

Exegetical Notes on Isaiah 53:10-12

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The reading from the Old Testament which is appointed to the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost in Series B of Lutheran Worship consists in the final three verses of Isaiah 53. (The exegesis of these verses below is, in answer to several enquiries, in no way designed to promote the use in the main service of the week of the three-year series provided in Lutheran Worship nor of any other modern selections from the gospels and epistles in such a context. This exegete, on the contrary, would continue to urge, on various grounds, fidelity to the pericopal tradition inherited from the ancient church by the church of the reformation and modified only slightly by the Blessed Reformer of the Church, if one is speaking specifically of the gospels and epistles to be read in the main (Eucharistic) service of the week. No comparable series of readings, on the other hand, from the Old Testament was either handed down from the ancient church or bestowed on us by the Blessed Reformer; nor, indeed, is there such a program of readings from the New Testament to be used in all the possible additional offices of any given week. In such cases, therefore, even such a traditionalist as this exegete is able, with consistency, to make use of any pericope drawn from the region of Holy Scripture desired.)

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

The historical and literary observations which follow assume the auctorial integrity of the Book of Isaiah which this exegete has defended elsewhere (especially in *An Introduction to the Book of Isaiah*). Isaiah ben-Amoz began his lengthy prophetic ministry of some six decades already in 739 B.C. in the final year of the reign of Uzziah as King of Judah. He then uttered the various prophecies contained in the first main unit of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 1-35 as we have come to call them since medieval times) on various occasions in the years leading up to 701 B.C. In the course of these years Isaiah prophesied again and again the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians which finally occurred in 701 B.C. in the midst of the reign of Hezekiah -- as recounted in the "historical bridge" constituting chapters 36-39 of his magnum opus. Isaiah then proceeded to compose in the course of the ensuing two decades the tightly integrated third unit of his book consisting in the chapters which we now enumerate as 40-66. Isaiah had, indeed, evidently finished these chapters by the time that King Hezekiah died in 686 B.C. and subsequently published the final edition of his book as a whole circa 680 B.C., shortly before his martyrdom in the bloody persecution of the true faith sponsored by King Manasseh.

An additional presupposition in the exegesis here is the elaborate nature of the triadic structure which characterizes the whole third unit of Isaiah (chapters 40-66), as, again, has been delineated in detail elsewhere (*ibid.*). The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah constitutes the climax of the sixth of its seven distinct cantos which provide, each of them in its own individual way, the rationale of the thesis of Isaiah as a whole, namely, that the Lord is the only reasonable object of faith.

Canto 6, in particular, of Isaiah (which embraces the chapters which we now enumerate as 49 through 57), argues that the Lord is the only reasonable object of faith because, in addition to all the points previously presented, the Lord provides the world with a Saviour in the person of His Sinless Servant. This provision of salvation was to come, predicted Isaiah, in the personal

ministry of the Messiah (1.) on the basis of His divine call (chapters 49-51), (2.) on the basis of His sinless suffering (chapters 52-54), and (3.) on the basis of His divine gospel (chapters 55-57). In regard, then, to the suffering of the Sinless Servant, chapters 52-54 speak in considerable detail of its redemptive significance (52: 1-12), its substitutionary significance (52:13-53:17), and its propitiatory significance (54).

Chapters 52:13-53:12 constitute the Fourth Servant-Song of Isaiah. The First Servant-Song appears, already in Canto 5 of Isaiah, in chapter 42 (verses 1-9), wherein God the Father introduces the Messiah as His Divine Servant. The Second Servant-Song in chapter 49 and the Third Servant-Song in chapter 50 both issue, in consequence, from the mouth of the Messiah Himself. The Fourth Servant-Song reflects, finally, the awe of Isaiah himself, as the inspired representative of the church, in beholding the ministry of the Messiah -- before concluding, as the songs began, with the authentication of God the Father Himself. Notwithstanding the many theories of modern critical scholars, there can be no reasonable question of the messianic identity of the Servant of the Lord speaking or described in the Servant-Songs of Isaiah. Others, whether individuals or Israel or the church, may, to be sure, be called the servant of the Lord, but the things which are predicated of the subject of the Servant-Songs can be no other than the Messiah who is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Such, certainly, was His own understanding (Luke 22:37) as well as that of His inspired disciples (Acts 8:35).

The three main sections of the Fourth Servant-Song describe the substitutionary significance of the Servant's suffering as having (1.) its basis in the Substitute Himself (52:13-53:3), (2.) its essence in His service as the substitute of all sinners (53: 4-9), and (3.) its issue in the complete satisfaction of God the Father and of the Messiah Himself (53: 10-12). The second strophe is divided from the first by the strong asseverative 'akhen (verse 4: "surely" [BDB, 38b]), while the third strophe opens with the Divine Name used emphatically at the beginning of verse 10.

This final strophe of Isaiah 53 falls into two subsections which are clearly distinguished at least on the basis of a change in speakers. For the first of these parts (verse 10) continues with the prophetic words of Isaiah himself in the same way as all the preceding verses of the song (beginning with chapter 52:13). In verses 11 and 12, on the other hand, Isaiah is quoting God the Father in the same way as he does in the First Servant-Song (42: 1-9). In 53:10, specifically, Isaiah connects the third strophe of the Fourth Servant-Song logically with the previous stanza (verses 4-9) and introduces the speaker of the final two verses by emphatically beginning the strophe with the Divine Name and by using the same name again in the final clause of the verse.

A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS

10. Yea, the LORD shall take pleasure in the crushing of Him whom He will have made weak: of His soul will make a guilt-offering, He will see a seed; He will lengthen days; Yea, the pleasure of the LORD will prosper by His hand.

The initial "yea" in the translation above represents a waw prefixed to a noun beginning a new clause and, indeed, in this case a new strophe. The waw, although always in such a connection grammatically disjunctive in some fashion, is here used specifically with emphatic force to introduce a clause which summarizes and explains the sinless sufferings of the Servant of the

Lord depicted in the preceding two stanzas and which thereby also provides the basis of the results of these sufferings which are depicted in the remaining lines of this verse and, indeed, in the two following verses (a similar use of the waw being listed as IV.C.6 in CHEL).

In general, to be sure, translations of the verse assume here an adversative use of the waw as "yet" or the like. The point, however, that it was the Lord Himself who was responsible for the suffering of the Messiah in the most ultimate and grievous way has already been made in the preceding stanza and is only being reiterated here. An adversative waw, indeed, runs contrary here to the prophecy in the preceding verse of the burial of the Suffering Servant with the rich (53:9), which intimates already the logical transition from divine rejection of the Messiah to divine satisfaction which is now clarified in verses 10-12. It is, in other words, precisely because God would have poured out on the Messiah all the divine wrath aroused by human sin that He would then reward His sinless suffering with His resurrection and the justification of human sinners.

The pointing of the waw before the tetragrammeton is exceptional (as is explained in CHEL, IV.A.3.c.).

The qal perfect of *chptz* has been translated above as a prophetic perfect, in which the certainty of the phenomenon predicted by divine inspiration is emphasized by the aspect of the verb which signifies completeness (II.B.1.A.1.b.(2.) in CHEL). This form, then, emerges as "shall take pleasure in" (as opposed to the "will" which corresponds in English to the ordinary future use of the imperfect). The idea of the first clause of verse 10a is not that God takes pleasure in the process of crushing the Messiah, but that He takes pleasure in the accomplished action. The reasons why He takes such pleasure in the action are then specified in the clauses which follow as being the necessary results of the Messiah's self-sacrifice, namely, the regeneration and eternal salvation of sinners.

The hiphil perfect, then, of *chlh* needs, contextually, to be understood as a future perfect ("will have made weak"). The qal of the verb has the basic meaning of "be or become weak or sick" and the hiphil possesses its usual causative significance. To make someone weak, however, is something much less severe than crushing him, although making him weak is, indeed, a necessary step along the way to crushing him. In terms of the Messiah, specifically, God made Him weak, according to His human nature, from the very beginning of His state of humiliation, a full thirty-three years or so before actually crushing Him in the very depths of His humiliation -- when He completely abandoned Him in the intermediate hours of His crucifixion. The idea of the first quarter, therefore, of verse 10 is that it is in the end God the Father Himself who crushed the Messiah whom He who had from the time of His conception made a weakling in comparison to the man of omnipotence which He was always capable of being and would indeed become in due time. Both weakening and crushing were done, of course, with the complete concurrence of the Messiah in the will of God the Father, both as God the Son from eternity and even as man in the state of humiliation (as is stressed when the following line speaks of the Messiah's own soul making itself a guilt-offering). In the translation above the object of the preceding infinitive is treated as the assumed object as well of the following future perfect in a way which in English requires the use of a relative pronoun ("whom" in "whom He will have made weak").

The subject of the succeeding clause is naphsho ("His soul") since this noun, like its qal imperfect predicate, is a feminine singular form. The same imperfect form, to be sure, could be construed as a second masculine singular so as to produce the rendition in the Authorized Version: "Thou shalt make" (as also elsewhere). Changing the addressee, however, from the people of God to God Himself introduces an unnecessary complication into the Fourth Servant-Song which is unparalleled in any of the preceding songs. The subject naphsho is reserved with dramatic effectiveness to the end of the clause in the original text. The rationale of emphasizing the spiritual self-sacrifice of the Messiah within the circumference of His passion as a whole is discussed sufficiently below in connection with the appearance of naphsho again as the second word in the succeeding verse (53:11).

The basic meaning of the conjunction 'im is "if" despite its rendition as "when" in the Authorized Version and elsewhere (BDB, 49b-50b). (Brown-Driver- Briggs, to be sure, acknowledges cases in which 'im is "nearly" equivalent to "when" but then connects this usage with the perfect, referring to but one arguable connection with the imperfect, in Numbers 36:4 [BDB, 50a-b]). There is, to be sure, no uncertainty as whether the Messiah's soul will make a sacrifice of itself. The preceding two stanzas of the Fourth Servant-Song have already foretold His self-sacrifice as assured, and the Lord Himself reassures us of the same in the succeeding two verses (10-11). The Messiah Himself, indeed, has already pledged Himself to this all-consuming end with unflinching zeal in the Third Servant-Song (50: 5-7). The rationale of 'im, however, at this juncture is the logical, rather than merely chronological, relationship between the self- sacrifice of the Messiah and the satisfaction of God manifested in the resurrection of the Messiah and the eternal salvation of His people.

A guilt-offering or trespass-offering required not only the blood of a sacrificial victim but also compensation exceeding any indebtedness to the Lord by an extra fifth (Leviticus 5: 15-16). The application of this term to the self-sacrifice of the Messiah emphasizes the superabundance of His atoning merits and pains. He suffered more than enough to satisfy the wrath of God aroused by all the sins of all sinners in all of human history.

The clause of 53:10 containing 'asham is cited twice in Article XXIV of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession in describing Christ Jesus as the all- sufficing sacrifice to God with regard to the sins of all men (23 and 55). On the first occasion, indeed, the Hebrew word itself is invoked: "Isaiah interprets the law to mean that the death of Christ is a real satisfaction or expiation for our sins ... The word he uses here ('asham) means a victim sacrificed for transgression. In the Old Testament this meant that a victim was to come to reconcile God and make satisfaction for our sins, so that men might know that God does not want our righteousness but the merits of another (namely, of Christ) to reconcile him to us" (BC, 253). The second occasion seems to tie in the justification of which verse 11 speaks: "In the Old Testament as in the New, the saints had to be justified by faith in the promise of the forgiveness of sins given for Christ's sake. Since the beginning of the world, all the saints have had to believe that Christ would be the offering and satisfaction for sin, as" Isaiah 53 "teaches" (BC, 259).

The prophecy that the Messiah would "see a seed" following His self- sacrifice promises both His own resurrection from death and His regeneration of spiritual children through the creation of faith in His all-atoning suffering unto death. The parallel prediction that He would "lengthen

days" applies, of course, in the first instance to His own resurrection from death, but no pronominal suffix restricts the "days" mentioned to His own life despite the usual assumption of translators and commentators alike. The Messiah proceeds on basis of His self-sacrifice and His own resurrection to dispense eternal life as well to His spiritual progeny.

The final clause of verse 10 begins, again, as the verse began, with a waw prefixed to a noun and utilized with emphatic force. There is, indeed, in the original text a beautiful balance, enhanced by the same use of the initial waw, between the two words beginning the verse and the two words beginning its final clause. For in the first case the Divine Name is the subject of the verb chptz, while in the second case a noun derived from chptz (and with identical consonants) is modified by the Divine Name in a construct chain. The idea of the clause is to state the general principle which is enunciated in more specific terms by the intermediate clauses of verse 10.

11. From the travail of His soul He will see -- He will be satisfied. By the knowledge of Him, the Righteous One, My Servant, will declare righteous the aforesaid many, even as their guiltiness this One will bear.

The speaker, as noted above, changes here from Isaiah, as the inspired spokesman of the church, to God the Father Himself setting His seal of acceptance on the atoning self-sacrifice of His Sinless Servant. The Messiah Himself would look upon His spiritual travail, once complete, and find satisfaction in its accomplishing its purpose, which is to say the satisfaction of the wrath of God aroused by human sin. The Messiah suffered, of course, excruciating pains of the body in the course of His passion, but the most horrible of His torments consisted in "the travail of His soul" as He endured the very essence of hell, which is to say rejection by God, during His intermediate hours on the cross. Even while still on the cross, therefore, and still in grievous physical pain, but now emerging uncompromised from His spiritual torments, He could express the satisfaction to be heard in the final two words from the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30) and "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 22:46).

The third clause of this verse is quoted in the original Latin of Article IV of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, in defense of justification through faith, in this form: "Notitia eius iustificabit multos" (101). The following comments are then subjoined: "But what is the knowledge of Christ unless to know the benefits of Christ, the promises which by the Gospel He has scattered broadcast in the world? And to know these benefits is properly and truly to believe in Christ, to believe that that which God has promised for Christ's sake He will certainly fulfil" (101 [CT, 151]).

The definite pointing of the prepositional prefixes to rabbim here and in the succeeding verse serves the same purpose as the definite article itself in its most common use, which is to say referring back to something already mentioned in the previous context ("the aforesaid many"). The reference here can only be to the spiritual "seed" of the Messiah which constitutes His church. The word rabbim, to be sure, is sometimes equivalent to "all" in the Old Testament; and, indeed, this usage carries over as a Hebraism or Semitism into the Greek of the New Testament. Thus, when our Lord describes Himself as having come into the world "to give His life as a ransom for many" (in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45), He is speaking of all human beings. The

rationale behind this usage is the absence of any adjective distinctly meaning "all" in Hebrew. The noun kol, to be sure, means "whole" and is commonly used in the construct to indicate "the whole of" something or "all of" whatever follows. This usage fails, however, to convey the idea of many individual entities within a given whole. The prophets, therefore, may employ rabbim to mean "all" when desiring to emphasize the multiplicity of the individuals involved. Such a usage is, indeed, sometimes necessitated by the context (such as a parallel use of kol) or the analogy of faith. Here, however, in verses 11 and 12 of Isaiah 53, the reference is, not to all men, but specifically to those who are accounted righteous as individuals through the creation of faith within them in the vicarious self-sacrifice of the Messiah. Here, in other words, the Lord is speaking, not of the justification of mankind in general, but rather of its application to individual men through faith.

12. Therefore I shall divide to Him among the aforesaid many; Yea, among mighty ones He will divide spoil, In return for this, that He will have poured out His soul unto the aforesaid death; For among violators He will have been numbered; Yea, this One will have borne sin of many; Even as for the aforesaid violators He will intercede.

The lakhen ("therefore") beginning the verse indicates that the ongoing benefits of the Messiah to sinners proceed, by logical necessity, specifically and exclusively from His vicarious work on behalf of these sinners. For His atoning work in the place of His spiritual seed has just been asserted in the clause preceding lakhen, "their guiltiness this One will bear" (53:11). The same logical basis of His benefits is reiterated in the intermediate clauses of the verse before us, which begin with tachath 'asher ("in return for this, that") and the waws which are used with explanatory and then emphatic force (and so rendered in the translation above as "for" and "yea" respectively).

The messianic blessings themselves are described figuratively in the first two clauses of the verse as the "spoil" won by the Messiah (with His sweat and blood) from all the enemies of His people, including, above all, the uncompromising wrath of God Himself. God the Father apportions this spoil to the Messiah as He stands in the midst of His spiritual progeny ("the aforesaid many") so as to allow Him, in turn, to distribute the plundered goods to all of them, who now become "mighty ones" as the spiritual sons of the victorious God-Man.

The blessings thus distributed by the Messiah to His people would, of course, include gifts and offices apportioned only to some of them and some gifts apportioned in various degrees. The blessings of greatest importance, however, such as the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation, are bestowed in superabundance on all His sons. One of these central benefits to all His people is given special prominence in the final clause of the Fourth Servant-Song, the mediatorial office of the Messiah. In this office the Sinless Servant whose one-time sacrifice of Himself in the place of sinners has satisfied the wrath of God provoked by sin now continually intercedes with God, on this very basis, on behalf of all His sons through faith.

The fourth clause of verse 12 is cited in Mark 15:28 of the Textus Receptus (and the Majority Text): "And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors'" (following the Authorized Version except in omitting the definite article before "transgressors"). Our Lord Himself, certainly, appeals to the same clause as a direct and

exclusive reference to Himself in verse 37 of Luke 22: "For I say unto you that this that is written must yet be fulfilled in Me: 'And He was reckoned among transgressors.' For the things concerning Me have a fulfillment" (following the Authorized Version except in translating teleo and telos as "fulfilled" and "fulfillment" instead of as "accomplished" and "end" and in omitting the definite article before "transgressors").