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# The Rich Monotheism of Isaiah as Christological Resource

Dean O. Wenthe

The canonical corpus of the prophet Isaiah is remarkable for many reasons. One of the most notable aspects of this prophetic witness is its unqualified critique of any alternative claim to divine status. What makes this claim so expansive is that it is embedded in the larger Torah narrative that has the entire world as its landscape. Isaiah, as well as the entire Old Testament, stands as an unequivocal challenge to any hint of implied or explicit pluralism. The pluralism of the twenty-first century makes Isaiah's message particularly applicable and poignant. This study will demonstrate that it was the wider prophetic narrative of Isaiah that was foundational for early confessions of Christ's identity and work, not only isolated prophecies that are explicitly cited in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

## I. The One God of Isaiah

Isaiah stands out in the canonical collection as the voice with rigorous and timeless clarity on the uniqueness of the one God of Israel. In a series of rhetorical questions, the prophet distinguishes and delineates the character of Yahweh as qualitatively different from any other claimant. In chapter 40, the question is repeatedly posed in a manner that requires the answer, "No one . . . absolutely no one." The beauty of Isaiah's own words—his elegant and precisely framed rhetoric—cannot be surpassed. He proclaimed:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the Lord, or instructed Him as his counselor? (Isa 40:12-13)

To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare Him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent study of the use of Isaiah within the New Testament, see Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken, eds., *Isaiah in the New Testament* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2005).

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such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. (Isa 40:18-20)

In chapter 44, the prophet brackets his critique of every idol with majestic claims for the true God's character and actions toward his people. Isaiah provides the following creedal description of God:

This is what the Lord says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no god. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let him foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one." (Isa 44:6-8)

In this passage, God's character as creator, controller of history, and covenant initiator is exhibited as distinctive and exclusive. The people, if their eyes perceive rightly, are witnesses to these truths embedded in the personal agency of the true God.

This confession frames one of the most incisive and extensive critiques of idolatry in any literature. The prophet uses several literary devices—from declaratory statements, to rhetorical questions, to satire. It is worthy of a fresh reading:

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms

himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire." From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god." They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?" (Isa 44:9-20)

The other bookend for this inclusion is a striking contrast to the emptiness and futility of idolatry. Isaiah invites his audience to remember:

Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. Sing for joy, O heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel. This is what the Lord says—Your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself. (Isa 44:21-24)

Here is commentary that expounds the basic creedal statement: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3).

Not only does the rich Torah tapestry provide Isaiah with an exposition of God's creative role, it also exhibits how the nations are utterly at his disposal to move about as he wishes. So, this chapter concludes with the specific prophecy of Cyrus as the instrument that God would call upon to restore his people to Zion, to Jerusalem, to city, and to temple:

[I am the Lord] . . . who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be built," and of their ruins, "I will restore them," who says to the watery deep, "Be dry, and I will dry up your streams," who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please"; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid." (Isa 44:26-28)

This text is a definitive articulation of the solitary nature of the Godhead. There is not only no competition—there is no entity that inhabits the same

category. Here the Torah story is expounded in greater fullness. Moses, contrary to the fashionable view in some circles that he was at best a henotheist, was a monotheist. M. W. Chavalas rightly states:

Nowhere does the Pentateuch imply that the 'gods' have fundamentally the same nature as Yahweh. Thus Moses could have penned a statement such as Exodus 15:11 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?' and still have been a true monotheist. The prohibition of worship of other gods and of divine images in Israel appears to be unique in the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup>

The inherited critical orthodoxy that such strict monotheism could not have existed in the second millennium BC cannot survive cross-examination. The eminent Egyptologist Kenneth A. Kitchen has recently written: "That a monotheistic belief might be found as early as the fourteenth/thirteenth centuries is no problem whatsoever. Akhenaten of Egypt instituted precisely such a religion during circa 1350-1340, promoting worship of the sun god as Aten to the exclusion of all other deities in Egypt."<sup>3</sup>

Against such an inclusive claim, therefore, it is noteworthy and striking that Isaiah's corpus describes this solitary God not as an undifferentiated monad, but as a solitary God whose character is rich and multifaceted. In these sixty-six chapters the character of God takes on dimensions of personality and community that are nonetheless one. This dense portrait of the God who stands utterly alone and without peer is the very heart of God's revelation. It is at the same time mysterious and beautiful. It requires a certain humility to be read rightly; no single attribute and action can be weighted at the expense of the others. One is placed in the position of simply receiving and beholding the wonder of such an exclusive and simultaneously profound God.

In such a context, Isaiah's portrait of God provides content for a truly textual Christology. Or, perhaps a more appropriate analogy would view the prophet as weaving a rich tapestry that displays the contours of God's work in such a way that the work of God, the presence of the God's Spirit, and the face of Christ can all be distinguished.

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<sup>2</sup> M. W. Chavalas, "Moses," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 576.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 330-331. For a sustained critique of the "no monotheism until the exile dogma," see W. H. C. Propp, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31 (1999/2000): 537-575.

## II. Reading Christology from Isaiah

The abiding critique that Christians, following the “mistaken” lead of the evangelists and other New Testament writers, are simply reading these contours back into the texts must now be cross-examined. As an example, consider the Qumran texts. These texts, like the New Testament apostles, expound Isaiah as a resource for future deliverance and a future deliverer. For example, the pesher on Isaiah (4QpIsa) understands Isaiah 11:1-5 to speak of a Davidic Messiah. John Collins summarizes his study of this text: “The pesher clearly envisages a role for the Davidic messiah in the final battle against the Kittim.”<sup>4</sup> More broadly, James VanderKam and Peter Flint have recently written: “Returning to our survey of messianism in the scrolls, as several of the passages we have surveyed indicate, the covenanters expected a war in the future and that the Davidic Messiah would lead the forces of good to victory and execute the leader of the armies of evil.”<sup>5</sup>

There is, however, a more decisive point to make about the propriety of viewing Isaiah as a rich tapestry where the face of Christ is clearly and rightly displayed. In Luke 24, the resurrected Lord expounds for the Emmaus disciples and for the apostles all the things concerning himself:

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45)

Thus, the Old Testament is the Lord’s catechetical choice in teaching the disciples about himself, even after the resurrection. Walter Moberly keenly observes about these passages: “This risen Jesus offers no new visions from heaven or mysteries from beyond the grave but instead focuses on the

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<sup>4</sup> John Joseph Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 57.

<sup>5</sup> James C. VanderKam and Peter W. Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 272. For an interesting collection of essays, see also *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

patient exposition of Israel's Scripture. The crucial truth lies there, not in some hidden heavenly revelation."<sup>6</sup> Thus the apostolic writers draw on dominical instruction for their exposition. R. T. France has aptly captured the pivotal place of Jesus in providing the apostles' their hermeneutical lens: "The school in which the writers of the early church learned to use the Old Testament was that of Jesus."<sup>7</sup>

Over against the Jesus' Seminar's fanciful interpretation of a personality created by their hypothetical Q-source and combined with the second-century *Gospel of Thomas*, sober New Testament exegetes have recognized the historical Jesus as the source of the apostolic vision and construal of texts like Isaiah. The cautious, but clear, common-sense language of the Cambridge scholar C. F. D. Moule is appropriate:

A more satisfactory approach, perhaps, is to rely on the total impression gained, cumulatively, by putting side by side the various portraits that are presented by the traditions of Jesus in his various activities: teaching, healing, disputing, training his disciples, and so forth. Without attempting any more than a rough-and-ready sifting, leading to the rejection of only the most obviously late accretions in each category, the general effect of these several more or less impressionistic portraits is to convey a total conception of a personality striking, original, baffling, yet illuminating. And it may be argued that it is difficult to account for this except by postulating an actual person of such a character.<sup>8</sup>

The initial point is the integration and coherence of Isaiah's tapestry. While proof-texting has its utility, it has robbed many a reader of pleasure and theological fulfillment. Put rather simply, Isaiah's corpus is not a clothesline on which he has hung a series of discrete Messianic prophecies. Just as removing all the blue threads from a tapestry does not reflect how that color is used in the whole pattern, so to isolate several texts is to present their claims partially and inadequately. No, Isaiah's program of restoration is a beautifully woven cloth that requires the reader to keep in view the whole pattern.

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<sup>6</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>7</sup> R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 225.

<sup>8</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 156.

### III. The Messiah and the Messianic Age in Isaiah

Thus, the pattern of Isaiah's tapestry expounds the coming Christ and his deliverance, and this pattern deserves a fresh consideration. It entails the whole of the sixty-six chapters, though it is only possible to place a portion of it here in the foreground. Having mapped this pattern, it will then be helpful to turn to how Jesus and the apostles cite passages that by their very nature assume and expound the larger message of the prophet.

The portion of Isaiah's tapestry considered here is that of the Messiah and the Messianic age. Consider this pattern in these texts and textual summaries:

#### *The Messiah*

- 4:2 "In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel."
- 7:14 "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."
- 9:6, 7 "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this."
- 11:1, 2 "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."
- 42:1-4 God upholds his servant and bestows his Spirit upon him.
- 49:1-13 The servant is the "ideal" Israel who reaches out and gathers in faithful Israel.
- 50:4-9 The servant will do God's will faithfully.
- 52:13-53:12 The servant will vicariously atone for the sins of the people and cause them to be righteous.



*The Messianic Age*

- 2:1-5 The Temple, Zion, and Jerusalem are exalted. God will teach many peoples in a peaceful epoch. The house of Jacob will walk in the light of the Lord.
- 4:3-6 The people will be holy. God will dwell in Mount Zion as he dwelt in the tabernacle. Zion will be a refuge for the faithful.
- 9:1-7 It shall be an epoch of peace, joy, justice, and righteousness.
- 11:1-11 It shall be an epoch of peace, righteousness, and justice. Creation is restored. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.
- 25:1-9 There will be an eschatological banquet on Zion for many. Death will be no more. Tears will be wiped away.
- 35:1-10 The blind will see; the lame will walk; and the deaf will hear. The desert will be watered and a highway will run through it.
- 40:1-8 The glory of the Lord will be revealed to all humanity. God's Torah will give life. An epoch described by wonderfully glad tidings.
- 42:1-7 An epoch of faithfulness and justice will come. The blind will see. Captives will be released. Nations will be included.
- 49:1-13 God's glory will shine and salvation will arrive. The Holy One of Israel is there. There will be no hunger and no thirst. There will be a highway in the desert.
- 50:4-9 The servant will display and do God's will in the face of opposition.
- 52:13-53:12 Righteousness will characterize the people through the agency of the servant.
- 56:1-12 Temple and Sabbath will be restored and available to all.
- 60:1-62:12 Zion will be exalted. God's glory and light will be displayed.
- 65:17-25 A restoration of creation: new heavens, new earth, and peace.
- 66:12-23 It shall be an epoch of peace due to God's comforting presence. God's glory will be displayed.

These two patterns of the Messiah and the Messianic age are woven together with a typology of judgment and destruction for those who have rejected the character and exclusive claim of Yahweh as the only true God. The Torah story provides the motifs, rationales, and vocabulary for both

restoration and judgment. The best commentators from the church fathers to the present have recognized this wonderful coherence and integration of Isaiah's message.<sup>9</sup> A classic Lutheran commentary, in many respects still the best available, is that of August Pieper. He writes:

Isaiah stands on that peak of the development of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament from which he discerns clearly that the Sinaitic pedagogy of the Lord has ended in the complete apostasy of His chosen people, 1:2; 5:2ff., etc., and that any further application of this kind of rearing by the Law is useless, 1:5. There is no longer any possibility of change for the better that might lead to salvation (1:16ff). Only destruction is now in order (1:24 ff.). The house of Jacob has been rejected (2:6ff; 5:6ff., etc.). Therefore a wholly different Royal Child must appear and establish a new kingdom—He who is Wonderful, Counselor, Power, Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, who will prepare and establish His kingdom with a judgment and a righteousness of another kind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For patristic exposition, see Steven A. McKinion, *Isaiah 1-39*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). McKinion summarizes: "The most important theme in the early Christian interpretation of Isaiah is messianic announcement. The prophecy of Isaiah occupied a central position in the early Christian proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah." *Isaiah 1-39*, xx.

<sup>10</sup> August Pieper, *Isaiah II: An Exposition of Isaiah 40-66*, trans. Erwin E. Kowalke (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 31. More recent commentaries that recognize and develop the integrated character of Isaiah's prophetic corpus are: J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), and *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998). A helpful summary of the Messiah's work that incorporates the multiple dimensions of Isaiah's description is that of Gerard van Groningen: "The Messianic message, or better said, Yahweh's revelation concerning the Messiah, contains the following elements. First, the One of whom Isaiah prophesies is the ministering Agent of Yahweh serving in place of the covenant people who have failed to carry out their covenant responsibilities. . . . Second, the ministering Messiah is the Mediator of the covenant. Promised as a covenant seed and Agent he mediates between Yahweh the Husband and Judah the unfaithful bride. In fact, he reconciles them. He restores, renews, enriches, and assures everlasting continuity of this covenantal relationship. Third, the ministering Messiah mediates for the nations as well. He is a substitute witness to them and he becomes the focal point to which they are drawn. Fourth, the ministering Messiah is able to carry out all his duties because he is anointed by Yahweh through the bestowal of the Spirit upon him. Fifth, the messianic concept in its narrower view is proclaimed. The ministering Messiah is a person of royal ancestry, a leader, and commander. In other words, he functions as a royal Shepherd. Sixth, the threefold office

From the patristic period to the present, this holistic interpretation of Isaiah most accurately exhibits the rich Christology within the unity of the one God. More than that, this manner of exegesis has its origin in the Lord and his apostles. They did not quote select texts, as though they were isolated punctiliar promises, but rather these texts served as shorthand for the whole Isaianic program of redemption and restoration. They selected and quoted material with the assumption that the hearer would know the larger plot and schema in which the specific text was embedded. A rough parallel might be the manner in which John 3:16 is sometimes used as a summary of the entire Scriptures. That single text can hardly be understood aright without a significant awareness of what it means in the framework of John's Gospel, and indeed, within the witness of Scripture as a whole.

#### IV. Isaiah in Early Christology

The contours of the apostolic use of Isaiah shall be considered next. In turning to the pages of Matthew's Gospel, what does one find? What is striking is the manner in which Isaiah, featured so prominently by Matthew among the prophets whom he cites, provides pivotal content to his Christology. In Matthew's birth narrative, 1:22-23, Isaiah 7:14 is appealed to: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' which means, 'God with us.'" Matthew is communicating not simply this text, but the whole witness of the so-called "Book of Immanuel," that is, Isaiah 7-12. Another use of this section of Isaiah supports such a suggestion. In Matthew 4, Isaiah 9:1-2 is used to expound on Jesus' movement: "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned'" (Matt 4:13-16).

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included in the messianic concept is proclaimed. As king, priest, and prophet he comes and labors on behalf of the covenant people and the nations. Seventh, the wider view of the messianic concept is described by the work the ministering Mediator performs. He seals the sure mercies promised to David; he functions as Yahweh's arm bringing deliverance and restoration, establishing justice and righteousness, and executing the vengeance of Yahweh as Judge. . . . Eighth, the ministering Messiah assures that Yahweh's eschatological program will become a reality." *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 2:663-664.

Again, there is a fascinating use of Isaiah 53:4 in Matthew 8:16–17: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.’” It is noteworthy that the apostle understands Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 early in his ministry, as he bears the suffering and reverses the brokenness of a fallen creation.<sup>11</sup>

One more Matthean example will show how the apostle has Isaiah’s whole program of redemption and restoration in view. In Matthew 11:1–6 there is a striking usage of Isaiah 35:5–6 and Isaiah 61:1. John the Baptist is in prison and requires proof that Jesus is “he who is to come.” In response, Jesus points to his words and deeds as the fulfillment of these two prophecies: the one a prediction of eschatological blessing (Isaiah 35), and the other a specifically Messianic prediction (Isaiah 61). Isaiah 61:1 is employed in a deliberate statement of Jesus’ status and mission. God’s time of salvation has come, and Jesus is the one anointed to be the bringer of that salvation. As R. T. France accurately states:

Isaiah 61:1–3 describes a figure closely similar to the Servant as depicted in Isaiah 42:1–7: both are endued with the Spirit of Yahweh, open blind eyes, and bring prisoners out of darkness. Both are, in other words, sent and equipped by Yahweh to deliver the oppressed and wretched, and both are characterized by their gentleness. . . . If this is not the Servant, it is a Messianic figure of similar character and status. That it was so regarded in the time of Jesus is indicated by Matthew 11:5, where Jesus’ use of the passage depends on the recognition by John the Baptist that it describes ‘him who is to come’; that Jesus himself so interpreted it we shall see from his use of it.<sup>12</sup>

Turning to the Gospel of Mark, several texts exhibit the foundational role of Isaiah in describing the work of the Messiah. Mark 10:45 reads: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Again, R. T. France aptly describes the clarity of this use of Isaiah 53:

The fact that the allusion occurs almost incidentally, as an illustration of the true nature of greatness, far from indicating that the redemptive role

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<sup>11</sup> For additional comments, see Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 132–133.

of the Servant was not in mind (for it is specifically the redemptive aspects of Isaiah 53 to which Jesus alludes), is in fact evidence of how deeply His assumption of that role had penetrated into Jesus' thinking, so that it emerges even in an incidental illustration. 'It is as if Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to fulfil the task of the *ebed Yahweh*.'" <sup>13</sup>

In Mark's account of the Last Supper we read: "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24; see also Matt 26:28 and Luke 22:20). Although Exodus 24:8 is the background for "the blood of the covenant" language in the words of institution, Isaiah 53 is the probable source for Jesus' atonement language, "poured out for many"; "because he [the servant] *poured out* his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of *many*" (Isa 53:12). As R.T. France states:

His work is to re-establish the broken covenant, but this can be done only by fulfilling the role of the Servant in His vicarious death. To make this point Jesus chooses words from Isaiah 53 which are as deeply imbued as any with the redemptive significance of that death, in that they highlight its vicarious nature. Thus here, if anywhere, we have a deliberate theological explanation by Jesus of the necessity for his death, and it is not only drawn from Isaiah 53, but specifically refers to the vicarious and redemptive suffering which is the central theme of that chapter.<sup>14</sup>

In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, both the beginning of Jesus' ministry and its end are described with pivotal and defining texts from Isaiah. We read at the inception of Jesus ministry:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled upon the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,

<sup>13</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 123.

and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:14-21)

One can hardly imagine a more pregnant moment of interpretation. Here Jesus again refracts his appearance through the lens of the prophetic text in such a way as to say that the whole program of reversal and restoration is now present in him. Consider this comment by I. Howard Marshall: "Above all, the fulfillment of Scripture is to be found in the person of Jesus himself, who has been anointed with the Spirit and appears as the eschatological prophet—a figure who is to be identified with the Messiah and the Servant of Yahweh. It is through his word that forgiveness comes to men."<sup>15</sup>

At the very end of Jesus' life, Luke narrates the following: "He said to them, 'But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. It is written: "And he was numbered with the transgressors"; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment'" (Luke 22:36-37).<sup>16</sup> R. T. France offers a helpful comment:

That Jesus on the eve of his death should quote from Isaiah 53 at all is surely significant, and indicates that he saw his death in the light of that chapter; that he should quote the phrase 'was numbered with the transgressors', far from indicating that vicarious suffering was absent from his mind, shows that he was preoccupied with the fact that he, who least deserved it, was to be punished as a wrong-doer.<sup>17</sup>

## V. Conclusion

As asserted earlier, a holistic interpretation of Isaiah most accurately exhibits the rich Christology of this book within its powerful testimony to the unity of the one God. Even though specific passages are at times quoted or echoed in the New Testament, it is the wider prophetic testimony to redemption and restoration in Isaiah that forms the basis of this usage. In describing how the apostolic writers used Isaiah for

<sup>15</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 178.

<sup>16</sup> I. Howard Marshall significantly notes, "The citation is from Is. 53:12 (LXX: καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνόμοις ἐλογίσθη (cf. 1 Clem. 21:13); Luke's version shows two differences from the LXX (use of μετὰ instead ἐν; omission of the article). These differences bring the quotation nearer to the MT (J. Jermias, TDNT V, 707 n. 404), and suggest that it is drawn from pre-Lucan tradition." *The Gospel of Luke*, 826.

<sup>17</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 115-116.

expressing Christology, Richard Bauckham aptly concludes: "They do so carefully, deliberately, consistently and comprehensively by including Jesus in precisely those characteristics which for Second Temple Judaism distinguished the One God as unique . . . Jesus, the New Testament writers are saying, belongs inherently to *who God is*."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 45; emphasis original.