

“You are my Servant, You are the Israel in whom I will be glorified”: The Servant Songs and the Effect of Literary Context in Isaiah

Christopher R. Seitz

Introduction

As a seminary student twenty-five years ago, I embarked on my first formal exegetical journey. It was a journey into that region of the Bible we had come to call, through the odyssey of historical-critical reading, “Second Isaiah.” I was an advanced student and had the privilege of a private tutorial from the senior Old Testament professor. To this day, the opening lines of Isaiah 40 remain part of my Hebrew memory.

In the midst of a specific assignment having to do with the servant songs and Isaiah 49, this conference gives me the occasion to reflect more generally on Isaiah studies—twenty-five years after. I do this not for reasons of nostalgia but rather because biblical studies of a formal sort appear to have become severed from the energy of church life and mission. Yet, what I recall as the thrill of reading Isaiah in Hebrew was precisely an expectation of what I will now call “the catholicity of objective excellence.” This was an excellence I hoped would transform the church. I could not then have formulated what I am here calling the catholicity of objective excellence, but what I sensed in my study of Hebrew exegesis was the possibility of some larger transcending reality that might captivate and renew the life of the church.

In the land of Calvin, I shall need to define my terms carefully, especially the itchy word *catholic*. By this I mean, I suspect, something close to Calvin’s own understanding: that is, “the capacity of the Bible to commend itself in a universal, clear, and saving way.” In the midst of denominationalism, failed (or wrong-headed) efforts at ecumenism, the tiredness of post-1960s Christianity, or the simple banality of much seminary education, the catholicity of objective excellence gave me hope for a better day. The idea was that a love of learning languages, reading the Bible, and applying excellently objective methods might unite the churches and lift them out of a flagging or confused existence. Where the catholicity of actual church unity had failed, the catholicity of objective biblical reading offered a ray of hope.

Just to speak of a Hebrew exegesis course on something called Second Isaiah is to describe what counted then for “objective excellence.” The language of Second Isaiah is precisely language tied to a critical decision to extract a portion of the canonical book and attach to it a personality and an independence of thought—even one judged to be exhilarating in its appeal and power to convict. Precisely with its concern to discover objective excellence as a way forward for the church, critical methodology had begun to give us *an Isaiah nowhere to be seen in the church’s actual catholic life*, as constituted by over eighteen centuries of reading and hearing God’s word spoken by the majestic prophet Isaiah. In that rich catholic life, we already had an Isaiah. Why would we need a second or a third one?

Two things at least counted for objective excellence: (1) recourse to a kind of history into which could be inserted, it was hoped, the prophetic mind and voice; and (2) defense of this procedure, either on the grounds that the biblical text demanded it or because there was no other way to account for an inspired word conveyed by a text than by appeal to the person responsible for it in his or her time and circumstance under God’s providence.

Unlike the book of Daniel, where application of these methods produced something akin to an “anonymous fraud” in the case of the second half of the book,¹ in Isaiah, a powerful and exciting dimension in prophetic discourse was uncovered. Yet, by insisting that these sixteen chapters of Isaiah be read against the historical backdrop of Babylonian exile, a problem was raised for inner-biblical coherence. Did not the Bible give us a warrant for thinking that the entire sixty-six-chapter book was authored—in whatever way we might mean that—by one prophet? Or, aside from the question of Isaiah authorship, did these chapters not comprise a single, sustained, and coherent vision? Still, objections along this line fell generally to the side in the hopeful days of objective excellence, and in the specific case of Isaiah they were surely offset by the provision of exciting new readings of these sixteen chapters. Here was a place, it could have been argued, where the entire apparatus of objective biblical analysis was vindicating itself, and richly so.

What we can now see, I believe, is that exhilaration in one area may produce confusion and inconsistency in another. Objective excellence is not easily come by, and indeed, in the case of biblical reading, it is hard to know exactly what we mean. Is this a quality of the method; of the text itself; of the reader; of a strange endowment, that is, the provision of a way of seeing and knowing the truth of a thing; or perhaps some complex admixture of all of these?²

¹ See my discussion in “Scripture Becomes Religion (s)” in *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 13-33; also, Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 612.

² For a recent discussion, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

There is a further biblical-theological side to this question. To what degree can Isaiah be read as a witness apart from the New Testament’s word about it? To what degree was this dimension ever successfully delimited by a claim to objective excellence? How exactly is the plain sense of Isaiah to be guarded, appropriately, as a word delivered by God to Israel and, at the same time, as a word given toward an end beyond its own literary scope now seen to be influencing the New Testament, which in turn influences our reading of the prophet Isaiah? These questions crowd in on us once we reckon with different understandings of objective excellence in our day.

Two Phases of Excellently Objective Reading

Let me describe two phases of objective excellence as a way of moving into our topic.

The Temporal-Literary Challenge Phase

The book of Isaiah, more than any other book of the Bible, has a huge depth dimension, temporally speaking. A single mind, working in the days of eighth-century kings of Israel, foresees and participates in the life of exiles and the homebound Israel three hundred years later. The very fact of this temporal depth and range would appear to be what Sirach, writing not much later, views as the single defining characteristic of our man Isaiah. “By his dauntless spirit he foresaw the future, and comforted the mourners in Zion. He revealed what was to occur to the end of time, and the hidden things before they happened” (Sir. 48:24-25).

Alongside what one might, from an objective standpoint, view as the challenge of temporal range in the book of Isaiah, we have the challenge of literary complexity. Just how the complexity of the literary presentation lines up with the ambition of the temporal range, is by no means straightforward.³ Anyone writing a commentary on Isaiah senses this from the moment of entry. In chapters 1-4, we appear already to be well into a drama; the precise beginning and final resolution of the reader will have to search for through the jumble of literary unfolding a full sixty-six chapters in length.⁴

In phase one, this literary and temporal complexity was handled in a very direct, if somewhat hermeneutically leaden way. I have in mind the commentary of Duhm as a magisterial example from this period.⁵ One tries to deter-

³ See my discussion in “Isaiah, Book of (First Isaiah),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:472-88.

⁴ For a typical modern treatment of these chapters, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition*, BZAW 171 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).

⁵ Bernard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1892).

mine literary disjunction through excellent close reading and then assigns portions of the text to Isaiah, Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah, or a vast array of anonymous editors and glossators working at random periods and for random reasons (none of these pursued with any aim at providing of an overarching theological rationale). The book is not capable of rational description in terms of its own final form or presentation. It does, however, offer the possibility of use for the reconstruction of such, by appeal to a theory of history, into which the book is then retrofitted.

In this phase, strikingly coherent (and singular for being so) are the chapters associated with Deutero-Isaiah once the theory has been allowed to run its temporal-literary course. Where a measure of disarray and complexity overlay so-called First and Third Isaiah portions of the book, chapters 40-55 of Isaiah emerge as a kind of heroic survivor from the ordeal of critical analysis. There is one (chief) exception to this: the decision to isolate four units of text, declare them to belong to a cycle, and set them off quite strictly from the presentation of Israel as servant on theological grounds. It is for this reason that our attention in this article is focused on the servant songs of Deutero-Isaiah within the logic of the book as a whole.

The Formal Analysis Phase

By lucky happenstance, Isaiah's discourse in chapters 40-55 seemed tailor-made for the next phase of development in objectively excellent reading—so much so, that one might wonder if the form-critical method could have emerged with force and clarity were it not for the speeches of our Second Isaiah. Yet ironically, these same speeches were argued to be *creative adaptations* of original forms: Those pure seams of ore that, according to the form-critical theory, predated Deutero-Isaiah and justified mining its alloys in the first place.⁶ This problem notwithstanding, the chief thing to be noted is that formal analysis did not seriously undermine but in fact strengthened the notion of four servant songs in a cycle. This might strike one as odd. Let us consider the basic evidence.

Songs 1 (42:1-4) and 4 (52:13-53:12) are the two third-person accounts. One is long, the other short. One is quite detailed and focuses on an individual; the other is grandly theological and focuses on Israel (or so it would seem). Song 4 stands alone in terms of theological audacity, confessional form, and detail of presentation. Song 3 (50:4-9) alone has a clean formal category to belong to (psalm of thanksgiving); it is a first-person account, but it diverges greatly in form from song 2 (49:1-6, 7), which likewise has this first-person form. None of these poems are actually songs (German "Lieder"), but retention of the term over the years signals that a proper substitute has not been found. Indeed, this

⁶ The best treatment of form criticism and its limitations in Isaiah remains Roy F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55*, BZAW 141 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976).

is because of the formal inconsistency of the four units of speech, which makes them resist a single classification, even an imprecise one such as “songs.” So, now the term is a kind of fossil, pressed in the rock of critical phases of analysis.

The theory of servant songs is a holdover from the first phase of analysis, which could not be bolstered by formal analysis but somehow also could not be dismantled.⁷ The best effort to produce a form-critical explanation for the songs did not seek to tackle the problem so much at the level of individual poems but as a cycle of four. This was the theory of Klaus Baltzer drawn up for the von Rad festschrift, where it was argued that the four songs belong to an antique classification, “ideal-biography,” applied in this case to Moses.⁸

According to Baltzer and von Rad,⁹ the songs recall with poignancy the career of Moses. Baltzer has now gone further by describing not just the songs’ referent (Moses) but also by making an extended case for why the author of Isaiah 40-55 might have been concerned with this figure from the distant past. In addition, Baltzer has moved beyond his teacher by insisting that an objectively excellent account of the songs would also have to deal with something virtually ignored in phases one and two—the matter of placement and context. Why do the songs appear where they do? To his credit, Baltzer has allowed this question to enter a field of play once circumscribed in older form-critical analysis.¹⁰

To conclude, it stood to reason that formal analysis should never have restricted itself to accounting for isolated units of text, being satisfied with locating them in a situation in life through attention to their genre. This kind of historicist interest was bequeathed it by the age, as a holdover from an earlier phase of analysis. Nothing should ever have prevented form criticism from taking up an investigation of final form or the aggregation and studied arrangement of forms that make up the *final form* of the text as it sits before us. This would then oblige the interpreter to ask, in the end, not just about the final form of Isaiah 40-55 but also about the final form of Isaiah within which these

⁷ It is one of those phases, arguably not unlike the uneasy alliance of source and form-critical or tradition-historical analysis of the Pentateuch for a season in critical reading. On this, for example, see Rolf Rendtorff, *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*, BZAW 147 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977); idem, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, trans. John J. Scullion, JSOT Supplement 89 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990). One gets a sense that the commitment to objective excellence means the retention of aspects of a theory, even when their sell-by date is past and this should not be surprising because the claim to objectivity is in part a claim to perennial, ageless truth; claiming such does not, however, make the demonstration any easier.

⁸ Klaus Baltzer, “Zur formgeschichtlichen Bestimmung der Texte vom Gottes-Knecht in Deuteronomium-Buch,” in *Probleme biblischer Theologie; Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag* ed. H. W. Wolff (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 27-43.

⁹ Von Rad’s treatment is found in volume 2 of *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 238-62.

¹⁰ Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, trans. Margaret Kohl. Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2001).

chapters now function; that is, Isaiah is a book worthy of our sustained attention and is not just a container for three or more prophetic personalities and their deposits from a former day.

At this point, we have returned to the kinds of questions objectively excellent historical analysis thought it was answering with its theories of inspiration behind the text. We confront the possibility of a different model of inspiration, riveted to the final form of the presentation and to those who have shaped it and bequeathed it to posterity as a faithful legacy of Isaiah the prophet. We confront a different historical model of God's word active in Israel and, with it, a different concept of how analysis of individual passages should proceed. After examining the servant cycle, and especially poem 2, we will return to the question of objective excellence and see if a new concept could help us reattach critical biblical studies to plain-sense reading of Scripture for the church.

The Cycle Broken

Why was a cycle argued for by Duhm and his argument accepted by several generations of readers? According to the description given above, it should have been for reasons of literary and temporal disjunction. Yet, in respect to the servant cycle, these factors were never all that decisive. Interpreters sat loosely in speculation about a cycle's original setting, its break-up into individual songs, and the distribution of these at random points in the present sixteen-chapter context. Indeed, the matter of present literary placement was all along a mystery for the theory, and only by refusing to regard the literary context as decisive for exegesis could the theory remain intact and compelling.

In point of fact, what drove the theory of a cycle of songs belonged far more to the realm of a prior content decision. There needed to be two servants in Isaiah: one individual and ideal; one messier, disobedient, reluctant, and halting in service. This latter could easily be Israel, the nation, and so it was, for in a majority of cases where the term *'ebed* appears, it refers to Israel in a straightforward way.¹¹ The individual servant, on the other hand, was allowed to remain hidden from view. This became the figure more easily limited to a cycle of four songs, in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 52-53.

Now, there is little doubt that such a notion can be argued for from the literary witness of the text, but the idea of a cleavage between two very different kinds of servants—one disobedient Israel and one ideal and individual—also suited the purposes of a certain kind of Christian understanding. It helped one to localize all the problematical aspects of servanthood in the historical people of Israel, whilst allowing the ideal to be projected into the realm of eschatology or into the realm of contemporaneous obscurity. This is the kind of obscurity upon which the investigative impulse of historical criticism thrives, as Jeremiah,

¹¹ Cf. Isa. 41:8, 9; 44:1, 21; 45:4; and 48:20.

Zedekiah, Jehoiachin, Ezekiel, Zion, and others stepped forward to claim the servant mantle.

The problem with the eschatological reading is that, according to the text, the “ideal servant” remains fully a man of his day and is not easily a figure projected into the distant (or even near) future; this is especially true for songs 3 and 4 but is also arguable for the first two poems. The problem with the contemporaneous reading is that it held exegesis captive to a realm of historical speculation that absolved it from dealing with what we actually do have before us in the text—a fairly direct portrayal. In both cases, the fact was downplayed that the fate of the one servant and the fate of the other are intimately related and cannot be detached and set at odds. This is precisely the burden of the text before us for examination, “you are my servant, [you are] Israel” (49:3). Not surprisingly, then, it was always 49:3-6 that frustrated the theory and called for radical surgeries nowhere indicated by any reliable diagnosis of the text there before us.¹²

As we shall see, the final form of Isaiah does properly distinguish two servants. The first is Israel and the second is an individual. Duhm, however, wrongly overplayed and misconstrued the character of the relationship between the two. The odor of German idealism is likely a culprit here, especially with its ideal distinctions and its resistance to the messy particularism of Israel’s election. For all that, there is indeed a distinction to be identified and respected in the text, and here is the second point: It is not a distinction that falls along the lines of four servant songs over against all other texts where mention is made of the servant. Rather, the main axis of differentiation falls along the line of the two major sections of the material, that is, at the transition from chapters 40-48 to chapter 49 and following. The servant Israel is prominent in the first section; the individual servant in the second. That is, attention to the final presentation in all its parts allows us to identify and interpret the servant. However, this clarity will fall to the side if one handles the material piecemeal or according to a theory of historical origins and development. Third, recognition of the significance of the final form, and the literary contexts of the servant songs, actually increases our sense of the relationship amongst them and thereby strengthens certain aspects of the original theory. This relationship has been enhanced editorially through the arrangement of the material in the final form of the text. That is, it never belonged within the logic of an original, discrete cycle to be set off against the other material. Indeed, what we uncover by attention to the context within which the poems occur, and only by attention to that, is the dramatic relationship between servant Israel and the servant who stands as an individual in relationship to Israel. The final shapers of the songs sought to relate them to each other based on their location within the literary unfolding of the context; thus enhancing the way the four poems now anticipate and underscore the climax that is seen in the death of the servant in the final song.

¹² See the helpful essay of Peter Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, “The Servant Songs in Second Isaiah,” *JSTOT* 42 (1988): 79-102.

In the end, a tidy cycle of discrete servant songs has been broken by attention to the literary context. In its place is a more dramatic and integrated reading of the servant theme: in relationship both to servant Israel and to the nations. Indeed, this is the main dramatic joist upon which the structure of the argument of this important section of Isaiah now securely rests.

Isaiah 49:1-6, 7

Background

I published a commentary on Isaiah 1-39 in the mid-1990s, and given my interest in the larger book of Isaiah, it was disappointing that chapters 40-66 were already assigned to another author.¹³ I was, however, pleased when *The New Interpreter's Bible* asked me to do this section for a new series they were launching.¹⁴ Incidentally, it was at a conference like this one, in the mid-1980s at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where I first tried to account for the unity of the book along the lines of its final canonical shape, which followed only loosely the parameters of a three-prophet concept and instead molded the traditions into a single organic portrayal.¹⁵

You will appreciate how intrigued I was to learn that my colleague Brevard Childs was also hard at work on his own single commentary on Isaiah during this same period. As is his practice, he was working stealthily away and produced a fine commentary on the whole book with his customary learning and creativity.¹⁶ I was intrigued to see where areas of agreement and divergence would occur, as my own work on Second Isaiah was taking place at the same time as his but in isolation. Striking is our overlap in the case of the servant songs, especially on the signal role of Isaiah 49:1-6 for the interpretation of these latter Isaiah chapters if not the proper conceptuality of the entire book.

I will begin with his treatment, therefore, as a way to focus the interpretative issues raised by this important passage. It is only necessary to summarize Child's conclusions, and his work and others can be brought into focus by attending to four questions: (1) Who is the servant? (2) What is the source of the frustration referred to in verse 4? (3) What is the relationship between this poem and the other songs? (4) In what way do the answers to these questions turn on the proper role given to the immediate literary context and chiefly the preceding chapter and its final unit (48:14-22)? It cannot be emphasized enough: *Isaianic interpretation is changing precisely to the degree that the role of literary context is regarded*

¹³ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

¹⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Christopher R. Seitz, ed., *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

¹⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

as a crucial integer in the interpretation of individual passages. Early literary analysis ruled this dimension out or looked the other way, and form-critical preoccupation with original forms and units, in their so-called pristine state and location in history, likewise failed to press on to an evaluation of the form of the material in its final presentation. So, let us begin there, in the immediate literary context of chapter 48, and then we will go back into the questions of the servant's identity and frustration, which are the specific subject of chapter 49.

Chapter 48 is unique. Israel is roundly rebuked and in such a way that many interpreters, hoping to find a uniformly optimistic message from Second Isaiah, resorted to theories of secondary glossing.¹⁷ Childs and others have rightly rejected this as theory driving exegesis, instead of the reverse.¹⁸ Second, the chapter speaks clearly of something new happening, and indeed it emphasizes this in as forceful a way as possible (“From this time forward I will make you hear new things . . . They are created now, not long ago . . .,” vv. 6-7). Third, the work of Cyrus, which lay at the heart of the message of preceding chapters, is here brought to a close (see vv. 14-15). This is further reinforced by the absence of attention to him in chapters 49 and following and with new attention to Zion and the work of an individual servant.

In a 1996 *Journal of Biblical Literature* essay,¹⁹ I focused on a further idiosyncrasy in the chapter, and Childs has picked up on this in his own way.²⁰ At the end of 48:16, we have the sole first-person singular *I* of the entire presentation thus far (with the exception of 40:6). Because of the difficulty of interpretation of the phrase within the context of vv. 14-16 many have excised the verse as corrupt or deemed it a misplaced fragment. Westermann saw a possible link with the first-person voice of 49:1-6 but did not know what to make of this, given the limitations imposed by the form-critical approach he was using, which rules out literary context as decisive.

Indeed the link is unmistakable. The collocation “LORD God” is a favorite of the third servant poem (see 50:4,5,7,9) and the “but now” of verse 16 nicely anticipates a similar word usage in 49:4. The chief points are these, and they come to the fore when one attends to the literary context and flow of the well-crafted argument of the material: (1) we have no stepping forward of an individual *I*-voice in the major section 40-48; (2) this voice is prominent in chapters 49-53, and especially in the two servant poems that are central to the presentation; (3) Cyrus disappears in the second major section; (4) the individualization of the servant is prominent in the final poem where the theme of suffering and death, anticipated by poem three, is at the center. It cannot be accidental

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

¹⁸ See his discussion in *Isaiah*, 367-79.

¹⁹ Christopher R. Seitz, “How Is the Prophet Isaiah Present in the Latter Half of the Book? The Logic of Isaiah 40-66 within the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 219-40.

²⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 376-78.

that, at the juncture where final tribute is paid to Cyrus, a first-person voice appears in such proximity to chapter 49 where a similar voice will dominate the following presentation. Related to this is the insistence on newness “created now, not long ago” in the chapter. So far, this is the major agreement between Childs and me (and several others).

I argue that the confusion over interpretation of the I-voice across the entirety of verse 16 flows from the difficulty of the presentation at this particular juncture in the argument.²¹ The first-person voice of the first part of the verse appears to be a continuation of the divine voice of verse 15. The first-person voice of the last line cannot be this because it says, “now the LORD God has sent me and his spirit” (a theme rooted in the first servant song but there tied to Israel as servant). The difficulty the text is seeking to negotiate, I argue, is in allowing the individual prophetic voice to step forward when up to this time it has remained hidden behind the divine voice, out of whose way it has receded. The prophetic voice has spoken about the calling of Cyrus, for example, consistent with the logic of vv. 14-15, but, where this took place in earlier chapters, the individual voice never stepped forward. It remained hidden, allowing the thundering voice of the Almighty to predominate from the divine council. In this divine council, the servant Israel was presented in chapter 42, and the dispatching of Cyrus was likewise proclaimed. “But now the LORD God has sent me and his spirit” refers to a new stepping forward, and confirmation of this can be seen in the second servant poem. This takes us, then, into the area of frustration as this is referred to in 49:4.

The theme of laboring in vain is important because it helps us secure an interpretation of the servant poem within the context of time (the servant’s temporal career) as this has been set forth in Isaiah, and, therefore, this is an appeal to the significance of literary context. The objection is not a typical one, known from call narratives, having to do with an impending mission (one thinks here of Moses and Jeremiah, for example). It is an objection about past frustration, about a laboring that has already taken place but has not borne fruit.²² This frustration is quickly resolved as the poem moves on, but it is not likely a mere vestige of the received form, taken up and then ignored en route to a different purpose. Already the form of a call narrative has been severely altered, and nothing would have prevented simple removal of the theme. Instead the theme is emphasized, now having to do with past failure, and it is not the vestige of a form sitting uneasily alongside the chief point. To what does it refer, then?

Childs takes the preceding chapter as holding the key. The final unit (48:17-22), following on the crucial first-person revelation (48:14-16), is the first proper speech of the obscure individual, as Childs sees it. Here the frustration of God, as uttered by the voice, is a clear theme. As to 49:4, Childs concludes,

²¹ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 418-20.

²² Seitz, “Logic of Isaiah 40-66,” 235-38.

the exact cause of his despondency is not explicitly mentioned, yet the context provided by chapter 48 points to the nature of the problem. The servant had just delivered the divine summons to depart from Babylon and for Israel to begin a new exodus. However, he confesses he had not been successful in the deliverance of the people from captivity.²³

Here one sees the clear role that literary context plays for Childs’s interpretation. Earlier he says this about the interpretation of chapter 48, consistent with this approach to the problem of 49:4, “chapter 48 draws the implications growing out of a refusal by the nation to assume its divinely appointed task as God’s true witness to the redemptive events occurring in public view (43:12). Babylon has fallen, Israel freed, but God’s people still do not grasp their true deliverance.”²⁴

If I understand him rightly, Childs lets the final speech of chapter 48 bear the weight of his interpretation of the frustration because (1) it follows directly upon the first-person voice revelation of 48:16, and (2) it immediately precedes our servant poem.²⁵ However, for him, the frustration motif can also extend back further into the speeches of 40-47 as well. At the same time, Childs is cautious about pursuing one theory that might follow from this that has to do with the servant’s identity. “I am not suggesting that collective Israel has been replaced by an individual prophetic figure, say, by Second Isaiah himself. Such historical speculation misses the point of the text.”²⁶ Still, it is in the speeches of the first part of the book where the theme of frustration emerges and can be properly nailed down, as Childs sees it, having to do with failure “in the deliverance of the people from captivity.”²⁷ He continues, “The servant had just delivered the divine summons to depart from Babylon and for Israel to begin the new exodus”—this from the end of chapter 48. “However, he confesses he had not been successful in the deliverance of the people from captivity”—this presumably being Childs’ interpretation of the despondency of 49:4. Then Childs moves further back into the first part of the material to give context to the interpretation he is pursuing:

Earlier, when captive Israel complained that its right (*mispat*) had been disregarded (40:27), God had promised that his appointed servant would not fail or grow weary until he had established *mispat* on the earth (42:4). Now the servant has grown weary; he has labored in vain. Nevertheless, he retracts his complaint and comforts himself that his *mispat* and reward are still assured by God.²⁸

²³ Childs, *Isaiah*, 384.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁵ “Chapter 48 gives no immediate description of his mission. Rather, the reader is forced to wait until chapter 49 in order to understand the identity of the one sent” (Childs, *Isaiah*, 377).

²⁶ Childs, *Isaiah*, 385.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 384.

Where Childs appeals to the preceding chapter, but then goes further to find the warrant for the complaint of the individual servant in the course of the presentation of chapters 40-47 in their entirety, he has made a link I describe as involving the stepping forth of the prophetic voice that once was hidden behind the speeches. The task given to Israel is here given to the individual. On this point, and especially in seeing a deliberate extension and transition from the first to the second servant poem, as a transferal of the work of the servant Israel to the individual servant, we are in agreement (and join others such as Williamson²⁹ and Wilcox/Paton-Williams). The crucial verse, which resists tampering with through excision of "Israel," is verse 3, and we concur with a predicative reading, "You are my servant, (you are the) Israel in whom I am glorified." Jan Leunis Koole rightly interprets this final phrase as one that "harks back to 44:23, where Yahweh will glorify himself with Israel."³⁰ What was true of the servant Israel is here true of the individual who takes up this commission—that he will be the location of God's glorification, with Israel and with the nations.

Wilcox and Paton-Williams put the matter forcefully in their exposition,

What has been Israel's mission is now given to the prophet. These verses describe the re-commissioning of the prophet, to do what Israel was called to do. Up to this point, it is Israel who has been called "servant of the LORD"; after this point that identification is not made. Up to this point it is Israel who has had a mission to the nations; after this point that responsibility is given to the prophet.³¹

As for the source of frustration, "Throughout the course of chs 40-48, the prophet's purpose has been to encourage Israel to take up the task to which he has been called by Yahweh. But the prophet's message has fallen on deaf ears, and in 49.4 he pours out his lament."³²

There is a measure of overlap between the conclusions of this insightful essay and of Childs' commentary in the area of the grounds for frustration. Childs, however, is more cautious about use of the language of replacement whereby an individual servant replaces a disobedient Israel. I concur with this view in my commentary, even as I find the source of the frustration elsewhere, to which in a moment. Childs puts it this way, "what is crucial to observe is that one, bearing all the marks of an individual historical figure, has been named servant, not to replace corporate Israel—the servant in Second Isaiah remains

²⁹ Hugh Godfrey Maturin Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

³⁰ Jan Leunis Koole, *Isaiah, Part 3, Volume 2: Isaiah 49-55*, trans. Anthony P. Runia, *Historical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 13.

³¹ Wilcox and Paton-Williams, "The Servant Songs," 92.

³² *Ibid.*

inseparable from Israel—but as a faithful embodiment of the nation Israel who has not performed its chosen role (48:1-2).”³³

The differences are subtle here, but I believe they are important. They are of theological significance for a figural reading of Isaiah by the church.³⁴ The frustration stems from the individual’s failure to accomplish a purpose in respect of Israel (so Childs and Wilcox/Paton-Williams). This reading comes by taking seriously the message of chapters 40-48 and relating this to chapter 49 because, in the former, something has not happened with Israel that should have happened. For Wilcox/Paton-Williams, Israel has been commissioned to be servant and yet has not been such. Here, we find the explanation for frustration (as the same individual servant was the one charging Israel to have this role) as well as for the decision suddenly to appoint an individual along the same lines as, and now in replacement of, the recalcitrant Israel of chapters 40-48. Childs is more cautious. The frustration is not so much to do with failing to get Israel to be servant, which failing leads to a replacement concept, but simply with Israel’s not heeding the divine charge to give public testimony of God’s sovereign work and thereby to thrive and return home and be the faithful Israel according to God’s designs.

I differ from both readings in this way. I take chapters 40-48 to be speech of the individual prophet, who in 48:16 is disclosed and who in 49:1-6 is given the role of being servant, not in replacement of but in unexpected, startling fulfillment of the promises delivered to Israel along these same lines in 42:1-4 and elsewhere. The frustration referred to in 49:4 is more strictly tied to the interior logic of the unit 49:1-6, even as it works in positive relationship to, and in enlargement of, 42:1-4 and chapters 40-48. Jacob-Israel has long had a charge to be a light to the nations, a charge going back in time to (fellow) patriarch Abraham. The coastlands and nations are addressed in the opening verse by the servant. In this ages-long role of Israel as servant in relationship to the nations, the individual speaker of 49:4 gives vent to frustration. The servant has heard the divine word that he is “Israel” according to the long-held tradition of having a specific role in bringing the nations to knowledge of God. In that role, the individual servant Israel, like Israel, is frustrated. The glorification of Israel is precisely an act intended to have influence on the nations and their acknowledgement of the one and only LORD.³⁵

This frustration is expressed only because it is quickly to be set aside, within the positive logic the individual is giving utterance to in the scope of the entire unit. The frustration is a past frustration, just as the commissioning to a dual activity for Israel and for the nations is the commissioning within which frus-

³³ Childs, *Isaiah*, 385.

³⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, “‘Of Mortal Appearance’—Earthly Jesus and Isaiah as a Type of Christian Scripture,” in *Figured Out*, 103-16.

³⁵ See my treatment in “Isaiah 40-66.”

trations are being set aside—on both fronts. As servant, the individual has a vocation to the people of God, but—and here the frustration is dismantled—he is also to be a powerful light to the nations. The final gloss of 49:7 has been provided as an editorial anticipation of the final servant poem. It tells what the true import of that final poem is: that the one who is despised and abhorred by the nations, who is their servant, is ironically the same servant by whose anguish and dying they will come to the knowledge of the servant's true mission and the Holy One who chose and sent him on just this mission (see 52:13-15).³⁶

The frustration is not to do chiefly with the servant's despondency with respect to Israel. This is made clear by two matters. First, when the frustration is set aside, we learn that the servant has a dual mission both to the nations as well as to Israel. His frustration is not just with Israel, and therefore the divine response that overcomes the objection relates the mission to Israel with the work among the nations. It would be too light a thing to focus on the servant's problem in respect to Israel because this is a servanthood calibrated to the coastlands at the earth's farthest reaches.

Second, the opening of the poem speaks of the long-term mission of the servant in such a way that would call into question any overemphasis on the preceding unit of 48:17-22 as the chief place to locate the source of the frustration. The servant was called in the womb. Prophecy has been in labor for some time. I also believe that the relationship to Jeremiah's call is intentional.³⁷ Jeremiah was to be a prophet to the nations. That task was unfulfilled along the lines of God's ultimate plan of having Israel be the means by which he is acknowledged as the only LORD—the major repeated theme of Isaiah thus far. When, then, the poem is concluded with the anticipatory gloss of verse 7, we are prepared to see the chief obstacle to the servant's task interpreted as completed, and that is the mission to kings and nations.

Who is the servant? The servant is the individual voice that steps forward in 48:16, and on this several interpreters are in agreement. This is the contribution of an exegesis that attends to literary context. Childs is reluctant to specify the individual as "Second Isaiah," but it seems clear that he does mean for the individual to be interpreted realistically in relationship to the preaching of chapters 40-48. For this and other reasons, I am prepared to see the anonymous voice behind chapters 40-48 here step forward and receive from God confirmation that in his activity as God's spokesman he is the Israel whom God called and continues to call to be his servant. This service will entail suffering over and above the initial reference to past frustration. The third servant song relates this suffering in a manner well known from the psalms but also firmly

³⁶ "The verse appears to be a careful paraphrase of 52:13 and following, the so-called 'fourth' servant song" (Childs, *Isaiah*, 386). Compare O. Steck, "Aspekte des Gottesknechts in Deuterocesajas 'Ebed-Jahwe Lieder'," ZAW96 (1984): 372-90.

³⁷ Seitz, "Logic of Isaiah 40-66," 233-35.

places it within the context of deep trust in the LORD God (50:4-9). Another final gloss appears to describe the affliction as stemming in this instance from within the circle of Israel. It may well have been supplied by the same righteous servants responsible for the final servant poem wherein the servant is himself silent, even to death. The servants, the “we” who speak forth from within Israel, pass on a singular report of the profound insight granted them into the life, the mission, the final mistreatment and death, and the vindication of the servant. This suffering and death, they insist, is the means whereby Israel’s servant destiny was most in evidence, most startlingly efficacious in the removal of their sins, and most dramatically the means whereby the nations would come to the light of God’s truth in witnessing the servant’s work and the confession of that work by the servants.³⁸

Space does indeed open up between the servant Israel and the individual servant of the final three poems, but it is a space that opens up and allows to emerge a life-giving and expiatory death, which in turn opens on to the testimony of servants now bequeathed to the ages in the final poem. Space is opened up, but in the final poem it is also closed as the servant’s work is comprehended and confessed by the servants. In the final chapters of the book, it is these same servants who imitate the suffering servant and take up his cross of suffering and sacrificial witness before the unrighteous Israel and the nations. Israel is called to be servant and to bring God’s *mispāt* to the nations. The individual prophet is given this role. He succeeds in my mission but only in a way perceived by the servants who confess the divine vindication of his work. Within this report, it is given to them to announce the recognition of the nations. Following this report, the servants become the faithful seed of the prophet and carry on where he had led the way. From Israel to servant to servants: This is the way the dramatic message of latter Isaiah unfolds.

Implications for Isaiah Interpretation

I began these remarks with reference to excellently objective method as a hopeful way to connect biblical studies to the renewal of church life and of the failure of this to transpire. What counted for excellence involved a reconstruction of the event of inspiration said to generate the text before us. Such a historical extraction of inspired speech failed to produce objective and stable reading.

The granting of significance to the final form of the text, and especially the role of literary context for interpreting individual texts, has shifted the meaning of objective excellence away from retrieved inspiration toward the objective fact of the text’s present form. With this comes a different understanding of inspiration. Inspiration is not chiefly to do with uncovering the historical prophet Deutero-Isaiah, and less still is it an effort to defend single Isaiah authorship on similar historical grounds in the manner of J. Alec Moyter. The notion that

³⁸ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” 457-70.

Isaiah's historical word spoken could admit of no extension, and therefore that no ongoing, inspired, generation of meaning beyond the confines of Isaiah's own historical context was possible, suffers from the same kind of limitations of historicist readings as a one-, two-, three-Isaiah model.³⁹ When we consider the dynamic of Israel-servant, servant-Israel, and servant-servants, we see precisely the dynamic of inspiration at work that issues into the final form presentation of the present book of Isaiah. That is, God's word is actively addressing generations, making its way from an Israel referent, to a prophetic individual, and to the servant followers of the servant. There is neither strict separation, nor replacement, nor discontinuity but a sovereignly guarded continuity in the trail that leads from Israel-servant, to prophet-servant, to servant-disciples. These latter report an insight and inspiration that can come only by patient listening and obedience. The final form of the text is not only inherently dynamic in its concept of inspiration but also inherently stable in the literary presentation of the message of God's word. This word was spoken by Isaiah and continued to address Israel and the reader because it is a word pressing for fulfillment through time. At the same time, this word is objectively presented in an excellent and public way through the testimony of the canonical form of Isaiah.

There is not time to explore all the implications of this understanding of Isaiah for a coherent biblical theology of Old and New Testament. Several things do stand out. (1) The first part of the book contains the theme of a word spoken that is not heeded but is preserved for a later day. (2) It contains the theme of royal promise, beyond the obedience of Hezekiah, foil to Ahaz, and it pushes this in an eschatological direction in Isaiah 11:1-9.⁴⁰ (3) The latter Isaiah joins to

³⁹ J. Alec Moyter, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Note the tendency toward historical psychology in his effort to deal with the development of the book along a single author and inspiration model. He must work beyond the plain sense witness when he states, "Our duty, however, at this point is not to enquire whether Isaiah was right or wrong in thinking himself to be verbally inspired but to ask what a man who had this conviction would be likely to do with the resultant material." He then develops these psychological hunches further.

Would he leave it, partly written and mostly oral, to the changes and chances of history? Or would he be more likely—indeed certain—to "bind" it up and "seal" it among his disciples, leaving them "this word" as "law" and "testimony" for their future instruction and guidance (8:16-20)? As the commentary shows, the significance of 8:9-22 is the self-conscious recognition of a people within the people, the church within the church, the believing remnant whose central principle is their attachment and obedience to the sealed, attested word they possess" (31).

This is rhetorically exciting, but it is difficult to know whether the psychological weight the text is being asked to bear can be supported, and then linked to a theory of Isaiah's compositional history. Surely if the point was this decisive for *our* exegetical-theological instruction, the book would have dwelt on it in more detail in its plain sense witness.

⁴⁰ I have discussed this movement in *Isaiah 1-39*, and Childs has his own fresh treatment in *Isaiah*. The following quote shows the fine interplay between literary potential and theological fixing in the book of Isaiah as a whole:

this theme of royal exultation, obedience, and new creation, the theme of the suffering servant; the servant is the culmination of hopes associated with the prophet like Moses. (4) The servant embodies the hopes associated with Israel, and in particular with Israel vis-à-vis the nations. (5) The servant disciples take up this hope, and in the final chapters of Isaiah, suffer as the righteous servants at the hands of others within Israel who reject or dispute the “light to the nations” role as executed by the servants and the servant followers.⁴¹

If these five themes are critical to a reading of Isaiah that considers the book a coherent single vision, the implications for biblical theology are considerable. In essence, Isaiah emerges as the fifth gospel. It is a figural presentation of the entire drama of Old and New Testaments together. New Testament readings that understand the mission of Jesus as enacting the return of Israel from exile can benefit from this understanding of Isaiah’s final form. At the same time, the final section of the book, which does not limit itself to this historical theme, should be allowed to exert proper pressure on New Testament interpretation. It helps resist an understanding of Isaiah as limited by what one can say historically about Jesus’ intentions and purposes in the manner of N. T. Wright and others.⁴²

the prediction of the Immanuel child in 7:13-17 appears to be fulfilled initially in ch. 8 with the birth of the prophet’s son (note the repetition of vocabulary and concepts in 8:3-10,18). However, 9:1-7 reveals that this one, who is to deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrians, is to be a royal child (cf. 11:1ff.; 16:5; 32:1-9), so the reader must set aside Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz as an option. This person remains nameless apparently until chs. 36-39, as Hezekiah seems to fulfill this hope (again through a series of echoes of ch. 7; note, e.g., the place, 36:1-2; a sign, 37:30; 38:7, 22; the need to trust in Yahweh’s help, 37:1-20). Yet, his failure in ch. 39 disqualifies him as well. Isaiah 40-66 presents the servant, one of whose tasks is to establish justice in Israel and among the nations. This and other characteristics (e.g., the Spirit, light) link him to the royal hope of chs. 1-39. The person that the people of God must wait for, then, is a composite figure, whose ultimate identity keeps pushing the reader forward through a series of historical eras yet without final closure. In addition, the many lexical and thematic connections between the servant and the people in chs. 40ff. yield an even more complex picture, which is full of theological and ethical implications. Of course, a Christian reader would identify Jesus as the final fulfillment of this literary movement. Nevertheless, our concern at this juncture is to demonstrate the flow and power of the eschatological hopes within the Old Testament itself” (M. Daniel Carroll R., “The Power of the Future in the Present: Eschatology and Ethics in O’Donovan and Beyond,” in *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. C. Bartholomew, J. Chaplin, R. Song, and A. Wolters [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 132, n. 57).

⁴¹ See the very illuminating essay of W. A. M. Beuken, “The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah: ‘The Servants of YHWH,’” *JSOT* 47 (1990): 67-87.

⁴² See my discussion in “Reconciliation and the Plain Sense Witness of Scripture” in a forthcoming volume on redemption, edited by Gerald O’Collins for Oxford University Press. Wright makes this point insistently, as he seeks to reconstruct the aims of Jesus, “*Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying, ‘return from exile’*” (268). For a full treatment, see 268-74 in N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

The book of Isaiah sees the return from exile as decisive but only in a derivative way. What is crucial is the work of the servant and the extension of that work to the disciples of the servant. Return from exile remains a theme subsidiary to the exaltation of Zion. By this exaltation, the nations will be drawn into the light of God's promises and made fellow-partakers in Israel's life. This latter theme, Zion's humiliation and restoration, would have to be carefully coordinated with the witness of the New Testament. Just as Jesus suffered and died, so, too, the disciples take up a cross for the sake of the world (nations) and for the sake of Israel. A proper use of Isaiah as a type of Christian Scripture demands care in hearing the breadth of its report, but that will have to be pursued on another day.