A Dialogic Reimagining of a Servant’s Suffering: Understanding Second Isaiah’s Servant of Yahweh as a Polyphonic Hero

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_______________________________

David Wyn Williams
ABSTRACT

A definitive identification of the Servant figure of Second Isaiah is notoriously difficult, as attested by centuries of conjecture and debate. The interpretive obstacles are profuse: the Servant is addressed as Israel-Jacob, but then spoken of in terms that are not consistent with the nation’s experience; in some texts he seems to represent a community, while in others he speaks as an individual; he seems to suffer extreme hardship and persecution, but then is said to experience new life; some of his experiences appear to be historical, while others are best described as idealistic.

But a primary reason the Servant is so difficult to pin down is rarely considered, and that is that there exists no objective image of the Servant anywhere in Second Isaiah. As a literary character he is constituted entirely by dialogue; that is, by discourse addressed to him or directly concerning him, spoken by him, and spoken about him by others in the form of a confession. His actions are never described, and his person is never defined. Scholars have referred to this as his “fluid” nature, but have lacked the methodological tools for a fuller study of this literary curiosity.

The ideas of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin speak to this type of characterisation. His “polyphonic hero” is a fictional character who is constituted by dialogue, and who embodies a unique point of view of the world. This thesis develops a reading strategy based on Bakhtin’s theories. It reimagines the internal discourse of the Servant in order to comprehend him according to the dialogue by which he knows himself. In the process it discovers that there is only one Servant, Israel-Jacob, whose self-knowledge as the faithful Servant of Yahweh calls empirical Israel to faith in a time of national distress.
## CONTENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### SECTION I BACKGROUND AND METHOD

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 2. A HISTORY OF THE SERVANT’S INTERPRETATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. The Servant in the pre-Christian era</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1. The Servant in late OT texts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2. The Servant in deuto-cannonical OT texts</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. The Servant in the NT</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1. The Servant in the Gospels and Acts</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2. The Servant in the NT epistles</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. The Servant in the Church Fathers</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4. The Servant in Jewish literature</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5. The Servant in modern scholarship</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1. Pre-Duhm</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2. Duhm to Mowinckel, 1892-1921</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.3. Mowinckel to North, 1921-1956</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4. From North to the Present, 1956 - 2007</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.1. Collective interpretations</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.2. Individual interpretations</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.4.3. Fluid interpretations</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6. Conclusions</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 3. A NEW LITERARY APPROACH TO AN OLD INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subsection</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1. The problem of the Servant’s constitution</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Bakhtin and biblical criticism</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3. Bakhtin’s thought</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1. Polyphony and dialogism</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2. The polyphonic hero</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3. Double-voicing</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4. Defining the task</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5. Defining the Servant discourse</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1. Isaiah 41:8-16</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2. Isaiah 42:1-9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.3. Isaiah 42:18-43:7</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.4. Isaiah 43:8-44:8</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.5. Isaiah 44:21-22 (23)</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SECTION II  EXEGESIS

4. YAHWEH’S DISCOURSE TO THE SERVANT IN ISA 40-48

4.1. Introduction

4.2. Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 41:8-16

4.2.1. “I am Israel, Jacob” (v. 8ab)

4.2.2. “I am the Servant, chosen by Yahweh” (v. 8ab)

4.2.3. “I am the offspring of Abraham” (v. 8c)

4.2.4. “I am afraid, but I am encouraged not to be” (vv. 10, 11, 12, 13cd, 14a)

4.2.5. “I am a worm, but I am told I will prevail” (vv. 14a, 15-16b)

4.3. Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 42:1-9

4.3.1. “I am chosen, delighted in, and upheld by Yahweh” (vv. 1ab, 6b)

4.3.2. “Yahweh’s spirit is upon me” (v. 1c)

4.3.3. “I am publicly commissioned for a specific task” (v. 1d, 3c, 4b, 6c-7c)

4.3.3.1. Justice to the nations

4.3.3.2. A covenant to the people

4.3.4. Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 42:18-43:7

4.4.1. “I am the Servant of Yahweh, yet I am blind and deaf” (42:18-20)

4.4.2. “My exile is Yahweh’s judgment, not his failure” (42:22-25)

4.4.3. “Yet I belong to Yahweh, and am loved” (43:1, 4)

4.4.4. “Therefore I am redeemed” (43:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)

4.5. Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 43:8-44:8

4.5.1. “Though I am blind and deaf, I am a witness” (43:8, 9, 10, 11-13, 15, 18; 44:7-8)

4.5.2. “I am guilty, but given a pardon” (43:22-28)

4.5.3. “I long for the past, but have been given a future” (43:18-19, 28; 44:2-5)

4.5.4. “I am and will become the Servant, kinsman of Yahweh” (43:14, 21; 44:1, 2)

4.6. Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 44:21-22 (23)

4.6.1. “I cannot be forgotten by the one who formed me” (v. 21)

4.6.2. “I am forgiven by the one who formed me, who has made possible my return” (v. 22)
4.7. **Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 44:24-45:7**

4.7.1. “I am the beneficiary of the actions of Yahweh’s ‘anointed’, his heathen ‘shepherd’” (44:28; 45:1, 4)  

4.7.2. “I have a prophetic role as a messenger of Yahweh” (44:26-28)

4.8. **Who am I?—The Servant in Isa 48:20-21**

4.8.1. “To be the Servant I must now act as the Servant.”

4.9. Conclusions

5. **THE SERVANT’S RESPONSE AND A CONFESSION, IN ISA 49-53**

5.1. Introduction

5.2. The response of the Servant in Second Isaiah—

The first discourse, Isa 49:1-12 (13)

5.2.1. The Servant speaks—The Servant in Isa 49:1-6

5.2.1.1. The Servant speaks to the nations, vv. 1-2

5.2.1.2. The Servant recounts a dialogue with Yahweh, vv. 3-4

5.2.1.3. The Servant double-voices Yahweh’s new command, vv. 5-6

5.2.2. Yahweh responds—the Servant in Isa 49:7-12

5.2.2.1. “I am despised, but I will provoke the nations’ honour” v. 7

5.2.2.2. “I have been kept by Yahweh as a covenant promise of the nations’ redemption” vv. 8-12

5.3. The response of the Servant in Second Isaiah—

The second discourse, Isa 50:4-11

5.3.1. The Servant speaks—The Servant in Isa 50:4-9

5.3.1.1. The Servant’s openness to Yahweh’s discourse, vv. 4-5

5.3.1.2. The Servant’s suffering, vv. 6-7

5.3.1.3. The Servant’s vindication, vv. 8-9

5.4. The significance of the Servant in Second Isaiah—

The final discourse, Isa 52:13-53:12

5.4.1. Yahweh speaks concerning the Servant

5.4.1.1. The Servant’s triumph, 52:13-15

5.4.2. The nations speak concerning the Servant

5.4.2.1. Yahweh’s purpose embodied in the Servant, 53:1, 10

5.4.2.2. Contempt for the Servant and his unjust treatment, 53:2-3, 7-9

5.4.2.3. The significance of the Servant’s suffering, 53:4-6

5.4.3. Yahweh concludes the Servant discourse

5.4.3.1. The Servant’s exaltation, 53:11-12

5.5. Conclusions
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