

Isaiah 49:1-13, The Lord Commissions his Servant

Overview of Ch. 49-57

Shifts of characters and speakers mark off the broad subsections. The section is largely chiasmic, ABA, centered around the watchman's triple call in 51:9-52:12 (chart). The two outer panels (A) each have three corresponding elements (one of which is doubled in the first panel). The central call echoes these three elements.

The Lord and his Servant (The agent of salvation)	49:1-13 (Conversation between the Lord and the Servant) (13 vv)	52:13-53:12 (Conversation between the Lord and the People, about the Servant) (15 vv)
The Lord Comforts Mother Zion (Indicative statement of salvation)	49:14-50:3 (17 vv)	54:1-17 (17 vv)
The Lord and his Servant	50:4-9 (Conversation between the Lord and the Servant) (6 vv)	
The Lord Challenges his People (Imperative warning and invitation to receive salvation)	50:10-51:8 (10 vv)	55:1-57:21 (46 vv)
The Watchman's Call	51:9-52:6, Detailed (21 vv)	52:7-12, Summary (6 vv)

Let's read a few verses from each section to get a feeling for the flow:

The Lord and his Servant	49:1-3	52:13-53:6
The Lord Comforts Mother Zion	49:17-23	54:1-5
The Lord and his Servant	50:4-7	
The Lord Challenges his People	50:10-51:2	55:1-4
The Watchman's Call	51:9, 17; 52:1 (Arm ~ Servant, Jerusalem ~ Mother, Zion ~ Challenge)	52:7-10 (Zion, Jerusalem, Arm)

One detail that may require further attention as we proceed is the section that extends from 55 through 57. It is 46 vv long, longer than the entire first panel (45 vv) (chart). Now, corresponding elements need not be the same length, as the center section the Watchman's Call shows: a 21 verse section is summarized in six verses. But it is unusual to have one element of several in a parallel structure be so out of balance with the others, and we will have to pay special attention to this section when we get to the last three chapters of this section.

The whole nine chapters consist of a beautiful embroidery of three main ideas:

- the Servant by whose suffering the Lord will redeem his people,
- the restoration that the Servant will achieve over their humiliation,
- and their responsibility to accept that blessing.

God sends his suffering Servant to deliver mother Zion from her humiliation, and challenges her to receive the blessing that he has thus purchased for her.

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Compare this role for the Servant for the one we saw in the previous nine chapters (chart). There, God charges his (sometimes sinful) Servant to bear witness to his superiority over the pagan gods, because of his power as creator and predictor. There, the Servant bears witness to God's actions. Here, the Servant is the agent of those actions.

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The first section of each side-panel focuses on the Servant.

Our study of this section will confirm what we have seen before: the Servant passages describe at least three distinct things, and often shift from one to the other. The nation Israel as a whole is the Servant, but it failed in its task, so God raised up the Messiah to restore them. Today, the body of Christ carries on that role of Servant. It may help to view the three as forming an hourglass (chart).

In the first panel, the Servant speaks, alternating between reporting his own thoughts and quoting what the Lord has said to him. There are two panels in this alternation (chart). The first panel focuses on the Servant's call; the second, on his confidence. The final verse (13) is a call to all creation to praise the Lord for the deliverance reported in vv. 6-12.

1-2, Servant to the Nations: His Call

49:1 Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye peoples, from far;--As often in Isaiah, "people" is plural, referring to the world's many ethnic groups.

We saw in 45:14-25 that God's blessings will be offered to the Gentiles. Now we turn from the fact of that blessing to meet its agent. The Servant's ministry reaches beyond Israel to encompass the Gentiles. So they are summoned to hear the record of his appointment.

The rest of this verse explains **when** God set him apart; v. 2 describes **why**.

The LORD hath called me from the womb;--The Messiah follows in the line of OT heroes whose coming was prophesied before their birth:

- Gen 16:11 is a negative example, Ishmael (note the destiny in v. 12)
- The births of the patriarchs were prophesied: Gen 17 (Isaac), 25 (Jacob).
- In 1 Sam 1, Eli told Hannah that she would have a son, who became Samuel.
- Judg 13, the angel tells Manoah and his wife that they would have a son who would judge Israel.
- In Luke 1, John is named before his birth.

from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.--Pre-birth naming is not as common, but occurs with Ishmael, John, and our Lord.

Two later servants of the Lord, perhaps drawing on this passage, declare their awareness that God chose them for their work before their birth:

[Jeremiah] Jer 1:4-5 Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 5 Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, *and I*

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ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

[Paul] Gal 1:15 God, who separated me¹ from my mother's womb², and called *me* by his grace, They are not alone in this divine appointment. Every child of God has been the object of God's special love and care long before birth:

Eph 1:4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

Remember the hourglass. Many characteristics of the Servant will be true of us as well.

The next verse explains **why** God set the Servant apart. The AV's punctuation deviates from the MT. The *athnach* marks the parallelism much better: the Servant is a sword hidden in the hand, an arrow hidden in the quiver.

2 And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword³; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me,-- Isaiah's contemporary Hosea speaks of the Lord's words as a weapon:

Hos 6:5 Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; **I have slain them by the words of my mouth:**

Hebrews also describes God's word as a sword:

Heb 4:12 For **the word of God is** quick, and powerful, and **sharper than any twoedged sword⁴**, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

So the point of the image is that the Servant speaks God's word. John picks up the image in his vision of Christ:

Rev 1:16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and **out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword:** and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.

and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me;--Now the image turns from sword to arrow, not held in the hand but stored in the quiver.

Both of these images, the sword and the arrow, are of instruments of destruction. As we move into this section that focuses on the Servant's work of redemption, it's interesting that he is presented first as the instrument of God's judgment. The message of salvation makes no sense unless we first of all understand that we are sinners under judgment. And the one who provides our salvation is also the one who will judge. The NT bears witness to our Lord's role as judge:

Mat 25:31-32 When **the Son of man** shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: 32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and **he shall separate them** one from another, as a shepherd divideth *his* sheep from the goats:

Joh 5:22-23, 25-26 For the Father judgeth no man, but **hath committed all judgment unto the**

1 Ἀφορίζω, as in Rom 1:1, set apart for his mission, not simply born.

2 See Lightfoot; AV misleadingly refers this to the event of his birth rather than the time of his appointment.

3 Rev 1:16, though there the sword is ρομφαία rather than μαχαίρα. Reflexes of חרב הרה: the word חרב is translated ρομφαία 195x and μαχαίρα only 150x; John may be translating directly.

4 Μαχαίρα as in Isa 49:2

Son: 23 That all *men* should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.

Act 10:42 And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that **it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.**

Act 17:30-31 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: 31 Because he hath appointed a day, in the which **he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained;** *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

3, Lord to Servant: Call

3 And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.--The Lord declares three things of the one to whom he speaks.

1. He declares him to be his Servant. God does not invite people to be his servants. He doesn't post a job description and hold competitive interviews. He chooses, and declares.
2. He identifies the Servant as Israel. We'll talk more about this in a moment.
3. He states that he will be glorified in the Servant. The Hebrew verb is reflexive; we might translate, "I will glorify myself." There is no contingency, no "If you obey me..." The Lord chooses the Servant, and uses him as an instrument for self-glorification. This promise is a reassurance to the Servant in the sequel.

Let's talk more about the second point. Twice before the Lord has named Israel his Servant.

Isa 41:8-10 But **thou, Israel, art my servant**, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. 9 *Thou* whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, **Thou art my servant**; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away.

Isa 44:21-22 Remember these, **O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant**: I have formed thee; **thou art my servant: O Israel**, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. 22 I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.

Israel as God's Servant is the top of the hourglass. This is the nation's purpose. It is called to bear witness to the Lord's creative and predictive power:

Isa 43:10 Ye *are* my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen

It is charged to spread the knowledge of the Lord throughout the earth, by going to cities "very far off" and offering them the choice of submission or death (Deut 20:10-18).

The nation has badly failed in this task. The Babylonian captivity, in view throughout this section, came upon them because of their sin. Some of the Servant passages focus on the historical nation and its failure. For instance, ch. 42 presents us with the anomaly of a servant-witness who is blind and deaf.

Isa 42:19 Who *is* blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger *that* I sent? who *is* blind as *he that is* perfect, and blind as the LORD'S servant?

How about this passage? The Servant is called “Israel,” but does the nation exhaust what is here described?

4-5, Servant (to the nations?): His Confidence

The Servant’s words in this section strongly suggest that he is distinct from the nation. Let’s study the verses, then summarize the distinction.

4 Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain:--The first distinction from the nation as a whole is that he is conscious of having labored in good conscience to serve the Lord.

There is a sense of frustration in the Servant’s confession. He has exerted his effort, apparently for nothing, seeing no results.

This was certainly true of our Lord. At the time of his death he had not succeeded in gathering the Gentiles. He had not turned Israel back to the Lord. He had not even brought his disciples to the point of spiritual independence, for they fled in disorder. From a human, results-oriented perspective he was a failure.

How does one deal with such a track record? One might expect the Servant to respond to God as Tevel does in Fiddler on the Roof: “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?”

The Servant’s attitude is very different.

yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.--Under these conditions, he leaves his case in the Lord’s hands. He has exerted his effort. God must bring about the result. Here he is casting himself upon the Lord’s promise in v. 3. “God said he would glorify himself in me, so in spite of appearances, I must leave my judgment with him.”

This attitude is foreign to the world, which focuses on results, never mind the means. The Servant’s attitude is just the opposite. He focuses on doing the right thing, and leaves the results in God’s hands. Compare Paul’s perspective:

1Co 3:6-7 I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

1Co 4:5 judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

5 And now, saith the LORD—He is about to enter into a series of three statements by the Lord, each introduced by “thus saith the Lord.” He gives the introduction to the first one, but then pauses to recapitulate the themes of vv. 1-4.

that formed me from the womb—This recalls v. 1.

to be his servant,--Here (as a prepositional phrase, least specific) is v. 3, the declaration that he is the Lord’s servant.

to bring Jacob again to him, though Israel be not gathered to him,⁵--The accentuation⁶ indicates that these two should be taken together, not separated as the recapitalization of “Though” in the AV indicates. The pair contrasts his mission and his apparent failure.

Consider first the mission: “to bring Jacob again to him,” which is also reflected in his failure to see “Israel ... gathered.” It seems strange that the Servant who is called “Israel” has as his mission to bring Israel back to the Lord. The nation cannot bring the nation back to the Lord. This paradox is integral to the hourglass. The nation as a whole has gone astray, so the Lord calls one specific Israelite to represent the nation and bring the rest back to the Lord.

Second, note the apparent failure in his mission. This contrast recapitulates 4a, the Servant’s sense that he has labored in vain and for nought. His mission was to restore the sinful nation, and yet at the time he speaks, this has not yet happened.⁷

yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. --Finally, the Servant recapitulates v. 4b. His focus is not on the outcome of his work, but on his relation to his master.

The point of the recapitulation is to emphasize the Servant’s sense of discouragement, and his trust in the Lord, which sets up perfectly the Lord’s following words of encouragement.

Before we go on to consider those words, let’s note two ways in which the Servant in vv. 4-5 is distinct from the nation as a whole.

1. In previous references to the nation as the Servant, it is blind and deaf to God’s revelation (42:19), sinful and in need of forgiveness (44:22 “I have blotted out ... thy transgressions”). Here, the Servant is laboring faithfully in spite of discouragement.
2. The mission of the Servant in previous passages is to bear witness to the Lord, something that the nation does even when it sins and receives the Lord’s public judgment. Here, the Servant’s task is to restore the nation, something that makes no sense if the Servant is identical with the nation.

6-12, Lord to Servant: Comfort

After this summary, the Servant now returns to the Lord’s speech, which he began to introduce in v. 5. The Lord makes three statements, punctuated by “he said” or “thus saith the Lord.” Each of these encourages the Servant in his mission. The first two are much shorter than the third, and in fact the third goes back over the ground covered in the first two, in chiasmic order (chart).

5 On continuation of an infinitive with a finite verb, see Gesenius §114.r.

6 *Athnax*’s clause is next divided by two *Zaqefs*, one on the first וְ and the second on אֵלַי. When a disjunctive is repeated without an intervening stronger disjunctive, the first indicates the stronger pause (Yeivin §198), so the major disjunction is after “his servant.” We should be cautious; the accentuation would have been inserted from the same tradition that recorded the following *Qere* וְ, which clearly favors a strong parallelism between Jacob and Israel. But even retaining the *Ketiv* אֵלַי, “Jacob” and “Israel” are parallel, though in a contrastive sense.

7 Virtually all modern translations follow the *Qere* that makes this bicolon completely parallel, “to bring Jacob ... and gather Israel.” The word order (with וְ before the verb) makes this clumsy, but the strongest argument against it is the realization that the Servant is recapitulating vv. 1-4 point by point as he prepares to cite the Lord’s words of encouragement to him.

6, The Servant will Deliver Israel and the Gentiles

The first encouragement is that in spite of the Servant's bleak assessment of his success with Israel, he will ultimately succeed in that task, and in another, far greater one.

6 And he said,--This is an external inclusion with 5a, "saith the Lord," after the parenthetical recap of vv. 1-4.

It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles⁸, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth⁹.--The Servant has two missions, both mentioned in the Servant's words in earlier verses:

- His mission regarding Israel recalls v. 5.
- His mission regarding the Gentiles recalls his call to the isles and peoples in v. 1.

The Lord begins his encouragement by assuring him of both missions.

Note that they are distinct: he is to restore Israel, and **also** to lighten the Gentiles. The Gentiles have not replaced Israel in God's purpose. The Servant's mission is not fulfilled just by saving a Gentile church that takes the place of Israel. It includes the restoration of God's ancient people and in addition the salvation of the Gentiles.

The restoration of Israel is presented as his fundamental task, and one that by itself is so simple ("a light thing")¹⁰ that he needs something else to do. In fact, throughout the last two thousand years, Gentiles have been much more responsive to the gospel than have the Jews. The "light thing" has yet to be accomplished, but according to the Lord's promise to his Servant, it will be. The Servant, conscious that he represents Israel and that "Israel [is] not gathered," laments that his labor is in vain. To encourage him, the Lord says, "Don't worry about that. That's actually a very simple thing to do. In fact, I'm going to make you successful in something far greater."

This promise of ultimate success in his mission is the first encouragement that the Lord offers his servant. Before turning to the second, let's pause to consider the NT use of this passage. When the Jews in Antioch rejected Paul's preaching, he said to them,

Act 13:46-47 Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so hath the Lord commanded us, *saying*, **I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.**

Paul takes this verse as descriptive of his own mission (chart). His adaptation of it is made possible by a small detail in the LXX. The MT says of the Servant, "that thou mayest be my salvation." The LXX translates this, "that thou mayest be **for** salvation." Only the Lord Jesus could actually be God's

8 Luke 2:32

9 Acts 13:47

10 For the rhetoric, see 1Ki 16:31, "And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him."

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salvation, but his servants, for example Paul, could promote that salvation.

We saw something parallel in Isa 42, in another prophecy of the Servant's ministry to the Gentiles:

Isa 42:6-7 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; 7 To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

When Paul recounts his encounter with Christ to Agrippa, he reports the Lord's charge to him in these very words (chart):

Act 26:16-18 I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; 17 Delivering thee from the people, and *from* the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, 18 To open their eyes, *and* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Here, as in Isa 42, we are reminded of our Lord's words to his disciples,

Joh 20:21 as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you.

The Servant hourglass, having necked down to the person of the Lord Jesus, now expands back out to include his body, the church.¹¹

7, The Servant will be Despised, yet Revered

The second encouragement is that the attitude of contempt that the Servant has experienced will be reversed. The first focused on his **people**; the second, on his **person**.

7 Thus saith the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers,--The Servant's complaint has not mentioned the attitude in which others hold him, but simply the futility of his mission. The Lord now draws our attention to the human rejection that has accompanied his labors. He has been the object of deep hatred and visceral rejection.

The syntax of the first two descriptions is obscure, but the words that are used are clear.

- "him whom man despiseth" is something like "a despicable thing of soul," that from which the soul shrinks back in disgust.
- "him whom the nation abhorreth" is something like "an object of abomination to the nation."

This rejection is clear in the gospel history. The hatred of the Jews for our Lord, or of pagans for the apostles, is no superficial disagreement, no polite difference of opinion. The Servant of the Lord confronts people with their own wickedness, and if they do not repent, they focus their disgust on the

¹¹ Isaiah's image may contribute to Paul's description of himself as δουλός ἡσσοῦ, "a servant of [the Lord] Jesus." The two Servant Songs in which the LXX translates עבד as δουλός rather than the more common παῖς are those that Paul applies to himself in Acts. However, this case would be stronger if in his references to himself as δουλός (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Tit 1:1) Paul had described his master as κυριός rather than simply by name.

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one who has brought their sin to their attention.

As we remember the hourglass, we should be prepared for this level of rejection by those around us. In spite of our courteous, gentle ministry, we can expect deep, emotional opposition. Paul experienced this reaction from those to whom he ministered:

1Co 4:13 Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, *and are* the offscouring of all things unto this day.

They treated him the same way they treated his master, as garbage, sewage, scum. We can expect no better.

Joh 15:18-19 If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before *it hated* you. 19 If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship--This attitude will be reversed. The highest ranked members of society will humble themselves before the Servant.

Again, what is true of the messianic Servant will be true of us who form his body.

2Ti 2:11-12 *It is* a faithful saying: For if we be dead with *him*, we shall also live with *him*: 12 If we suffer, we shall also reign with *him*:

Rev 20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he ~~shall choose~~ has chosen thee--The last verb is imperfect with *waw* relative, and there's no reason not to translate it as a past tense. The Lord who chose the Servant will not abandon him. Whatever suffering he may allow his Servant to bear, he will ultimately vindicate him.

The main idea of this word of encouragement is summarized by Paul in Phil 2,

Phi 2:5-11 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things* under the earth; 11 And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Again, as members of his body, we enjoy the promise of the same faithful deliverance, 2 Thes 1:4-10.

8-12, The Servant will Be Saved, and Save

The first two words of encouragement are:

- The Servant's apparently failed mission will succeed after all (v. 6). God will save the Servant's *people*.
- The personal rejection that he has received will be turned to reverence (v. 7). God will deliver the Servant's *person*.

Now the third, much longer word repeats the first two, in chiastic order.

8a, The Lord Saves the Servant's Person

8 Thus saith the LORD,

In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation יְשׁוּעָה have I helped thee¹²: and I will preserve thee,--Who is being heard, and what are they saying?

In the context, the cry is the Servant's lament of v. 4, and the response is God's promise to deliver him. This element thus picks up the reassurance of v. 7.

This alignment becomes clearer when we hear in the words "acceptable time" an echo of David's Ps 69, the only other place in the OT that this phrase appears, along with a reference to God's salvation:

Psa 69:13 (MT 14) But as for me, my prayer *is* unto thee, O LORD, **in an acceptable time**: O God, in the multitude of thy mercy hear me, in the truth of thy salvation (יִשׁוּעָה, but v. 30 has יִשׁוּעָה).

Compare the general flow of the Psalm with our passage.

- As in Isa 49:7, David describes himself as the object of abuse and scorn:
 - Psa 69:7 for thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath covered my face.
 - Psa 69:9 the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.
 - Psa 69:12 They that sit in the gate speak against me; and I *was* the song of the drunkards.
 - Psa 69:19 Thou hast known my reproach, and my shame, and my dishonour:
- As in 49:8a, the Lord hears the cry of his Servant:
 - Psa 69:33 For the LORD heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners.
- As in 49:8b, the Lord's deliverance extends beyond the Servant to his people, and the land:
 - Psa 69:32-36 The humble shall see *this*, *and* be glad: and your heart shall live that seek God.
 - 33 For the LORD heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners.
 - 35 For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah: that they may dwell there, and have it in possession.
 - 36 The seed also of his servants shall inherit it: and they that love his name shall dwell

¹² 2 Cor 6:2

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therein.

The parallel is not surprising. Before we get to Isaiah, God does sometimes call people “my servant.” He applies this title once each to Abraham and Caleb, four times to Job, and six times to Moses, but David receives the title 18 times, more than all the others put together. From this Psalm of David’s lament and trust in the Lord, Isaiah draws this image of the restoration of the abused Servant.¹³ And the NT follows his lead, in citing Ps 69 four times of the Lord’s history:

- 69:9 For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up (John 2:17 and Rom 15:3)
- 69:22-23 Let their table become a snare before them: and *that which should have been* for their welfare, *let it become* a trap. 23 Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. (Rom 11:9-10)
- 69:25 Let their habitation be desolate; *and* let none dwell in their tents. (Acts 1:20; the last part of Acts 1:20 comes from Ps 109:8)

In view of the Psalm, the “acceptable time” is first of all the time when the Lord shows his favor on his rejected Servant. But this salvation is not limited to the Servant. It spills over to the humble and those that seek God (v. 32), the poor and prisoners (v. 33), the seed ... of his servants ... and they that love his name (v. 36). It is truly a “day of salvation.”

Paul quotes this verse in 2 Cor 6:2, in formulating the invitation to salvation that believers offer the unbelievers:

2Co 6:1-2 We then, *as* workers together *with him*, beseech [people], “Don’t you receive the grace of God in vain. 2 (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation.)

I’d always understood the “thee” to be the ones being invited, as though Paul were saying, “This is the day that the Lord is open to receive your petition for salvation.” But in Isaiah’s context, “thee” is the servant, an individual, while Paul views his invitation going out to a group (“Don’t **you** receive the grace of God in vain”). The point of the quotation rather seems to be that the day in which the Servant comes is a time when God will accept people and save them. Paul recognizes that the servant has come, concludes that the day of salvation is here, and so aggressively reaches out to unbelievers.

Let’s pursue the parallel further. In Isaiah, the “day of salvation” is first of all the day of the Servant’s salvation from his humiliation. His deliverance is what brings deliverance to his people. In the light of the NT revelation, we can understand this more fully: he died under the burden of our sin. By itself, his death does not save us. It only emphasizes the power of our sin. It is his resurrection from the dead that proves that the price has been paid and the power of sin has been broken. Thus Paul writes,

Rom 4:25 Who was delivered for [δία + accusative, “because of”] our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

His death is the result of our sin. His resurrection is the result of our justification. His day of salvation is ours as well.

13 Within Isaiah, the title is applied once each to Isaiah (20:3), Eliakim (22:20), and David (37:35).

8b-12, The Lord Saves the Servant's People

Now the focus shifts from the Servant's Person to his People. In v. 6, the Lord promised to deliver both Israel and the Gentiles. Here he mentions both groups again, repeating phrases used earlier in Isaiah.

and give thee for a covenant of the people,--Here, the AV has the singular "people" correct. This phrase recalls 42:6,

42:6 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

When we studied this passage, we saw that NT readers understood "the people" (singular) as Israel. This is Isaiah's promise of the New Covenant with Israel. The Servant is called "a covenant" because he is its ratifying sacrifice. Recall the idiom for establishing a covenant, "to cut a covenant," referring to the slaughter of the covenant animal.

to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages;--By the subordination constraint, these two infinitive clauses modify the previous finite verb "I will ... give thee," not the minimally specific "covenant."

They describe the purpose for which the Lord establishes the new covenant. It includes the physical restoration of the earth. The restoration has not yet taken place, and indicates that God's promise of the new covenant is not yet completely fulfilled.

9 That thou mayest say¹⁴ to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that *are* in darkness, Shew yourselves.--He continues his reference to ch. 42 with echoes of v. 7,

42:7 To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures *shall be* in all high places.--The disjunctive clause (prepositional phrase precedes the verb) marks a break; the Lord now appears to be speaking to a broader audience than just the Servant, for in v. 10 he refers to the Servant in the third person.

The point of this bicolon is to reinforce the physical restoration that will take place. "High places" is not the usual term for a pagan sanctuary (הַמְצֻדָּה), but a barren place, such as a rocky eminence with no trees or vegetation. A "way" is a road, again usually devoid of vegetation, a point our Lord made when he described even the side of the road (παρα την οδον) as a place where seeds cannot take root, but are eaten up by the birds (Matt 13:4 and parallels). Yet when the world is restored to its edenic state, even the roadbeds and the mountain crags will provide food.

10 They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them:--In the midst of such plenty, no one will want.

for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them.--Who is the "he" here?

Could it be the Lord? That would require a shift of speaker to Isaiah, now speaking about the Lord. That is not unprecedented; cf. 42:18-20. But then we would expect him to speak directly to the

14 In English, this looks like an increase in specificity (as one would expect under the ordering constraint), but in fact it is a third infinitive clause.

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captives: “he that hath mercy on you shall lead you.” The Lord has been speaking since v. 8, and speaks again in v. 11, so it is most natural to assume that he is speaking here. In that case, the pronoun cannot refer to him.

Most likely, it is the Servant. With the disjunctive clause in the middle of v. 9 (“they shall feed”), the Lord turns from speaking directly *to* the Servant, and now addresses a broader audience *about* the Servant and his ministry to his people.

There are three verbs here (the participle “he that hath mercy,” and two finite verbs “lead” and “guide”). Each merits our attention.

he that hath mercy on them.--We should note two things about showing mercy.

1. It is distinctively a divine prerogative. God is subject of this verb 32x; people only seven times. Two of these are as the direct result of God’s compassion (1 Kings 8:50; Jer 42:12), and four are statements that an invading army will *not* show mercy. This observation is paradoxical: “he that hath mercy on them” seems to be a clear reference to God, yet we have seen that the pronoun most likely refers to the Servant. The Servant is distinct from God, and yet carries out divine actions. We saw this paradox already in 48:16. It becomes even stronger after the exile, in Zechariah 2:8,9; 4:8,9, and comes into full focus in the NT, whose writers take passages from Isaiah and elsewhere that clearly refer to the Lord God and apply them directly to the Lord Jesus.
2. It is selective. In Isaiah, God is the subject of this verb only four times before 49:10. Two of these are promises of deliverance to Judah:

14:1 For **the LORD will have mercy on Jacob**, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob.

30:18 And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, **that he may have mercy upon you**: for the LORD *is* a God of judgment: blessed *are* all they that wait for him.

But twice, he states that he will *not* have mercy, on societies that dishonor him:

Ephraim: 9:17 Therefore the Lord shall have no joy in their young men, **neither shall have mercy on their fatherless and widows**: for every one *is* an hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh folly. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand *is* stretched out still.

“The defenced city,” man’s power: 27:11 When the boughs thereof are withered, they shall be broken off: the women come, *and* set them on fire: for it *is* a people of no understanding: therefore **he that made them will not have mercy on them**, and he that formed them will shew them no favour.

It is customary to think of God as warm and friendly, a God of love and mercy. He is indeed a God of wonderful love and mercy, to those whom he chooses to love and on whom he has mercy. But he is under no obligation to have mercy on all, and in fact the Bible teaches that he is selective. The very first instance of the verb חָמַד “have mercy” is

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Exod 33:19 And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

he ... shall lead them ... by the springs of water shall he guide them.--These verbs describe the Servant as a Shepherd.

“Lead” נהג is distinctively used of driving a flock of animals. In the only other text with this exact form of the verb, Asaph wrote of God’s actions during the Exodus,

Psa 78:52 [He] made his own people to go forth like sheep, and **guided** them in the wilderness like a flock.

The final clause is a close paraphrase of Ps 23:2, and uses the same verb נהל,

Psa 23:2 he **leadeth** me beside the still waters.

Both verses talk about the provision of water, but there is an interesting twist. The Psalm refers to “still waters,” standing water. A well-known article that I read years ago quotes a Basque shepherd’s explanation of the Psalm:

Every shepherd knows that sheep will not drink gurgling water. There are many small springs high in the hills of the Holy Land, whose waters run down the valleys only to evaporate in the desert sun. Although the sheep need the water, they will not drink from these fast-flowing streams. The shepherd must find a place where rocks or erosion have made a little pool, or fashion with his hands a pocket sufficient to hold a bucketful.¹⁵

David as a shepherd accurately reflects what real sheep need. Isaiah wants to emphasize the abundance of the provision, and so transforms the “still waters” into “springs of water.”

We noted that the title “Servant” draws our attention to David, whom God often calls “my Servant.” David is also remembered as the Shepherd-king. Ps 78 ends,

Psa 78:70-72 He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds:
71 From following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance.
72 So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands.

So the future Servant of the Lord will be a Shepherd to his people, caring for them on God’s behalf as a Shepherd does for his master’s sheep. Ezekiel no doubt has Isaiah’s combination of figures in mind when he predicts,

Eze 34:23 And I will set up one **shepherd** over them, and he shall feed them, even **my servant David**; he shall feed them, and he shall be their **shepherd**.

And of course, these themes come together in our Lord’s description of himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10.

11 And I will make¹⁶ all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted.--A repeated

15 <http://mfarnworth.com/miscellaneousreadings/The%20Basque%20Shepherd%20and%20the%20Shepherd%20Psalm.htmv>

16 *Waw*-relative, so this continues the previous verse; the reference is still to the return of the Jews.

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theme in Isaiah is that the Lord will prepare a highway to allow his people to return from their exile to Jerusalem.

11:16 And there shall be an **highway** for the remnant of his people, which shall be left, from Assyria; like as it was to Israel in the day that he came up out of the land of Egypt.

35:8-10 And an **highway** shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

43:19 Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a **way** in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.

So the picture that we have is of the Servant leading his people back to the land, while the Lord flattens the mountains and fills in the valleys to smooth their way before them.

12 Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim.--The “behold” marks a break. Now he sees an even larger company coming from the ends of the earth, the Gentiles whom the Servant will save, according to 6b.

“The land of Sinim” has long been a puzzle. To fill out the merism, it must contrast with “north” and “west,” thus refer either to the south or the east.

Some modern translation (e.g., ESV) emend the text to recover “Syene,” an ancient Egyptian location near modern Aswan, site of the great dam on the Nile. But as the text stands, the most likely reference is the Qin (phonetically “shin”) state of China, one of the major warring states that emerged in the ninth century BC and later (221 BC) gained control as the Qin dynasty. Thus in this verse the Lord uses China to represent the most distant lands of the Gentiles, coming under the Servant’s redemption and rule.

13 Doxology

In response to the promises of vv. 6-12, a third party (probably Isaiah) calls on all creation to rejoice. Compare the very similar doxology in 44:23, also at the end of verses describing deliverance associated with the Servant (vv. 21-22) (chart).

Isa 44:23 Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done *it*: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.

13 Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains:--There are two ways in which we can understand this call to the inanimate creation to join in praise.

We might take it as an instance of metonymy, in which the name of a place stands for those who live there. This would work fine for heavens and earth, but is harder to understand for the mountains.

More likely, the reference is to the effect of God’s redemption on the whole creation. We know that the physical creation suffers the effects of man’s sin:

Rom 8:19-22 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. 20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him

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who hath subjected *the same*, in hope 21 that the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted (pl).--We have seen that there are two categories of divine provision in vv. 6-12: the Lord’s restoration of his people, both Jew and Gentile (6, 8b-12), and his comfort to his Servant who has been despised by all (vv. 7, 8a). Both of these are now offered as bases for this praise: God has comforted his people, and he promises to have mercy on his afflicted.

The word “his afflicted” is in the plural. One might question the relation of this term to the previous context if we insist on understanding the “Servant” as only a single person, the Messiah. But the hourglass icon reminds us that the individual Servant is a representative for the past and present Servant, the people of God. The church continues to suffer for Christ. Paul saw his sufferings as an extension of those of Christ:

Col 1:24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:

So 23b is an entirely appropriate summary of the promises of vv. 6-12.

Notes

Servant Vocabulary in the OT

	παις	δουλος
עבד	332	306
נער נערה	27	

So παις is (barely) more dominant as a translation of עבד, but since it can also serve for another family of Hebrew words, δουλος is more dedicated.

Which words appear as translations of עבד in which Servant poems? Asterisks mark the classic four.

	παις	δουλος
42:1-9 *	8,9	
42:18-43:7	19	19
43:22-44:5	1,2	
44:21-23	21 (2x)	
48:14-16		
49:1-13 *	6	3,5,7 (of rulers)

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50:4-9 *	10	
52:13-53:12 *	13	11 (δουλευω)

Παῖς is more common, and lies behind several references to our Lord in Acts (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). But it is notable that the two songs that use δουλος to describe the servant are the same ones that Paul applies to himself in Acts!

Ptc plus Finite Verb

Other examples of the construction in 49:10, מְרַחֵם יְנַהֵגם

Gen 4:14 כָּל־מִצְאֵי יְהִרְגֵנִי

Pro 8:17 וְיִשְׁחָרֵי יִמְצְאֵנִי

Isa 61:9 כָּל־רְאִיֵּהֶם יִבְרָאוּם

Isa 62:9a מְאֹסֶפֶיךָ יֵאכְלֶהוּ

Isa 62:9b וּמִקְבָּצֶיךָ יִשְׁתַּהוּ

Zec 11:5 קְנִיֶהוּ יְהִרְגֵנוּ

The function of the ptc as subject to the following verb, both with coreferential pronominal suffixes, seems standard, and without exception.

Compare also related constructions, e.g.,

Isa 27:11 עַל־כֵּן לֹא־יִרְחֲמֵנוּ עֲשֵׂהוּ וַיִּצְרוּ לֹא יִחַנְּנוּ: