

The Servant of the Lord and the Gospel of Mark

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Isaiah's Servant of the Lord provided the early church with an interpretive key for understanding Jesus. Four passages in the Book of Acts attest that the first believers declared the significance of Jesus in Servant of the Lord imagery. In a sermon Peter is recorded as saying, "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate" (Acts 3:13).¹ This reference to Jesus as God's servant is joined by three others in Acts (3:26; 4:27, 30), all four of which are attributed either to Peter or the fledgling church in their first public pronouncements and prayers about Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem. The only other New Testament passage where Jesus is called the Servant (Greek: *pais*) of God is in an extended quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4 in the Gospel of Matthew. According to Matthew, Jesus' popular appeal, his public healings, and his subsequent warnings not to disclose his identity were a fulfillment of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord, "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased" (12:18-21).²

Oscar Cullmann and others are correct in saying that "the 'Servant of God' is one of the oldest titles used by the first Christians to define their faith in the person and work of Christ."³ Nevertheless, although Servant of the Lord imagery was employed early, it was used only sparingly and did not sustain itself in early Christian literature. The five texts cited above

are the sum total of the title in the New Testament, and in the succeeding century the title appears only another eleven times in three different texts.⁴ Moreover, the title does not appear in the letters of the Apostle Paul. This is surprising since Isaiah's Servant of God is the only personality in the Old Testament who suffers vicariously for others, and the vicarious sacrifice of Christ on the cross is a major Pauline theme. In select Pauline passages (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3; Phil 2:7; Rom 4:25; 5:12ff) there are allusions to the vicarious suffering of the Servant of God, but not once does Paul directly cite a suffering Servant of the Lord passage with reference to Jesus' atonement. Why was Servant of the Lord used sparingly in Christian vocabulary, and why did it suffer an early demise? And what can we know of its origin? Were Peter and the early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem the originators of the title, or did they inherit the concept (if not the term itself) from Jesus?

Before turning to these questions, let us begin by recalling that the overwhelming consensus among New Testament scholars is to associate Servant of God with the passion of Jesus. This is true of any number of standard treatments of the Servant-title in New Testament Christologies.⁵ As a rule, interest in the Servant of God begins and ends with its explanatory significance of the death of Jesus on the cross. There may be passing references in discussions of the title and its significance for the ministry of Jesus, but they tend to be sporadic and seldom explored. The

investigation of the title inevitably makes a long jump over the ministry of Jesus and plants its heels firmly in the passion accounts, or sayings of Jesus related to the passion accounts (e.g., Mark 10:45).⁶ “Unfortunately,” notes Larry Hurtado, “scholarship has been primarily occupied with the question of whether *pais* reflects the ‘suffering’ servant passages/idea in Isaiah, and thus has not adequately considered other matters.”⁷

This observation brings me to the first thesis of this study, and also to its relevance for the Gospel of Mark. When we compare the Gospel of Mark with the Servant of God in Isaiah we find a number of instances where the Servant informs the *ministry* of Jesus as well as the passion. A review of Mark shows Servant of God imagery equally evident in the ministry of Jesus, and particularly in the first half of Jesus’ ministry in Mark 1:1-8:27. To be sure, this imagery is present primarily by way of allusion rather than direct quotation. That is scarcely an argument against its authenticity, however, for the Servant of God imagery relating to Jesus’ passion also operates by way of allusion rather than direct quotation. Isaiah’s Servant of God imagery appears to have provided Mark with a template or prototype for the presentation of Jesus as “the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14), in both his ministry and death.

The Baptism: Jesus as Son of God and Servant of God

Nearly all New Testament scholars agree that the baptismal accounts in the Synoptic Gospels reflect Servant of God imagery. This is particularly true in the divine declaration, “You are my Son, the Beloved; in you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). The Synoptic baptismal stream

consists of several different tributaries, including the inauguration of the Israelite king in Psalm 2:7 (also *T. Jud.* 24:1-3), the messianic priest of *Testament of Levi* 18:6-8, and also the sonship imagery of Genesis 22:2, 12, 16 and Exodus 4:22-23.⁸ But the most important tributary arguably derives from Isaiah, and particularly Isaiah’s Servant imagery. The prelude to the divine declaration is the tearing apart of heaven and the descent of God’s Spirit on Jesus, both of which have clear precedents in Isaiah. The rending of heaven appears to echo Isaiah 64:1 (LXX 63:19), “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” The Hebrew word for “tear open,” *qr’*, is actually translated in the LXX by a milder verb “to open” (Greek: *anoigein*), but its true force is captured by Mark’s *schizein*, meaning “to tear” or “render.” Such rendings often depicted cataclysmic events in the Old Testament: Moses cleaving the waters of the Red Sea (Exod 14:21), the Lord splitting the rock in the wilderness (Isa 48:21), or the Mount of Olives being rent asunder on the day of the Lord (Zech 14:4). “To tear open” is equally momentous at the baptism: the heavens are rent asunder so that God’s Spirit may descend on Jesus.

The descent of the Spirit also echoes Isaiah. In an early messianic prophecy Isaiah declared that “the spirit of the Lord shall rest on [the descendent of Jesse]” (11:2).⁹ That prediction takes specific form in Isaiah 42:1, where God declares, “I have put my spirit upon [my servant].” This is actualized in turn at the baptism where Jesus saw “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him” (Mark 1:10).

The baptism of Jesus is thus framed by three texts from Isaiah, two of which relate to the Servant of God. The climax

of the baptism comes in the divine declaration to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). This saying is widely understood by New Testament scholars to combine the divine declaration to the Israelite king as God’s son at his enthronement (Ps 2:7, “You are my son”) and the divine declaration to the Servant of God from Isaiah 42:1 (“my chosen, in whom my soul delights”). I do not disagree materially with this consensus, but I should like to argue that another Servant of God text provides a more conspicuous parallel to Mark 1:11. In Isaiah 49:3 God says to his servant, “You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” The similarity of this verse to the divine voice at the baptism is immediately obvious: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). In Greek, the two declarations are remarkably parallel, both structurally and thematically. In both, the commission is contained in the call. Both contain a declaration, followed by a description, followed by an explanatory clause. Apart from three changes (servant/Son; Israel/Beloved; glorified/well pleased) the wordings of the declarations are virtually identical.

The major difference between Isaiah 49:3 and Mark 1:11 is the reference to the Servant as “Israel,” whereas Jesus is called “my Son.” Already in Israel’s history there is an intriguing convergence of “Israel” and “Son,” however. In Exodus 4:22-23, God sends Moses to announce to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son. . . . ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” This important text defines the nature of God’s relationship with Israel in terms of a Father-son relationship. In calling his people into existence, God

first defines who they are in relation to him, and then calls them to worship and serve him. Identity precedes function; naming determines commission. This corresponds to the divine proclamation at the baptism. The baptism declares Jesus to be both God’s Son and God’s Servant, but sonship and servanthood are not parallel. Rather, Jesus’ servanthood derives from his divine Sonship. What Jesus does as the Servant of God is meaningful only because of who he is as the Son of God. The baptism signals the confirmation of Jesus’ divine sonship and the commencement of his servanthood. Jesus is the fulfillment of the ideal of Israel, the true Israel, Israel reduced to one. In the Exodus and the baptism, the Father first defines the sonship-relationship with Israel/Jesus, and subsequently commissions Israel/Jesus to worship and serve according to servant categories.¹⁰

The Mighty One Who Vanquishes the Strong Man

The Gospel of Mark begins with a carefully crafted Old Testament quotation. The first half of the quotation is a conflation of Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1, introducing a messenger who will prepare the way of God, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way” (Mark 1:2). The second half of the quotation reproduces nearly exactly the Septuagint version of Isaiah 40:3: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:3).

The quotation is significant, first, because Mark seldom quotes from the Old Testament. This was presumably due to the fact that Old Testament proof texts could not be expected to carry the same weight of persuasion with Gentile audi-

ences that they did with Jewish audiences. In spite of this, Mark begins his Gospel with a complex tapestry of Old Testament texts. This indicates the significance in his mind of the Old Testament story for his Gentile readers, regardless of how dubious the choice may have seemed to them. The gospel Mark imparts to his Gentile readers originates not from their story but from the redemptive story of Israel. The salvation proclaimed to Gentiles is not inherent in themselves, but in an “alien righteousness,” to quote the Reformers. Gentiles are heirs of a salvation that is extended to them from God’s saving activity in Israel. Their salvation depends on their being grafted into God’s saving root in Israel (Rom 11:13-24).

The quotation tapestry is doubly significant, however, because it culminates with the mentioning of Isaiah, “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah” (Mark 1:2). The passage quoted is the dramatic announcement of Judah’s deliverance from a half-century of exile in Babylon. The quotation heralds an eschatological event, nothing less than salvation to captive Judah.¹¹ The quotation comes from chapter 40, the major juncture in Isaiah’s prophecy where God intervenes directly in Judah’s historical experience, no longer as judge, but rather as gracious deliverer. To be sure, Isaiah 40:3 proclaims the deliverance of Yahweh, but Yahweh’s deliverance is repeated in the immediate context of Isaiah’s first Servant hymn in 42:16 in essentially the same terms: “leading the blind,” “laying waste mountains and hills,” and “turning rough places into level ground” (42:16). The deliverance of Yahweh, in other words, is closely associated with the deliverance of the Servant of Yahweh.

A third aspect of Mark’s opening

quotation is also relevant for the Servant of God. The fortieth chapter of Isaiah, from which Mark quotes the dramatic announcement to “Prepare the way of the Lord,” rehearses God’s deliverance of Judah from Babylonian captivity by way of leveled paths and straightened roads in the wilderness. In Isaiah, the references to “your way” and “his paths” are, naturally, references to “the way of the Lord,” to Yahweh. As employed by Mark, however, the same pronouns refer to *Jesus’* way, as announced by John the Baptist. At the outset of his Gospel, therefore, Mark signals that the way of Yahweh is fulfilled in the way of Jesus, that Yahweh’s epochal deliverance of Judah from Babylonian captivity foreshadowed a final deliverance in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This extraordinary transfer of Yahweh’s way to Jesus’ way becomes a *leitmotiv* in Mark’s presentation of Jesus. In Mark 1:8, John the Baptist announces Jesus as the “more powerful” one, just as Yahweh is the “mighty one” who delivers Judah (Isa 42:13; 49:26; 10:16). The true nature and magnitude of Jesus’ might becomes evident in Mark 3:27: “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.” This brief but nuclear parable comes as a response of Jesus to the scribes from Jerusalem who accused him of being in league with Beelzebul. The meaning of “Beelzebul” is not entirely certain, but it appears to refer to Baal’s abode, or to Baal as the lord and prince of the abode.¹² The claim that Jesus is in cahoots with Beelzebul, the chief of demons, is self-refuting, says Jesus. *Au contraire*, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mark 3:23). Jesus is in *conflict* with Satan, as Mark 3:27 graphically illustrates. Jesus is the “more

powerful” one who binds the strong man and plunders his goods.

The image of binding a tyrant and emancipating his captives was not hatched in a vacuum. Snippets of the same image can be found elsewhere in the Hebrew tradition,¹³ but none corresponds to Mark 3:27 as closely as does Isaiah 49:24-26:

Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? But thus says the Lord: Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued; for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

The similarity of Isaiah 49:24-26 to Mark 3:27 is widely acknowledged. The evil one in Mark is called Beelzebul, Satan, and the Strong One; in Isaiah the evil one is *gibur* and *ahritz*, “mighty warrior” and “tyrant,” respectively; and in the LXX *gigas* and *ischuon*, “giant” and “powerful one,” respectively. All these terms depict a violent and terrifying adversary, but his power is no match for God, who identifies himself emphatically as “I, the Lord your Savior and Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isa 49:26). Just as the Mighty One of Jacob despoils the evil one, so too Jesus plunders the house of the strong man and liberates his captives. The verbal similarities between the two texts are not exact, but the thematic similarities are so striking that a parallel between these two passages can scarcely be doubted. The organic relationship between the two texts is reinforced by the absence of a comparable picture of a strong man freeing captives of a tyrant anywhere else in

the Old Testament.¹⁴

An invective against idols and idolatry is a running theme in Isaiah 40-55. The invective is directed, in part, at the absurdity of idols: objects made by the hands of fallible humans are deaf, dumb, uncomprehending, and useless (44:9-20). A greater danger of idols, however, is in their power of confusion. They tempt people to pray to gods that cannot save, and they distract people from praying to the God who can. God abhors the compromise that idols pose to his saving character and purpose: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me” (45:20-46:13). These dangers are equally present in the confusion of Jesus and Beelzebul in Mark 3:20-30. There is, to be sure, the manifest illogic of the matter: how can Satan and his dynasty prosper if Satan is fighting against himself? But the offence exceeds illogic. To confuse the purposes of the evil one with the Righteous One; to attribute Jesus’ miraculous ability to an unclean spirit, and the malice of Satan to Jesus, is blasphemous, an unforgivable offence. The severity with which Jesus rejects the Beelzebul-connection is reminiscent of Yahweh’s acid denunciation of idols in Isaiah.

In discussing Mark 1:2-3 and 3:27 we have seen that the attributes of Yahweh are transferred in a direct and undiminished way to Jesus. That is quite remarkable when one recalls Isaiah’s insistence that “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me” (45:21). To no other figure in Scripture are God’s attributes transferred—and transferred so inherently—as they are to Jesus. A particularly revealing example of this transfer is the ability to forgive sins. In Isaiah 43:25 Yahweh reserves the prerogative of the

remission of sins to himself: “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” This text emphatically identifies the forgiveness of sins not in extrinsic sacrifices but in *Yahweh’s own nature* (“for my own sake”).

This unique authority is also evident in Jesus—and only in Jesus. When Jesus declared the sins of a paralytic forgiven, the attending scribes accused him of blasphemy: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). The scribes were, of course, entirely correct in their assumption, for in the received tradition God alone could forgive sins. According to Mark, Jesus proceeded to heal the paralytic “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10). Like Yahweh, Jesus willed that his hearers recognize his unique authority, and attribute it to no other than himself. Jesus did not pronounce forgiveness in the name of a sacrifice, or even of Yahweh. He pronounced it in his own authority, which was equivalent to the authority of God.

The Mighty One who binds the strong man and ransacks his habitation possesses eschatological messianic authority. Two Jewish texts corroborate this interpretation. In *The Testament of Levi* we read, “And Beliar shall be bound by [the messianic high priest], and he shall grant to his children the authority to trample on wicked spirits” (18:12). Likewise, a first-century B.C. Qumran text portrays Melchizedek apotheosized to the divine pantheon as a heavenly prince who, like the archangel Michael, “will carry out the vengeance of God’s judgments, [and on that day he will free them from the hand of] Belial and from the hand of all the sp[irits of his lot]” (11Q13 [Melch], col.

II, l. 13).

Our discussion of Mark 1:2-3 and 3:27 has shown multiple moorings with Isaiah 40-55. But are there specific moorings with *the Servant of God*? The Servant, after all, has not been expressly mentioned in the foregoing discussion. In this instance anonymity should not be understood as absence, for a clear line of demarcation cannot be drawn between the work of God and the work of the Servant in Isaiah 40-55. Isaiah’s Servant hymns are traditionally identified with four passages,¹⁵ but mention of the Servant of God is not limited to those four.¹⁶ The interplay between God and the Servant permeates large parts of Isaiah 40-55, where the redemptive work of both is expressed in virtually the same imagery. That is certainly true of Isaiah 49:24-26, where God’s mighty deliverance parallels that of the Servant in 42:6-7, who is “a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Again, in Isaiah 53:12, the climax of the final Servant hymn, the Servant is described as “dividing the spoil with the strong.” Finally, in Isaiah 42:22, Judah is described as “a people robbed and plundered, all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become a prey with no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, ‘Restore!’”—no one, that is, except God who, along with his Servant, defeats the powers of darkness and liberates the captives. In all these passages there is reciprocity between God and the Servant. Mark’s depiction of Jesus as the promised Mighty One who brings salvation by destroying the works of the devil (1 John 3:8) is properly understood against this background.

The Compassionate Provider

The dominant theme of Isaiah 40-66 is set in chapter 40. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem (Hebrew: “speak to the heart of Jerusalem”). . . . ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,’ . . . He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (40:1, 3, 11). God’s compassion and shepherding of his troubled people through hostile wastelands echoes like a refrain throughout Isaiah 40-66. “Comfort” or “compassion” (*nhm* in the piel) occurs a half-dozen times in the latter half of Isaiah.¹⁷ The same is true of the wilderness motif (*mdb*). In the wilderness God provides a way for his pilgrim people (40:3; 43:19); the wilderness will be flushed with pools of water (41:18; 43:20), and verdant as Eden (41:19; 51:3).

Compassion for harried crowds is a central theme in the first half of Mark’s Gospel as well. And often, as in Isaiah 40-66, the compassion occurs in deserted places. Mark’s opening announcement of the good news of God occurs in the wilderness. John the Baptist appears not in the Holy City but, quoting Isaiah 40:3, as “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (Mark 1:3). The theme is repeated in the following two verses: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mark 1:4-5). God’s attributes are again transferred to Jesus, for the compassion demonstrated by Yahweh in Isaiah 40-66 is demonstrated by Jesus in the Gospel

of Mark.

In one instance Jesus showed compassion on a man who not only lived in a wasteland, but was a wasteland. A leper approached Jesus, asking to be healed. Jesus’ compassionate healing of the pariah brought about an unanticipated role-reversal: the man who theretofore had been banished to the wilderness was rehabilitated into society, but Jesus “could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country” (Mark 1:40-45). Specifically, in Greek, Jesus had to “stay outside in deserted (*erēmos*) places.” In yet another wilderness—a ritual wilderness on the border between Israel and Phoenicia—Jesus had compassion on a desperate father by healing his epileptic son (Mark 9:14-29).

The theme of compassion for people in distress comes into sharper focus elsewhere in Mark. A salvation-in-the-wilderness text, Isaiah 43:19-20, declares, “The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.” This text may evoke Mark’s temptation narrative where, in addition to the test of Satan, Jesus “was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:13). There is no exact parallel to this curious statement in all the Bible. The one reference to “wild beasts” (Greek: *thēria*) in the Gospels, however, repeats the same word in Isaiah 43:20 (LXX). Whether “wild beasts” should be understood in an amicable sense in Mark’s temptation narrative is disputed,¹⁸ but a not implausible case can be made that it should be.¹⁹ If so, then Mark’s temptation narrative could be understood as an eschatological fulfillment of the peaceable kingdom (Isa 11:6-9), in which all creation, wild animals included, rightfully honor their creator.

Once again, the honor due to God would be received by the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah.

A stronger allusion to Yahweh's compassion in Isaiah 40-66 occurs in Mark's two feeding miracles, particularly the Feeding of the Five Thousand. The compassion of God for wilderness wayfarers is again the theme. According to Isaiah 49:9-10, God will call those who are hungry to himself and feed them. "They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them." In both the Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:31-44) and Four Thousand (Mark 8:1-9) Jesus miraculously feeds great numbers of people in "deserted places" (Upper Galilee in 6:31-32; the Decapolis in 8:1). Like Yahweh's "feed[ing] his flock like a shepherd" (Isa 40:11), Jesus "had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). Again, "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance" (Mark 8:2-3).

The compassion of Yahweh for errant Israel and the compassion of Jesus for shiftless crowds are atypical of the *hesed*, the covenant faithfulness, enjoined by the Deuteronomic perspective and the Wisdom tradition. According to these two traditions, God's faithfulness to Israel was contingent on Israel's obedience. Job's friends testify to this inexorable logic: if Job is suffering the punishment of God, it must be because he has sinned against

God. This same understanding popularly prevailed in Jesus' day: "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will" (John 9:31).

The compassion of Yahweh in Isaiah 40-66 and the compassion of Jesus in Mark scandalously break the traditional rule, however. In both instances, compassion is shown to those who have forfeited and forsaken it. For the latter half of Isaiah and for Jesus in Mark, to say that one is a sinner is not to say that one is abandoned by God, but rather that one is the object of God's compassion. The unconditional nature of God's compassion expressed in Isaiah 40-66 is singularly parallel to the compassion of Jesus in Mark.

Revelation through Hiddenness

In Isaiah, the Servant is sent as "a light to the nations." Each time this phrase appears it refers to the Servant of God (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 51:4). According to Luke, that light was recognized by Simeon the Seer when the baby Jesus was presented in the temple: "My eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32). "The consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25) for which Simeon hoped was the consolation promised by God to his people and to the nations²⁰ in Isaiah (e.g., 46:13; 49:13).

In the Gospel of Mark, "the light to the nations" is more paradoxical and mysterious than in Luke's infancy narratives. This paradox is reflected in the Servant hymns themselves. The Servant hymn that bears the strongest resemblance to Mark's presentation of Jesus is Isaiah 49:1-7. There the mission of the Servant unfolds contrary to all expectation. The mission begins in 49:1-3 with a description of the

Servant's lofty destiny to reveal the glory of God. The audience is not simply Israel, but "the coastlands" and "peoples far away," namely, the nations of the world. The Servant is aware of his destiny ("The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb"), and of his unique endowments to fulfill it. His words will be effective ("He made my mouth like a sharp sword") and far reaching ("he made me a polished arrow"). Through the Servant, God will be glorified in Israel (49:3).

There is a tormenting discrepancy, however, between the above ideal and the Servant's experience. Though his mouth is like a sharp sword, God has not brandished the sword in victory, but hidden it in the shadow of his hand (49:2). A polished arrow he may be, but rather than being set on the bowstring as the warrior advances in battle or the hunter to the kill, he is hidden away in the quiver. At every turn the Servant's experience belies his destiny. "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity," he laments (49:4). Nevertheless, the Servant does not falter or fail, but commits his "cause with the Lord, and my reward with my God" (49:4). The Servant does not rebel against his fate as do Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and other servants in Israel. Rather, the humiliation of Judah in exile is mysteriously reflected in the humiliation of the Servant. He is submissive to his destiny of suffering, and his submission becomes the vehicle of God's unexpected work through him. The plot seems tragically contrary, like a coach who inexplicably keeps a star player on the bench during a championship game.

God exacerbates this predicament by a final mystifying response. "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to

raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel" (49:6). To anyone familiar with the history of Israel, this statement is an oxymoron *par excellence*. The outstanding problem of the Old Testament has been the restoration of Israel. Until now no one has succeeded in healing Israel's chronic disobedience—not David or Elijah or Isaiah or God himself. God now informs the Servant that the unfulfilled objective of salvation history is, in fact, "too light a thing." The Hebrew *qll* implies that the original plan of saving Israel was a "trifling matter" that "pales in comparison" to the new plan of salvation for the nations. Contrary to all logic, the Servant who has failed in the smallest of tasks will be selected for the greatest task, to be "a light to the nations." To be sure, the restoration of Israel is still part of God's plan, but it is not the sum of it. God wills that salvation be extended beyond Israel "to the end of the earth" (49:6). The one rejected by Israel will, by a divine irony, redeem Israel; the one "abhorred by the nations" will be worshipped by the kings and princes of the nations (49:7).

Mark's portrait of Jesus' ministry strangely resembles this unique figure in Israel. Jesus attracts large crowds, but he is not understood by them. He does wonders among crowds, but seems to have no lasting fruit among them. Systematic opposition from religious leaders in Jerusalem dogs his mission. He crisscrosses the Sea of Galilee and travels extensively, but he goes nowhere. He makes a long circuitous journey into Gentile territory and ends up where he was before. The misunderstandings and impediments of the masses are accentuated in his own disciples, and even his own family, who fail to understand him and who frustrate his ministry. He is dead-tired, but has virtually nothing

to show for his labors.

The Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:1-9) is a revealing commentary on the seemingly abortive mission of Jesus. A farmer sows widely and indiscriminately in an open field, as if to symbolize Jesus' ministry. The risks of sowing are not warranted or rewarded, however. Seed is gobbled up by birds; it falls on rocky soil and is scorched by the sun; it is choked by thorns and brambles. Fully three-quarters of the seed is lost, and all hope of a harvest seems dashed. The labor of the farmer seems to symbolize the ministry of Jesus, who, like Isaiah's Servant, also has "labored in vain . . . and spent his strength for nothing" (Isa 49:4).

And yet, the Parable, like the Second Servant hymn, does not end in defeat. A fraction of the seed bears so much fruit that all the wasted seed suddenly becomes irrelevant. It is "too light a thing" to be considered any more. There is a harvest beyond compare—"thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold" (Mark 4:9). The ineffectual labors of the Servant were, by the mercy and miracle of God, transformed into a miraculous mission, a light to the nations. The disastrous losses of the farmer—and of the ministry of Jesus—are, by the same divine mercy, transformed into a miraculous bumper crop. One cannot judge the effect of the Servant's ministry or of Jesus' ministry by the present state of affairs. Both have trusted irrevocably in God, and their reward will be great.²¹

According to Mark, the Parable of the Sower is not simply one parable among many, but the key to understanding all Jesus' parables. "Do you not understand this parable?" says Jesus. "Then how will you understand all the parables?" (Mark 4:13). Parables, moreover, provide windows of understanding into Jesus'

ministry and mission. Could the Parable of the Sower be the key to Jesus' ministry precisely because it plumbs the mystery of hiddenness foreshadowed by Isaiah's Servant? The reward will be great because of the power of God, of course, but also because of the hiddenness of the Servant. Not in spite of his hiddenness, but *because* of it. Through smallness, weakness, misunderstanding, and even suffering, the Servant—and Jesus—becomes the inexplicable victory of God.

Significantly, in Isaiah's Servant hymns *tsedek*, which normally means "just" or "right," takes on the meaning of "salvation" (Isa 41:2, 10; 42:6, 21; 45:8, 13, 19; 51:1, 5). In humiliation, insignificance, and even suffering, the Servant, who acts contrary to all human designs, conforms to a deeper impulse of rightness and justice in the divine economy, and supremely achieves God's saving purposes for Israel and the nations. Through the weak and foolish, God has worked not only his wisdom and power, but his *salvation* for Israel and the nations.

The Servant of God and the Gospel of Mark

So far in our discussion we have omitted passages in Isaiah 40-55 that relate to the passion of Jesus. We have done this not because we question their relevance, but because a correspondence between the Servant of God and the passion of Jesus is widely acknowledged, even by scholars who minimize its significance.²² For the sake of completeness, however, we should mention those passages in Isaiah 40-55 that evidently influenced Mark's passion narratives. The reference to the insults, spitting, and physical abuse of the Servant in Isaiah 50:6 appears to be echoed in the third passion prediction of Jesus in Mark

10:34, as well as in the description of the abuse of Jesus by the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:65) and by the Roman soldiers (Mark 15:16-20). The silent suffering of the Servant of Isaiah 53:7, likewise, seems to have foreshadowed the silent suffering of Jesus before both the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:60-61) and Pilate (Mark 15:4-5). The numbering of the Servant with transgressors (Isa 53:12) is also suggestive of Jesus' crucifixion between two criminals (Mark 15:27), and the references to the suffering of the Servant for "the many" (Isa 53:10-12) are likewise reminiscent of the vicariousness of Jesus suffering in Mark 10:45 and the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-24). Less clear, but not improbable, are also the reference to the "cup of wrath" in Isaiah 51:17, 22, and Jesus' Gethsemane prayer to have the "cup" removed from him (Mark 14:36). Likewise, the reference to the vanishing of heaven and earth in Isaiah 51:6 strikes a chord with Mark 13:31, where Jesus says that although earth and heaven will perish, his words will not.

Even without further discussion it is apparent that these passion references, like the references to Jesus' ministry, depend on allusion rather than on direct quotation. This same observation, incidentally, characterizes the New Testament as a whole, where "astonishingly few" Servant of God passages, to quote Jeremias, are expressly applied to Jesus.²³ This does not imply, however, that the relationship between the Servant of God and the Gospel of Mark is thereby less actual. It simply means that the allusions are *sine litteras*, that is, conceptual rather than literal. An allusion need not be less definite than a quotation, however. Indeed, a direct quotation is usually required to evince the existence of a dubious relationship, whereas an allusion suffices to recall an

established relationship. The first conclusion of this study, then, is that interpreters will fail to recognize the significance of Isaiah's Servant of God in the Gospel of Mark if they look only to direct quotations. The relationship between Isaiah's Servant and Mark's story of Jesus, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is typically allusional rather than literal.

A second conclusion is that Isaiah's Servant of God has played an important role in shaping Mark's story of Jesus' *ministry*, just as it has in shaping the passion narratives. There are as many allusions to the Servant of God in the first half of the Gospel with reference to the ministry of Jesus as there are in the passion narratives in the second half of Mark. The presence of these allusions throughout the Gospel of Mark requires an expansion of our understanding of the hermeneutical function of Isaiah's Servant of God: it encompasses Mark's *entire* Gospel. The profile and mission of the Servant, which are unique among Old Testament personalities, were seen by Mark as a unique prefigurement of both the ministry and passion of Jesus, and in roughly equal measure. The enigmatic Servant of God, who in a mysterious way embodies the good news of God's deliverance of Judah from Babylonian captivity, also prefigures the good news of Jesus as the "light to the nations," from his baptism to his crucifixion.²⁴

Third, not all of Mark's allusions to Isaiah 40-55 recall explicit Servant of God imagery. Yahweh's forgiveness of sins and saving mission in the world, for example, are transferred in the Gospel of Mark directly to Jesus. This correspondence surpasses the correspondence between Jesus and the Servant, for it implies that the nature and mission of Yahweh were regarded by Mark as being present and

fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus fulfilled not only the role of the Servant of God, but in the above respects also the role of the God who sent him. Jesus did not simply “proclaim the good news of God” (Mark 1:14); he *was* the good news of God.

Fourth and finally, if the Parable of the Sower reflects the mission and experience of Isaiah’s Servant of God, and if, as nearly all scholars agree, parables reflect the mind of Jesus (whether *ipsissima verba* or *vox*), then it seems justified to assume that Jesus found within the profile of Isaiah’s Servant a paradigm for his own ministry. The relationship between Isaiah’s Servant and the Gospel of Mark, in other words, appears to derive from Jesus rather than the early church.²⁵ This conclusion is reinforced by the use of Servant of God in Judaism, and to a certain extent also in the early church. It seems doubtful, as Michael Grant argues, that the early church would have invented the connection between Jesus and the Servant of God, for the idea of a Suffering-Servant-Messiah “remained so far from the central themes of Jewish doctrine, so contrary both to the prevailing official and popular conceptions, that it would scarcely have established itself in the tradition of the early Christian Church unless it had been too authentic to jettison.”²⁶ It is important to remember that there is no known pre-Christian Messianic text in Judaism that speaks of a *suffering* Messiah.²⁷ The popular conception of the Messiah, whether at Qumran or in the *Psalms of Solomon*, depicts a Messiah mighty in word, wise in the Holy Spirit, endowed with miraculous powers, holy and free of sin, and above all, the destroyer of God’s enemies and liberator of Jerusalem and the temple from Gentiles. But there is no mention of

a *suffering* Messiah; and given the above range of ideas, seemingly no possibility of such.²⁸ It would be difficult to find an Old Testament text on which Jewish and Christian interpretations historically have differed so dramatically.²⁹ The concept of a suffering servant and savior figure is so unprecedented in Judaism that the early church can scarcely have inherited the concept, either historically or theologically, from Judaism. There is no plausible explanation for its presence in early Christian tradition except to ascribe it to Jesus himself.

The above complex of ideas allows us to postulate why the title Servant of the Lord, although employed early in the church’s proclamation, was used only sparingly and soon dropped out of use altogether. The Servant of God concept clearly guaranteed the experience of humiliation and suffering in both Jesus’ ministry and passion, but it failed to encompass the exaltation of Jesus’ person, particularly as a result of the resurrection. The title, in other words, was inadequate to incorporate both humiliation and exaltation (e.g., Phil 2:6-11). Other titles, especially “Lord,” “Christ,” and “Son of God,” were more adequate for the Christological task before the church. In the Gospel of Mark, in particular, “Son of God” is the load-bearing Christological title, within which Servant of God is subsumed. Appearing in the opening verse (1:1) and final scene at the crucifixion (15:39) of Mark, Son of God is the supreme expression of Mark’s portrayal of Jesus as the divine Son of God who lives and dies as the humble Servant of God.³⁰

ENDNOTES

¹Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

²On the function of this quotation in Matthew, see A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthaeus. Seine Sprache, sein Ziel, seine Selbstständigkeit* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1948), 401-402.

³O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. S. Guthrie and C. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 51. Likewise, J. Jeremias, "pais theou," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 5:709, writes, "the Christological interpretation of the servant of the Lord of Dt. Is. belongs to the most primitive age of the Christian community, and very soon came to be fixed in form." Again, R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribner's, 1951 and 1955), 1:51, states, "so it appears to have been early, at any rate, that [Servant of God] was taken into the liturgical vocabulary of the Church." Finally, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ. Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 193: "we probably have here an authentic item of the christological vocabulary of early Jewish Christian circles."

⁴Jeremias, 700. The three texts are the Didache, 1 Clement, and The Martyrdom of Polycarp. In all eleven instances the title occurs in the liturgical prayer formula, "through Jesus Your servant."

⁵For example, Cullmann, 51-82; Jeremias, 700-712; G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. I. and F. McLuskey with J. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 226-227;

F. Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel. Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 54-66; W. Kaspar, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (New York: Paulist, 1977), 119-123.

⁶See J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 2:106-107; or M. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 248-249. Cullmann declares that "the *ebed* consciousness came to [Jesus] very probably at the time of his baptism," indeed, that it "has its origin with Jesus himself" (68). Nevertheless, Cullmann does not discuss the relevance of the title for Jesus' ministry.

⁷Hurtado, 190-191.

⁸See J. Edwards, "The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 43-57.

⁹For a discussion of the similarities between Isaiah 11 and the Servant of God, see John Walton, "The Imagery of the Substitute King Ritual in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 742.

¹⁰On the correlation of Israel and royal messianic connotations, see further Hurtado, 191-192.

¹¹See T. Hatina, *In Search of a Context. The Function of Scripture in Mark's Narrative*, JSNTSup 232 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 182-183.

¹²J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 120.

¹³"No one takes plunder away from a strong man" (Pss. Sol. 5:3); "... by setting [Sarah, daughter of Raguel] free from the wicked demon Asmodeus" (Tob 3:17).

¹⁴See M. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant* (London: SPCK, 1959), 272; R. E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 148, 284-287.

¹⁵Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.

¹⁶Isa 41:8-16; 42:5-9, 19; 48:16 (?).

¹⁷Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 19; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13.

¹⁸Edwards, 40-42.

¹⁹See R. Bauckham, "Jesus and the Wild Animals (Mark 1:13): A Christological Image for an Ecological Age," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, eds. J. Green and M. Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Pater-noster, 1994), 3-21; also K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3.1, *The Work of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 180.

²⁰The Greek *ta ethnē* means both "the nations" and "the Gentiles."

²¹This interpretation of the Parable of the Sower speaks to the experience of pastors, missionaries, and evangelists as well. God brings forth a harvest, despite our personal inadequacies and the inevitable oppositions to ministry.

²²Even Hooker, who thinks "[t]he influence of Isaiah 53 on [Mark 10:45] has . . . been grossly exaggerated," admits that "the theology of Isaiah 40-55 as a whole is certainly an important part of its background" (249).

²³See the passages noted in Jeremias, 705-706.

²⁴In the early church, Servant of God images were likewise employed as examples for Christian virtues: Mark 10:45 for humility and service; Phil 2:5-11 for unselfishness; 1 Pet 2:21-25 for willingness to suffer without cause; 1 Clem 16:1-17 for humility.

²⁵Many scholars recognize that Jesus regarded his impending death (e.g., Mark 10:45) according to Suffering Servant imagery. See the material and reasons gathered in Cullmann, 79-80; and in Jeremias, 712-717.

²⁶M. Grant, *Jesus. An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Scribner's, 1977), 137-138. Grant continues, "The Church did not like [the concept of the Suffering-Servant-Messiah]; the whole Suffering Servant range of ideas as reformulated in relation to Jesus proved unassimilable, and soon disappeared. Yet it was so manifestly part of the original record, and authentic, that the Gospels could not omit it altogether."

²⁷Contra Jeremias, 699. Jeremias rightly notes, "It is remarkable that in this rich material [the understanding in Israel of the atoning power of the deaths of certain righteous individuals] there is no reference to Is. 53," but wrongly concludes that the silence is due to a preexisting association of the two concepts in the Jewish mind. The reason there is no association of Messiah and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, rather, is because the two concepts were incompatible in the Jewish mind. Martin Hengel's conclusion is certainly correct: "A

crucified messiah, son of God or God must have seemed a contradiction in terms to anyone, Jew, Greek, Roman or barbarian, asked to believe such a claim, and it will certainly have been thought offensive and foolish" (*Crucifixion*, trans. J. Bowden [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 10).

²⁸The Targum to Isaiah 53 identifies the Servant of God with the Messiah by wholly suppressing the aspect of suffering! The Targum depicts the Servant, as do the *Psalms of Solomon*, as a victorious Messiah who would drive out the Romans and restore the temple. In a different vein, Walton has noted the motif of a servant who vicariously suffers on behalf of the king in ancient Assyrian contexts (734-743), but he has not shown how these or other Assyrian ideas might have influenced Judah. Moreover, in Isaiah the Servant suffers on behalf of the people, and not, as in Assyria, on behalf of the king.

²⁹See Herbert Haag, *Der Gottesknecht bei Deuterojesaja*, *Erträge der Forschung* 233 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985) and, more recently, W. Bellinger, Jr., and W. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998). Judaism is generally indifferent to the figure of the Servant of God, as reflected in Abraham Heschel's two-volume study of *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), where discussion of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah receives a scant page of comment.

³⁰In the preparation of this study I

have profited from the research of and conversation with my teaching assistant Geoffrey Helton.