisive is not this or that interpretation of a biblical text, but rather the belief that through Israel and its Holy Scriptures God has drawn near to men for the sake of their salvation.²¹—*Translated by Emily Rielley.* □

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¹⁹On the background of biblical lamentation (prayer), see C. Dohmen, “Wozu, Gott? Biblische Klage gegen die Warum-Frage im Leid,” in *Schweigen wäre gotteslästerlich*, ed. G. Steins (Würzburg, 2000), 113–125; B. Janowski, *Konfliktgespräche mit Gott* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2003), esp. 347ff.

²⁰T. Schneider, *Was wir glauben* (Düsseldorf, 1988), 252.

²¹On the wide-reaching theological and christological consequences, and especially for Jewish-Christian dialogue, see J. Wohlmuth, *Die Tora spricht die Sprache der Menschen* (Paderborn, 2002), as well as the recent document from the PBC, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible.” Also see C. Dohmen, ed., *In Gottes Volk eingebunden* (Stuttgart, 2003).