The Song of the Suffering Servant

G. Herbert Livingston *

There are certain Old Testament passages which have had peculiar and profound impact upon Christians throughout the ages. But no portion of the Old Testament has so pervasively molded the New Testament presentation of Christ as Isaiah 52:13—53:12. Here is the supreme prophetic portrait of the Servant of the Lord in which Philip the deacon, the Gospel writers, and most Christian theologians have recognized the Sufferer on the central cross of Calvary.

Passages in the Bible of great significance invite repeated purviews of their riches and challenge the student to look for treasures both new and old. The Song of the Suffering Servant is no exception, and it is with a hope that a bit different approach may stir the mind to see new facets of the truth that this study is presented.

One of the motivations behind this study has been the observation that in all the essays written about this passage, almost no effort has been made to evaluate the verbs which appear in the Song. Hence, these objectives have been set for this paper: a) to explore the nuances of meaning that the Hebrew verbs may possess, b) to note problems relative to expressing these meanings in an Indo-European language, c) to clarify the ambiguity resident in selection of specific verb tenses for the translation of key verses, d) to suggest options available to translators, and e) to relate those insights to the problem of identifying the Servant.

The procedure in the paper will be, first, to describe briefly the essential nature of Hebrew verb forms in order to provide background for the verb analysis; secondly, to set forth the structure of the Song and in each section to identify the verbs and to describe their functions. In relationship to the verbs, there will be an effort to outline the possibilities of tense available to the translator. In each section also, the basic burden of its message will be summarized. The third step will be to relate the total Song to Jesus Christ.

---

* Professor of Old Testament, Asbury Theological Seminary.

FUNCTIONS OF HEBREW VERB FORMS

The Hebrew verbal system does not have tense and mood at its core. Temporal guidelines must be gained from other factors in Hebrew syntax or in larger literary units. Sometimes the function of a verb in the sentence or in the literary unit will provide clues. Frequently, a translator will be forced to speculate; thus one translator will arrive at a different conclusion than another.

Hebrew verbs, especially in the perfect, imperfect and participial forms, stress qualities and varieties of action or condition. The perfect denotes completed action. This action may be wholly in the past, or in the past but continuing till the present. The perfect may depict a stable condition in the body, mind, emotions, will or in a combination of these aspects of a person's life. The perfect may provide an emphatic sense to an action or a condition; it may specify actions with such definiteness that it will have the force of an imperative. These are the main qualities of the perfect; there are other less common functions.

The Hebrew imperfect has a special interest in motion and thus designates incomplete action or condition. The imperfect depicts possible or contingent action and thus is similar to the subjunctive mood, but it also designates repeated activity, and actions which are developing or desired. When it occurs with a conjunction in a narrative, the imperfect denotes the movement of the story from action to action. The imperfect may connote the general traits of a group or a general truth. There are other less common functions.

The Hebrew participle stands for pure, continuous action and lacks in itself any time indicators, thus it can serve as either a verb or a noun. The verbal action portrayed by a participle tends to be harsh, stark and dramatic.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SONG

The medieval effort to divide the text into chapters was clumsy at this particular point. The beginning of this passage is Isaiah 52:13. Evidently, the shift of address from God to a human source, which takes place at 53:1, misled the man who made this division of chapters.

Isaiah 52:13-15 is an introductory proclamation proceeding from God through his spokesman, and is addressed to whoever would listen. The subject-content moves from a presentation of "my servant" as supreme in verse thirteen, as humiliated in verse fourteen, to the servant as the object of amazement in verse fifteen.

Isaiah 53:1-3 focuses on the Man of Sorrows himself, particularly as

seen through the eyes of those who behold him. Isaiah 53:4-6 presents a verbal portrait of his sufferings in relationship to human sin. Isaiah 53:7-9 depicts his sufferings in relationship to his death and burial. Isaiah 53:10-12 lays bare the purposes of God which give significance to the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of the Servant in terms of the redemption of man.

MAJESTIC YET REPULSIVE—
Isaiah 52:13-15

This section begins with an expletive, "behold," and then an imperfect, *yaskîl,* "act wisely," which may be regarded as designating a present repeated activity or a future activity. Most translators prefer the future tense for an English rendering. The same is true of the next verb, *yārûm,* "exalt," which refers to a general truth about the Servant. Immediately following are two perfects: *nissā',* "lift up,"and *gāvah,* which also means "exalted." Each perfect is parallel to the other and tends to reinforce the verb *yārûm,* pushing the concept to its highest limits. Whatever tense in English is selected for the imperfects would apply to the perfects also.

Verse fourteen has only one verb in the Hebrew, namely, *shāmemû,* "amaze, astonish." Since it denotes an inner attitude, it may indicate a past condition which continues unchanged, a present attitude or a subjunctive mood. The possibilities are "were astonished," "have been astonished," "are astonished," or "should be astonished."

Verse fifteen, like thirteen, begins with two imperfects: *yazzeh* "sprinkle, startle," and *yiqpetsû,* "shut, close" and a series of perfects: *suppar,* "report, tell," *rā'û,* "see," *shāme'û,* "hear," and *hitbōnānû,* "consider, think about." Again the imperfects can represent present repeated actions or a simple future tense in English. Most translators choose the future tense. The phrase *kî 'asher,* "for that which," tells the reader that the four perfects provide a logical cause for the actions of the nations and the kings. The perfects occur in pairs. In each pair the first perfect has a negative which denotes a definite exclusion and the second perfect points to a certainty which may be put in an English present or future tense, thus:

> for that which has never been told them,
>   they see (or, shall see)
> and that which they have never heard,
>   they understand (think about, or shall think about)

The thrust of the introduction is three-fold: First, the divine message is that the person of the Servant would be unusual indeed. He would have

the capacity to manage relationships with others in a successful and sensible manner. He would possess high position and authority. The Servant would be no "run of the mill" man. He would be at the very top, displaying royal traits. Though submerged in the main body of the Song, this theme is persistent in its peek-a-boo appearances.

The second theme is the Servant's humiliation. He would be so physically disfigured that the people would express surprise, after looking at Him. Both his face and body would be seriously deformed. This fact is vividly detailed later in the Song.

The third theme, in verse fifteen, is not so clear cut because of the controversy over the meaning of the verb, *yazzeh.* The time honored English rendering is "so shall he sprinkle many nations." Elsewhere in the Old Testmaent the verb occurs in a context of ritualistic cleansing and does mean "sprinkle." The Greek Septuagint carries the meaning of "marvel," and the RSV has "startle," and S. H. Blank proposes an emendation to *yirgezû,* which means "be aghast".[1] Either "startle" or "be aghast" would seem to produce an excellent parallelism with verse fourteen. But "sprinkle" is by no means impossible. The redemptive import of the verb is an important emphasis of 53:4-9, but the theme of shocked surprise is not so reiterated later in the Song.[2]

To believe that the disfigured Servant would be qualified to engage in an act of cleansing, would seem to be a concept beyond the grasp of those who gazed upon him. Even the most powerful men would be amazed. The Servant humbled and wounded would have a power to act which would be greater than their own royal power. How could suffering and power be paired so effectively? Is it not a truism that a beaten person is also a helpless person?

"MAN OF SORROWS"
Isaiah 53:1-3

The opening verse of this chapter with its two questions, might suggest that the kings of 52:15 had recovered their powers of speech and were giving verbal vent to their amazement. However, the prophets were no strangers to the fact that people were frustrated in the face of the

---

1.   S. H. Blank, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), p. 89.

2.   See "The Manual of Discipline," *The Dead Sea Scriptures* T. H. Gaster, translator (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1946), pp. 50, 53, for this same association of "sprinkle" with redemptive purity, *(IQS etc.).*

magnitude of their message; they saw the inability of mankind to comprehend. Nor was it unusual for a prophet to employ an editorial "we" to express a common sense of bewilderment; the prophets also were overwhelmed.[3] Especially would this be true of a prophet who had a disfigured "Servant" to portray to a skeptical world. So it would seem that these first two questions were utterances of the prophet himself.

Verse one has two rhetorical questions, each containing a Hebrew perfect form; *he'amîn*, "believe", which is an inner condition or state, and *niglātāh*, "reveal", in the passive voice. Both perfects point to a past situation which continues into the present and can include the future. The English tense must indicate this condition; so a past perfect, a present or even a subjunctive are possibilities.[4] The obvious answer to the rhetorical questions is "No one!" So the perfects serve to show that this situation still continues and that all are excluded as participants in believing or receiving the revelation.

An imperfect with a conjunction, *waya'al*, "grow up," mostly found in narrative, stands at the beginning of verse two. Yet this is not narrative. The verses from two on provide the message which is the cause of frustration behind the questions in verse one.

A search through the standard Hebrew grammars and manuals on Hebrew syntax provides little light on this construction with the exception of the work by J. W. Watts.[5] His suggested translation puts the imperfect in an English future tense, but it could be a present tense, though most translations prefer a past tense. There is no compelling reason why the past tense should be employed.

The only other Hebrew verbs in verse two are perfects: *wenir'ehû*, "see", and *wenehmedehû*, "desire", each with a conjunction prefixed and a pronoun suffixed to it. Both are in subordinate clauses and carry a subjunctive connotation, hence the translations: "that we should look at him" and "that we should desire him." (RSV).

There is a series of three Hebrew participles in verse three: *nivzeh* (twice, in passive voice denoting "in a condition of being despised") and *ûkemastēr*, "hide". All of these are timeless in value; so the translator

---

3. None expressed this amazement more forcefully than did Jeremiah (e.g., Jeremiah 4:19-21; 5:3-5, 21-22; 6:10).

4. J. W. Watts, *A Survey of Hebrew Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1964), p. 75.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-111, 126-128.

must interpret the time value of the entire passage in order to select suitable English tenses. The verse ends with a perfect: *hashavnûhû*, "esteem, value," which, since it denotes an inner attitude, has no inherent time indicator. Selection of tense is up to the translator.

Commonly, in the ancient Near East, suffering, impotence and sin were tightly bound together. As far as is known, non-Israelites never related pain with power in a positive manner, and many an Israelite was of a like mind. A reading of some of the Psalms will quickly demonstrate this phenomena.[6] Within such an environment it is not surprising that the average Israelite had great difficulty in understanding the divine message that, redemptively, God can work powerfully in the lives of men and women who go through suffering, persecution and abuse. And the claim that a superior person, a Savior, could redeem mankind through personal suffering was even more incomprehensible. Such an intermixing of the "arm of the Lord," the symbol of power, with a "Man of Sorrows" was not part of their heritage. How could the average man recognize God's redemptive activity? The Redeemer-Servant would not be an obvious figure in society. He would be as vulnerable as a tender plant. He would be, outwardly, as weak as a root in a desert, as plain as a common person, as inconspicuous as an average man. He would not know a normal fulfillment, for he would be one of the unfortunates, one of the dispossessed. He would not be accepted by the masses; sorrow would weigh heavily upon him. Grief would be his companion. He would be outside proper social circles, the recipient of prejudice and bigotry. He would be this sort of person, not because he would actually be a bad person, but because men looked at Him as such a person. Yet, this fact that men would be ignorant of His true character would not lessen his pain; rather, it would intensify his inner agony.

THE SIN-BEARER
Isaiah 53:4-6

A series of three verbal perfects appears in the first part of verse four. They are *nāsā'*, "lift up", and *sevālām*, "carry," which serve as a pair in parallelism, for they are synonyms in this context. The other perfect is *hashavnûhû*, "esteem, value," which designates an inner attitude; hence in itself is timeless. Three other verbal forms in this verse are participles. Two are used as nouns in a genitive relationship to other nouns. These

---

6.   See Psalm 6:1-7; 10:1-2; 13:1-4; 22:1-18; 38:1-14; and others.

depict pure action and are devoid of time values. The other one is simply a verbal noun without time value. The forms are *nāgûa'*, "strike," *mukkeh,* "smite," and *ûme'unneh,* "afflict."

The tense value in English given to these verbs will depend a great deal on whether the translator regards the Servant himself to have lived and suffered prior to the writing of this passage, at the same time as the passage was written, or whether this is an event to come. If completed action in history is depicted by the perfects, then the English past tense is proper. If these perfects are the so-called "prophetic perfect," which the prophets employed plentifully to emphasize the certainty of God fulfilling His purposes in the future, then the English future tense is in order.[7]

Three more participles show up in the fifth verse. They are *meḥōlāl,* "wound," *medukkā',* "bruise," and *mûsar,* "chastise." Each is timeless and expresses the startling aspect of action. The verse ends with an imperfect, *nirpā',* "heal," which can be present, future or a subjunctive.

The next verse, six, has three perfect verbal forms: *tā'înû,* "wander," *pānînû,* "turn aside," and *hifgîa',* "lay on." These can have the sense of past action which continues till the present, or can be a present tense in English.

In this portion of the song, the prophet brings to the surface that which lay hidden behind an outward appearance which offended man. The word "surely" stresses the real work of the Servant. He would not suffer due to personal acts of sin. He would suffer because men are sinners. In the participles mentioned above, the nature of that suffering is vividly set forth. To gain the full force of these participles one should add vocal inflection and gesture, plus imagination. One should use or imagine gestures of pounding, of thrusting, of crushing, of swinging a whip. Visualize the black bruises, the wounds, the crack of bones, the snap of the lash. If one can add to the words themselves the visual symbols of stark action, as this punishment is horribly carried out, then something of the force of these Hebrew participles can be grasped.

The contrast between the unconcerned, carefree human race and the bleeding Servant appointed by God to be man's Redeemer is most striking in verse six. At first glance man does not impress one as worth saving.

THE DEATH OF THE INNOCENT
Isaiah 53:7-9

The first verb of verse seven is a perfect in the passive voice: *niggas,*

---

7.   Consult any standard Hebrew grammar or manual of syntax for this function
     of the Hebrew perfect verb form.

"oppress," or more fully, "in the condition of being oppressed." This latter meaning is highlighted by a participle, passive voice, *na'aneh*, "afflict," which stands in a parallel relationship to the first verb. Whatever tense has been chosen for the perfects in verse four would carry over to these two verbs since there is time continuity between these two sections. Yet the imperfect form, *yiftaḥ*, "open," which closes this parallelism strongly suggests a present or a future tense in the English. Imperfects normally only have a past sense in narratives, unless some time word rules the passage. An obvious time word does not occur in this Song up to this point. The last part of verse seven is a set of similes in parallelism. The verb that comes first is the imperfect form, *yûvāl*, "lead, bring," and the other verb is the perfect form, *ne'elāmāh*, "silent, dumb." The imperfect suggests a present or a future tense; and, since the perfect denotes an inner condition, it can also be present or future. The tense of the first would govern the second. Again the imperfect *yiftaḥ*, "open," closes the parallelism.

A perfect form, luqqah, "take," is the first verb in verse eight, and its tense in English would be governed by that given to the opening perfects of verse four and verse seven. The next two verbs, though, are imperfects. They are *yesôḥeáh*, "consider, lament," and *nigzar*, "cut off." As imperfects, they suggest either present or future tenses for English.

Verse nine has the character of an obituary after the death of the Servant, hence it begins with an imperfect with the form of the conjunction used in narrative literature. Normally this situation requires a past tense in English translation. The imperfect is *wayyitēn*, meaning "gave, provided, or appointed." The other verb is a perfect form, *'asāh*, "done," which denotes an action or condition before the death of the Servant; so, rightly, it should be translated as "had done."

This section of the Song deals with the lamb which was to be slaughtered. In Job, 4:7, Eliphaz flings at Job the overpowering questions: "Whoever perished, being innocent? or Where were the righteous cut off?" Job could not answer these questions. But Isaiah declared to the world that there would be one who, though innocent, perished; one who, though righteous, was cut off. In the Old Testament, the law of retribution declares that he who sins shall die (Ezek. 18:4). Job's friends tried to reverse this law by saying that he who suffers must, by the very nature of the case, be a sinner[9] (Job 20:1-29 *et passim*). They did not realize that the word "suffer" is much broader in scope than the word "sin."

The prophet declared that the Suffering Servant, in his life and death, would suffer, not because of his own sin, but because of the sins of others. He would be the lamb slain as a sin offering. The irony of the

situation would be that those for whom the redemptive act was done would not recognize it as "for them." The One would go to His grave misunderstood and rejected.

THE VINDICATED SERVANT
Isaiah 53:10-12

Typical of each of the sections in chapter fifty-three, the opening verbs are perfects, namely *ḥāfēts,* "please, desire," and *heḥeli,* "make sick, grief striken." Both designate inner conditions, the first a decision of the Lord and the other the agony of the Servant. Consequently, both perfects are timeless. The Lord's decision continues without break, past, present and future. The tense of the second perfect would depend on whether the translator regarded the Servant's grief to be in the past, in the present or in the future. It could be left timeless by translating the phrase, "he (God) has determined to put him to grief."

For the first time in the Song a Hebrew word indicating "time" occurs in the text. One of the functions of the word *'im* is to indicate an indefinite time, mostly future in the sense of possibility. This goes well with the rather long series of imperfects which continue through the rest of verse ten, through verse eleven and the first part of verse twelve. These imperfects ar *tāsîm,* "set, place, prepare," *yir'eh,* "see," *ya'arîk,* "prolong," *yitslāḥ,* "prosper, have success," *yir'eh,* "see," *yisba',* "satisfy," *yatsdîq,* "make righteous," *yisbōl,* "carry, bear," *'ahalleq* "divide," and *yeḥalleq,* "divide." Practically all English translations properly put these in the English future tense.

The three final verb forms are a perfect form *he'erāh,* "pour out," a passive participle, *nimnāh,* "numbered, counted," another perfect *nāsā',* "lift up, bear," and a final imperfect, *yafgia',* "supplicate, intercede."

This group of verbs is initiated by a phrase denoting the reason for all that the series of imperfects had just described. The phrase *taḥat 'asher* can be translated as "because," or more fully, "due to the fact that." This immediately points to the past tense for an English translation. The final imperfect denotes a repeated action which has no necessary stopping point.

The basic theme of this section is that God had made a firm decision, in regard to the Suffering Servant, which gave to everything that happened to him, to everything he did, an overwhelming significance. This has been, is and will ever be God's will; this is the way God has always intended it to be.

In making known the future triumph of the Servant, the prophet grounded his message upon the established intention of God whose purposes would be actualized in the life, the deeds, of the Suffering Servant. The passage makes it clear that God's intention was to offer up this

Servant as a sin offering for the redemption of all mankind. What would happen to the Servant would not be accidental; God had already decided that the life and death of the Servant would be a redemptive event in history. The Servant was the "lamb slain from the foundation of the world." (Rev. 13:8). Within the intention of God the redemptive event would surely come to pass.

But the Servant would not remain slain. It is true that the word "resurrection" does not occur in this song, but it is difficult to read the last part of verse ten and the first part of verse twelve without noting that this slain Servant is very active, very powerful indeed. Power, victory and success are to be his as fruits of the struggle and the agony. Triumph paces its steps back and forth through these sentences.

CONCLUSION

The Ethiopian asked the deacon Philip, "Of whom speaketh the prophet this?" With that question as an opening to the conversation, Philip compared the Servant to Jesus Christ. Not all have been as responsive as the Ethiopian to such preaching. In reference to the corporate interpretation of the 'Servant,' where in all mankind can an individual or a community be found which can measure up to the prophet's portrayal of the Suffering Servant? No ancient person or community can be brought forth which can meet the standard of righteousness set forth in 53:9, "He has done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." But Jesus provided such an example, for he was without sin. Neither could any Old Testament individual or community provide redemption for "us all." But Jesus provided redemption for all mankind. Jesus is the same yesterday. The verbal image in the Song of the Suffering Servant matches the Jesus of Nazareth who died and rose again. And Jesus is the same today.

Turn back to 53:4-6 again and read it in a different way. First transform the pronouns to nouns. Those that refer to the Suffering Servant, replace with the name Jesus. And the plurals, "our," and "we," make very personal by replacing them with "my" and "I" or better, insert your own name. Then read thus:

> Surely, Jesus has borne my griefs,
>   and carried my sorrows;
> Yet, I have esteemed Jesus striken,
>   smitten of God and afflicted;
> But, Jesus was wounded for my transgressions;
>   Jesus was bruised for my iniquities;
>   The chastisement of my peace was upon Jesus;
>   And with Jesus' stripes I am healed.

> I, like a sheep, have gone astray;
> I have turned to my own way.
> But, the Lord has laid on Jesus my iniquity.

Those who have refused to accept Jesus Christ as the true Messiah have refused to accept this correlation. But to the earnest follower of our Lord the relationship between the Suffering Servant and the crucified Jesus is transparent.

The verbal portrait of the Suffering Servant in the song, the gospel presentation of Jesus of Nazareth, and the contemporary Christ, who speaks to our hearts today, fit together. There is no distortion when the three are aligned with each other. There is no mismatch. Rather, the Suffering Servant, Jesus of Nazareth, and the resurrected Christ are the same forever.