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# Paul's Witness to Biblical Monotheism as Isaiah's Servant in Acts

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# PAUL'S WITNESS TO BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM AS ISAIAH'S SERVANT IN ACTS

*William S. Kurz, S.J.*

It is an honor to submit an essay for this Festschrift for Father Frank Matera, who contributes so much to our professional lives as scholar and colleague. Because of his solicitude for elaborating responsible theological approaches to Scripture based on scholarly historical and literary foundations, I dedicate to him these theological investigations into the significance of monotheism in Paul's Gentile mission in Acts. How does the mission of the Servant of God in Isaiah influence the portrayal in Acts of Paul's witness to the one living God and rejection of pagan idolatry and worship?

## INTRODUCTION

The influence of the book of Isaiah on Luke and Acts has been widely discussed and generally admitted.<sup>1</sup> It has also become a consensus that Luke

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1. See esp. Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 367; New York: T&T Clark, 2008); Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the Story of God's People Intertextually* (JSNTSup 282; London: T&T Clark, 2005); David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Septuagintal Midrash in the Speeches of Acts* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002); Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology* (JSNTSup 110; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Darrell Bock, "Scripture and the Realization of God's Promises," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41–62, esp. 56–58; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 11; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), esp. ch. 2, "The Old Testament," 25–53; and ch.

used the Septuagint (LXX) Isaiah rather than pre-Masoretic Hebrew texts. The Greek translations of Luke's time had already applied and modified the theology of Hebrew Isaiah in usually small but sometimes significant ways.<sup>2</sup> It is also important to realize that the Lukan author was not aware that the especially influential section, "Second Isaiah," was a separate writing by a later author. Rather, Luke read the canonical Isaiah as a unified biblical book.<sup>3</sup>

Emphasis on Isaian influence on Luke-Acts does not discount the major effect of other Jewish Scriptures on Lukan narrative and theology. Commonly discussed are the Lukan theme of Jesus as the Deuteronomic "prophet like Moses" (Deut 18:15 in Acts 3:22–23; 7:37), and the messianic foreshadowing of Jesus in the Psalms, interpreted as authored by David and prophesying David's descendant Jesus (Pss 16:8–11; 110:1 in

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6, "Luke-Acts," 111–59; Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles"* (trans. Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery, and Richard Bauckham; SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 224; Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus' Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel* (JSNTSup 94; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); R. E. Clements, "A Light to the Nations: A Central Theme of the Book of Isaiah," in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts* (ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House; JSOTSup 235; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 57–69, esp. 64–68; Robert F. O'Toole, "How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?" *Bib* 81 (2000): 328–46; Thomas S. Moore, "The Lukan Great Commission and the Isaianic Servant," *BSac* 154 (1997): 47–60; idem, "'To the End of the Earth': The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke," *JETS* 40 (1997): 389–99; Steve Moyise, ed., *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North* (JSNTSup 189; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Robert L. Brawley, *Text to Text Pours Forth Speech: Voices of Scripture in Luke-Acts* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); G. K. Beale, "Isaiah VI 9–13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry," *VT* 41 (1991): 257–78.

2. For the LXX see Joseph Ziegler, ed., *Isaias* (vol. 14 of *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum, Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Göttingensis editum*; 3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983). Unless otherwise specified, English translations of the LXX are taken from *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). This translation (hereafter *NETS*) has some unusual literalistic spelling of names, such as Ierusalem.

3. See Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah*, 204. Cf. Mark Walter Koehne, "The Septuagintal Isaian Use of ΝΟΜΟΣ in the Lukan Presentation Narrative" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2010), 163–66.

Acts 2:24–36).<sup>4</sup> In fact, the only biblical book that Luke-Acts appeals to more than Isaiah is the book of Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Many have wondered which specific Scripture passages justify the repeated claims in Luke-Acts that Scripture prophesies that the Messiah must suffer (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). Joshua Jipp argues that the Lukan author found the suffering and exalted Messiah primarily in the psalms and their depiction of King David's sufferings and vindications.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have also discussed echoes from Isaiah's Suffering Servant in the Lukan passion account.<sup>7</sup> Less has been written about how in Acts and in Isaiah as understood during the Second Temple period, the Servant's focus on the nations is an organic development from Israel's promotion of monotheism and denunciation of pagan idolatry.

In this essay I will try to demonstrate how what at times appear to be digressions in Acts have an earnest theological purpose. They illustrate that Paul's servant mission to the Gentiles, from cultivated philosophers in Athens (Acts 17) to rustic "barbarians" at Lystra (Acts 14:8–18), had to combat ingrained cultures of polytheism and idolatry. In Acts, Paul grounded the Christian message to Gentiles in his monotheistic belief in the one living God who is both creator of everything and judge of all humans.

The explicit quotation of Isa 53:7–8 LXX in Acts 8:32–33 corroborates the Lukan application of Isaiah's Servant to Jesus in Acts. Clear allusions to other Isaian Servant passages (for Jesus in Luke 2:32 and Acts 26:23; for Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:47) confirm this Isaianic influence on Luke-Acts. I hope that a closer look at the whole of septuagintal Isaiah may expose additional significant Isaian contexts and background for portraying the ministries of Jesus and of his followers. Already acknowledged Lukan applications of the Isaian Servant of the Lord to Jesus and his followers include being called by God from the womb (e.g., Isa 49:1), servant

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4. See esp. Strauss, *Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*.

5. Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah*, 3.

6. Joshua W. Jipp, "Luke's Scriptural Suffering Messiah: A Search for Precedent, a Search for Identity," *CBQ* 72 (2010): 255–74, esp. 257, where he cites David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 20. Cf. Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah*, 20.

7. Cf. *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (ed. William H. Bellinger Jr. and William R. Farmer; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998); P. B. Decock, "The Understanding of Isaiah 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–33," *Neot* 14 (1981): 111–33.

ministry to Jews and to all nations (49:6), and suffering as part of the Servant's calling (53:7–8).

#### MONOTHEISTIC MISSION TO THE NATIONS OF THE SERVANT IN ISAIAH AND IN ACTS

Less frequently treated is how the Isaian servant outreach to the nations promotes Israel's monotheism and combats pagan idolatry. This is particularly evident in Paul's ministry to Gentiles in later parts of Acts.<sup>8</sup> To contextualize the portrayal of outreach to the nations in Acts, let us trace septuagintal Isaiah's themes of God's relationship not only to his chosen people Israel but to all the nations of the world that he created, and Israel's corresponding role in making God known to these nations.

Although Christians added christological developments to their proclamation of only one living God, they maintained the biblical tradition of God's universal care for all humans and nations he created, and his condemnation of human worship of other gods. Their preaching of biblical monotheism (in Christian form) to Gentiles jarred with their hostile pagan environment and culture of polytheism, magic, and occult public practices. This clash with pagan culture and religion brought intense resistance to Paul's servant testimony to God.<sup>9</sup>

In referring to the LXX of Isaiah, one must be careful not to identify the theology and focus of various sections of the Hebrew book of Isaiah with the linguistic reformulations and theological adaptations of Isaiah as a whole in the LXX. Neither Hebrew nor Greek texts of Isaiah fully accords with the emphases and theological adaptations of Isaiah in Luke and Acts. Questions calling for particular distinctions are the meaning and function of universalism in Isaiah.

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8. In this essay I develop my earlier observations about the Isaian servant mission to the nations in "From the Servant in Isaiah to Jesus and the Apostles in Luke-Acts to Christians Today: Spirit-Filled Witness to the Ends of the Earth," in *Between Experience and Interpretation: Engaging the Writings of the New Testament* (ed. Mary F. Foskett and O. Wesley Allen Jr.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 175–94.

9. Cf. C. Kavin Rowe, "The Book of Acts and the Cultural Explication of the Identity of God," in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 244–66.

Original meanings of Isaiah, especially the prophecies in Isa 40–55 (Second Isaiah) about Israel being and bringing light to the nations, have often been understood in light of their later interpretations, beginning already with the framework imposed by Isa 56–66 (Third Isaiah). Initially, Isa 40–55 was not as universalist about including Gentiles *as Gentiles* within the people of God as the New Testament would later interpret these chapters. Isaiah 40–55 generally presumed that Gentiles would either have to become Jews or be dependent on Jews. The book of Isaiah envisaged all nations coming *to Jerusalem* in a centripetal direction to be taught the law (e.g., Isa 2). Acts, on the contrary, presents believers going out *from Jerusalem* in a centrifugal movement to the ends of the earth to incorporate the Gentiles into the people of God, while letting them remain uncircumcised.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the later sections of Isaiah and Old Testament writings, as they are understood in Luke-Acts and the Pauline Letters, raise new questions about other gods when they insist that the gods of other nations are not gods (e.g., Acts 17:16–31; 1 Cor 8:4–7). There is only the one God worshiped by Israel, who created and will judge the world and all peoples in it. This belief in only one God challenged more primitive Israelite presuppositions about other nations and the reality of their gods (see Hos 8:6).

What the contemporary world calls monotheism seems to have developed gradually in ancient Israel.<sup>11</sup> At least by the time of both Paul and Luke-Acts, the Old Testament was interpreted as presenting the religion of Israel as monotheistic. Paul and Luke (and other Christians) explicitly contrasted Jewish religion to their neighbors' polytheism. Thus they denied that the gods of the Gentiles are genuine gods. Yet at least sometimes they admitted that gods worshiped by pagans had at least some reality, power, and influence on human events. Several Old Testament passages, when translated into Greek, refer to pagan gods as demons, which well before the New Testament had connotations of "evil spirits" (created by God, but not nothing).<sup>12</sup>

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10. Joel Kaminsky and Anne Stewart, "God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40–66," *HTR* 99 (2006): 139–63.

11. See Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

12. Examples include Deut 32:17 LXX, "They sacrificed to demons which were no gods" (RSV; δαμόνιον, "minor divinity," later construed as "demonic spirit"); Ps 95:5 LXX, "For all the gods of the Gentiles are demons [δαμόνια], but the Lord made the

Paul, for example, believed in angelic spirits and their influence on human life, as evidenced by his argument against eating food sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor 10:19–21. There, in question form, he challenges the widespread conviction among the Corinthians that idols to whom meat is sacrificed are “nothing” (v. 19). While admitting that idols and pagan gods are not gods, Paul still insists that they have some reality and power. Thus he counters, “No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:20–21 rsv).

Acts has both these ways of referring to pagan gods. It has some extreme denials that idols or the gods they represented were anything at all (e.g., Acts 17:29: “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man,” rsv). However, Acts also acknowledges the reality of demonic powers involved in magic and in pagan polytheistic beliefs. This is implied in exorcisms of evil spirits (Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:11–16), burning of magic books (Acts 19:17–19), and expulsion of the spirit of divination from the slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:16–19). The pagan spirits are real, but they are only creatures and are easily overcome by the power of God and his messianic servant Jesus.

#### LXX ISAIAH AS CONTEXT FOR LUKE-ACTS

Although most of the Isaian servant influences on Luke-Acts originate in the later chapters of Isaiah (esp. Isa 40–55), some early passages in Isaiah seem to have affected at least the setting and circumstances for describing some events, activities, and sayings of Jesus and the disciples in Luke and Acts. Without alluding, like Matthew, to Isa 7:14 LXX (“the virgin [vs. MT young woman] shall conceive”), Luke equally insists on Mary’s virginity with respect to Jesus’ conception. With Isa 9:6–7, Luke insists that this child is born to the throne of David. In Isa 11 messianic references to the root of Jesse in whom the nations will hope (11:10), as well as the call

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heavens” (my trans.); Bar 4:7 LXX, “For you provoked the one who made you by sacrificing to demons [δαίμονις] and not to God.” Cf. also Isa 65:11 LXX. Cf. Joel Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” in Wagner et al., *Word Leaps the Gap*, 107–31, esp. 120–25.

to declare God's glorious deeds among the nations and in all the earth (12:4–5), seem relevant background for Luke-Acts.

Isaiah 37:16 quotes King Hezekiah's prayer to the Lord in the face of the Assyrian Sennacherib's threats, that "you alone are God of every kingdom of the world; you have made heaven and earth." In Isa 37:20 Hezekiah asks God to save Israel "so that every kingdom of the earth may know that you alone are God."

Isaiah 40 begins strong messages of consolation for Israel in her suffering for her sins after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. His prophecy of the voice in the wilderness who will proclaim the way of the Lord is applied to John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in all four Gospels, and climaxes in the prophecy that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Isa 40:5, quoted in Luke 3:6). Jesus' mission will benefit not only the chosen people but "all flesh."

Isaiah 41:8–10 addresses Israel as "my servant, Iakob, whom I have chosen, the offspring [σπέρμα] of Abraham, whom I have loved." The Lord has chosen as servant and will not forsake the people Israel (v. 9). Isaiah 42 continues to certify that the people Jacob is the Lord's (corporate) servant and Israel his chosen, on whom the Lord put his Spirit to bring forth judgment to the nations. He will not be overcome until he has established judgment on the earth and the nations hope in his name (42:1–4). The vocation of the servant is explicit in 42:6–7: "I have given you as a covenant to a race [εἰς διαθήκην γένους, "race" referring to Israel], as a light to the nations [εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν]."

Although the context has continued to imply that the servant is the nation Israel, the servant who acts as covenant for the race of Israel in verse 6 has to be an individual servant ministering to the nation. As light to the nations, the servant Israel could be either the people Israel or the same individual servant commissioned to be a covenant for Israel. For the nations, the Lord's servant will "open the eyes of the blind," which is conversion imagery. Luke will take servant language that in Isaiah can have either corporate or individual referents and apply it to Jesus (and Paul and other followers of Jesus) as God's servant sent both to the chosen people and to the uncomprehending Gentiles.

Immediately following God's call to his servant in Isa 42:8 LXX, he declares his name as Lord God who will not give his glory "to another, nor my excellence to the graven [γλυπτοῖς, 'carved'] images." Isaiah 42:10–12 goes on to ask believing sailors and island dwellers to glorify God's name "to the end of the earth" (v. 10), to "declare his excellences [ἀρετάς] in the



islands” (v. 12). After promising all the ways that God would bless and help his people, the prophecy complains that the unfaithful people “turned away backward,” when they “trust in the graven images” and “say to the cast images, ‘You are our gods’” (42:17). God’s call to the servant is intimately related to his concern that his name be proclaimed everywhere and that idolatry and false worship by both his people and Gentiles be opposed.

Isaiah 43 then proclaims a gathering of all nations and rulers, before whom God insists that only he was able to predict what has come to pass. He asks God’s people, “Be my witnesses,” as God himself is a witness “and the servant [παῖς] whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe and understand that I am [ἐγὼ εἰμι, the divine name]” (v. 10). Here not only the people are to be witnesses but also God himself and the individual who is called as God’s servant to help the people comprehend God’s divinity.

This servant is to help the people become witnesses that there was no other god before God, nor will there be any after (v. 10). Besides God, “there is none who saves” (v. 11). Regarding these truths about the only true and saving God, God says of the people after they have been instructed by the servant, “You are my witnesses; I too am a witness” (v. 12). God goes on to promise that he will again save his people from Babylon in a new exodus (vv. 13–21).

In Isa 44 the Lord again calls Jacob his servant whom he has chosen and formed from the womb. “I am first ... besides me there is no god” (v. 6). God challenges other gods to duplicate God’s ability to prophesy the future: “Who is like me? ... let them declare to you the things that are coming before they come” (v. 7). To Israel he repeats, “You are witnesses whether there is a god besides me, and they were not formerly” (v. 8). If Israelites are God’s witnesses, those to whom they witness seem logically to be or at least include Gentiles.

Isaiah 44:9–20 then mounts a vigorous polemic against idolatry and idol makers that mockingly describes the fashioning of idols especially from wood from the forest that the Lord had planted and his rain watered. With part of the wood, the artisan warms himself and cooks food. “But the rest they fashioned into gods, and they do obeisance to them. Half of it he burned up in the fire” and roasted and ate meat over it (vv. 15–16). “The rest he made into a graven god and does obeisance to it, and he prays, saying, ‘Rescue me, for you are my god!’” (v. 17). This mocking picture of idolatry in Isaiah is probably a conscious exaggeration and caricature of actual pagan beliefs and practices, but this caricature of idolatry is a

common Old Testament topos or theme that is also taken up in the New Testament, for example, by Paul and in Luke-Acts.<sup>13</sup>

Immediately following this anti-idolatry polemic is another address to Israel as “my servant” (παῖς). God urges Israel not to forget God, and assures him that his previous acts of lawlessness have been blotted out. However, Israel must return to the Lord, who will redeem him (Isa 44:21–22). The prophecy in 44:24–28 refers to God who both redeems Israel and also created the universe. As universal creator, God will undo the pagan practices of ventriloquists and divinations, making foolish the so-called wise practitioners of magic “and confirming the words of his servant” (v. 26). This, in effect, is what God did through Paul when in Jesus’ name he expelled the fortune-telling demon from the slave in Acts 16:18–19.

Isaiah 44 introduces the Persian king Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylon and had Jerusalem rebuilt. It proclaims that God is the one “who tells Cyrus to be wise” and says to Jerusalem, “You shall be built, and I will lay the foundations of my holy house” (v. 28). God has such dominion over even a Gentile ruler because he is the only God and Creator of the universe.

Isaiah 45 describes a servant calling made directly to the pagan Cyrus, whom God by his authority over all nations and peoples has made “my anointed” (χριστός) ruler, whose “right hand I have grasped so that nations will obey before him” (Isa 45:1 LXX). This use of “anointed” for a pagan ruler rather than for a Jewish king (usually a descendant of David) is a startling innovation in this prophecy. God will remove obstacles to Cyrus’ rule and give Cyrus hidden treasures, “so that you may know that I am the Lord God, the God of Israel, who calls your name” (v. 3).

God will call Cyrus for the sake of his servant Jacob and chosen Israel, even though “you did not know me.” To Cyrus God proclaims, “I am the Lord God, and there is no other god besides me, and you did not know me” (v. 5). Through Cyrus, all peoples “from the rising of the sun and from its going down may know that there is no one besides me. I am the Lord God, and there is no other” (v. 6). God proclaims that he has created everything and controls everything: “I am the Lord who does all these things” (v. 7).

This monotheistic prophecy to Cyrus goes on to say that God forms the clay like a potter, hence the clay cannot challenge the potter about what he is making (vv. 9–10). God repeats that he “made the earth and humankind

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13. Cf. Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament,” 107–31, esp. 108–11.

upon it," and he placed and commanded the stars. As creator of everything, he has raised Cyrus in righteousness, and Cyrus shall rebuild God's city "and turn back the captivity of my people, not with ransom or with gifts" but by his military power (v. 13). Nations "will do obeisance to you and pray in you, because God is in you" (v. 14). The Greek is less clear-cut than the Hebrew here about whether the nations perceive Cyrus himself as god or as having God present with him. However, the following verse, Isa 45:15 LXX, clearly refers to God, not Cyrus: "For you are God, and we did not know it, O God of Israel, Savior."

Isaiah 45:20–25 then rebukes Jews who were being thus saved from among the nations, and those who ignorantly lift up wooden graven images or idols "and pray as if to gods that do not save" (v. 20). The identity of this last group is not obvious, for its description could refer both to exiled Jews and to the nations among whom they lived. Thus the exhortation in 45:22, "Turn to me, and you shall be saved, you who are from the end of the earth! I am God and there is no other," could refer (or later be interpreted to refer) to both Diaspora Jews and Gentiles from afar. The prophecy, "to me every knee shall bow and every tongue acknowledge God" (v. 23), sounds like a universalist claim about God, and probably was so interpreted by Christians. However, the last verse directs these particular promises of God especially to Israel: "all the offspring of the sons of Israel shall be glorified in God" (v. 25).

Isaiah 46 then disaffirms the reality of the gods of Babylon and rebukes the people of Israel for heeding the so-called gods of their Babylonian conquerors instead of keeping their focus and hope on the only true and living God, the God of Israel. They should remember that it is God who has always rescued and saved them in their history. Not only can the Babylonian gods not save them, but the prophecy mocks them as gods who are fashioned by goldsmiths and have to be carried because they cannot move. Nor can such gods heed the people who cry out to them for help. The exiled Israelites are to remember God's many former deeds to save them, for he is the only God; he is the only one who prophesies the future and who fulfills his plan of salvation.

Isaiah 47 then prophesies the fall of Babylon, who had exiled Israel. God will deliver the Babylonians to defeat and shame, for they have defiled God's heritage (Israel). Though God had given his people over to the Babylonians, they had no mercy on the Israelites and oppressed them grievously. Babylon will suddenly become like a widow, and her impotent pagan enchantments and witchcraft and astrologers cannot help her. For Babylon there will be no salvation.

Therefore, Isa 48 exhorts the Israelite exiles to leave Babylon and reminds them that his prophecies of liberation have come true (v. 3). God rebukes the Israelite captives because of their stubborn and persistent attribution of their salvation not to God but to idols (v. 5). God reminds the exiles that he is now saving them as he had formerly saved his people (from Egypt). He emphasizes that he, who alone has created heaven and earth, has now worked his will against Babylon (vv. 6–14). He reminds the exiles that he alone is God who has shown them the way to go, but their disobedience has prevented the prosperity with which God wished to bless them (vv. 17–19). Now they are to flee Babylon and proclaim the joy of their deliverance “to the end of the earth,” that the Lord has delivered his slave Jacob and will provide for their thirst from the rock in the desert (as in the exodus). But there is no rejoicing for the impious (vv. 20–22).

Isaiah 49 is frequently cited as especially influential in the structuring of the Luke-Acts narrative.

Just as Isa 61.1–2 provides a concise summary of Jesus' messianic ministry [in the Nazareth pericope in Luke 4], so Isa. 49.6 proves to be equally helpful for Luke in summarizing his narrative concerns. As David Tiede notes, “the allusion to Isa 49:6 [in Lk 2.32] ... might well be regarded as *a thematic statement of Luke's entire narrative: the call of the servant (pais) to restore the diaspora of Israel and to be a light to the Gentiles to the end of the earth.*”<sup>14</sup>

In Isa 49 the servant's announcement of his vocation is surprisingly addressed not to the people Israel but to the islands and the nations. “Hear me, O islands; pay attention, O nations!” (v. 1). From its very first words, this direct address implies that God's call to his servant is projected more ultimately at proclaiming God to all nations, not only to Israel.

The servant's vocation by God even precedes his birth, as did the callings of Jesus and John the Baptist in Luke. “From my mother's womb he called my name” (v. 1). God equipped his servant to be his spokesperson: he “made my mouth like a sharp dagger” (v. 2). He protected him till he was old enough to begin his ministry (“he hid me” and “in his quiver he sheltered me,” v. 2). Compare Jesus' hidden years at Nazareth under his

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14. Quoted from Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah*, 184, who cites with added italics Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*, 31.

parents' authority (Luke 2:51–52), until his manifestation to Israel at the age of “about thirty” (Luke 3:23).

The servant's complaint that his labor has been in vain is answered by God, “who formed me from the womb to be his own slave [δοῦλος], to gather Iakob and Israel to him” (v. 5). Isa 49:6 LXX differs from the Hebrew, which calls the vocation to Israel “too light” or even “trivial” in comparison with being light to the nations (קל). Instead, the LXX says, “It is a great thing [μέγα, the opposite of ‘too light’] for you to be called my servant, so that you may set up the tribes of Iakob and turn back the dispersion of Israel.” The LXX does, however, continue in closer approximation to the Hebrew: “See [an emphatic Greek ἰδοὺ] I have made you a light to the nations, that you may be for salvation to the end of the earth” (v. 6). The LXX drops the negative comparison of the servant's ministry to Israel that is in the Hebrew, and instead characterizes as “great” his outreach to Israel. However, it actually places more emphasis than the Hebrew on the servant's ministry also to the nations by calling special attention (“see,” “behold”) to this additional mission.

Isaiah 49:7–12 LXX continues the motif of the servant's commission both as “a covenant to the nations” and “to establish the land” (of Israel), to call “those in bonds” and in darkness to be returned from exile by God to their land: “Lo, these come from far away, these from the sea, but others from the land of the Persians” (v. 12). God will summon the nations to bring back Israel's sons and daughters and compel them to do obeisance to Israel and to “lick the dust of your feet” (v. 23). The prophecy ends with this promise: “Then all flesh shall perceive that I am the Lord who rescued you” (v. 26).

In the LXX, Isa 50 is in the mouth of the servant: “the instruction of the Lord opens my ears, and I do not disobey nor contradict. I have given my back to scourges and my cheeks to blows” and face to spitting (vv. 4–6; cf. Luke 18:31–33). The servant willingly accepts suffering and humiliation that is occasioned by his preaching. He puts his trust in the Lord's help to keep him from being put to shame (vv. 7–9; cf. Luke 22:42). The servant and those to whom he speaks trust in the Lord, even though the Lord allows sorrow to come upon them (vv. 10–11).

Isaiah 51 LXX further exhorts the people to trust the Lord, who raised and multiplied a great number of descendants from the one man Abraham and his wife, Sarah. God will comfort his people in the most desolate situations. God promises that “a law will go out from me, and my judgment for a light to nations” (v. 4). God's “salvation will go out, and the nations will hope in my arm” (v. 5).

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 has been intensively investigated as the song of the suffering and triumphant servant of the Lord. Acts 8:32–33 explicitly quotes part of this song, Isa 53:7–8, and applies it to Jesus (Acts 8:35). Isaiah 53 LXX goes on to note that the servant had no glory or honor, and he was not esteemed by humans. But he is bearing our sins and is wounded because of our lawless acts, for on him was the punishment or discipline (*παιδεία*) that led to our peace, so that we were healed by his bruises.

Because we, like sheep, all went astray, the Lord handed him over (*παραδίδωμι*) for our sins (Isa 53:1–6). Luke repeats the term “hand over” in several passion prophecies by Jesus (e.g., Luke 9:44; 18:32; 20:20), in reference to Judas handing Jesus over (22:21–22; 23:48), and in prophecies that Jesus’ disciples also will be handed over to persecution (21:12, 16). The Servant accepted this injustice without protest, in silence. His life was taken from this earth. He was put to death because of the lawlessness of God’s people (vv. 7–8). The Greek reference to God giving the wicked for his burial is less clear than the Hebrew reference to the servant having a grave assigned among the wicked. In any case, the reason given is that the servant committed no lawlessness (*ἀνομία*, v. 9; cf. the centurion’s declaration at the cross, “Certainly this man was innocent [*δίκαιος*]!” Luke 23:47 RSV).

The Lord will then vindicate his servant (Isa 53:10–12 LXX), to “cleanse him [*καθαρίσαι*, ‘purify’] from his blow [*πληγῆς*]” (v. 10 LXX). This differs from the Hebrew text, in which the Lord crushes him. Isaiah 53:12 LXX, like the Hebrew, then promises reward for the servant because he bore the sins of many and was handed over for them.

Isaiah 55:3 has a *crux interpretum* in the LXX and its quotation in Acts 13:34: “I will make you an everlasting covenant, the sacred things of David that are sure” (v. 3; Greek τὰ ὅσια Δαυιδ τὰ πιστά, Hebrew “reliable mercies to David”).<sup>15</sup> God’s promises to David will be fulfilled in the servant (in Acts, particularly by the resurrection of the servant Jesus).

God has established David “as a testimony among the nations, a ruler and commander for the nations” (v. 4). “Nations that did not know you shall call upon you, and peoples that do not understand you shall flee to you for refuge, for the sake of your God” (v. 5). This reference to an indi-

15. See Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah*, 110, 124; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 517; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 235.

vidual person who is in the Davidic tradition combines Davidic kingship with the servant's mission. This descendant of David who will be deliverer of nations is readily identified by Christians as the messianic savior, Jesus.

The prophecy in Isa 56 LXX proclaims that God's house (temple) welcomes any person who keeps God's Sabbaths. Neither should the foreigner (*ἀλλογενής*) say that God will separate him from his people, nor should the eunuch say he is a "dry tree" (v. 3) excluded from God's people and the temple. If even a eunuch keeps the Sabbaths, he will be welcome in the temple (as also in Wis 3:14 and Acts 8:34–39). God says to the eunuchs who hold fast his covenant that he will give them in his house (temple) "an esteemed place, better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name" (v. 5).

"And to the aliens who cling to the Lord ... so that they may be his male and female slaves ... I will bring them into my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer" (Isa 56:6–7). Their sacrifices will be accepted on God's altar, "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (v. 7). This prophecy welcomes all nations into God's temple, but in Isaiah it still seems to presuppose that the eunuchs and aliens become Jews subject to Jewish laws like the Sabbath. In Acts, however, the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized as a full member into the community and foreign converts are given equal standing with Israelites from birth, without eunuch or converts being circumcised.

In Isa 57:3–13 there follows a forceful condemnation of God's faithless people who turn to idolatry. They are blamed for calling on idols under trees, slaughtering children in ravines, and sacrificing and pouring out libations to pagan gods. "Shall I not therefore be angry for these things?" (v. 6). God further denounces his people for supposing that if they deserted their Lord they would obtain greater blessings from these foreign gods (v. 8). The people did not stop sinning or turn back to God to plead again for their needs. Although they feared other gods, they forgot their own God; therefore, let the other gods deliver them when they call for help. Those who cling to God, however, shall possess the earth and inherit Mount Zion (vv. 10–13).

Isaiah 61 LXX relates in the first person another calling by God and anointing by God's Spirit to minister to those in darkness and need. In the Lukan Gospel Jesus applies this calling to his own ministry (Luke 4:16–21), so that this Isaiah prophecy structures the individual stories about Jesus' ministry into a coherent narrative. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed [*ἔχρισέν*] me" (v. 1). The one called is

sent “to bring good news to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to summon the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of retribution, to comfort all who mourn” (vv. 1–2). The prophecy goes on to promise that God “will make an everlasting covenant with them.” And “their offspring and their descendants shall be known among the nations” (vv. 8–9), because they are blessed by God. All nations shall know of and admire Israel.

Isaiah 62 LXX portrays God’s light shining forth from Jerusalem for all nations to see. God will make Jerusalem his bride, no longer known as Forsaken (vv. 1–5). God will post sentinels on Jerusalem’s walls who will never cease talking about God. God will forever protect her (vv. 6–9). God says to “lift up a signal [σύσσημον] for the nations” (v. 10). The Lord makes the message heard to the end of the earth that God comes as the Israelites’ savior and calls them a holy people redeemed by him (vv. 11–12). As Acts 26:26 expresses it, God’s salvation of his people is widely known even among the nations, for “this was not done in a corner” (RSV).

Isaiah 65 LXX is another divine complaint against the chosen people. Its vehement denunciations of the Israelites’ pagan sacrifices and idolatry sheds light on the importance of monotheism and indictment of idolatry in the Greek version of Isaiah that influenced the later narratives of Luke-Acts (vv. 1–3a). The divine charge against the idolatry of God’s people includes this accusation, “they sacrifice in the gardens and burn incense on bricks to the demons [δαίμονις, inferior divinity or (evil) spirit], which do not exist” (v. 3b). The Hebrew lacks “to the demons, which do not exist,” but states simply, “sacrificing in gardens and burning incense upon bricks” (Isa 65:3b RSV). By the time of the New Testament and already intimated in Greek Isaiah, the question about the existence of pagan gods was being answered by suggesting that the beings previously referred to as gods were actually demons, spirits created by God who rebelled against God. Therefore, they, like humans, were creatures, not other gods.

Isaiah 65:3b LXX seems somewhat ambivalent about even this mention of demons, as evidenced by its added qualification, “who do not exist.” However, a similar later substitution of “demon” for a god in 65:11 LXX does not mention any doubt about its existence. The Hebrew says, “who set a table for Fortune, and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny” (RSV), in which both Fortune and Destiny are generally understood as gods of Israel’s neighbors. The Greek substitutes, “and prepare a table for the demon [δαίμων, in Hellenism, an inferior divinity; in the NT, an evil spirit], and fill a mixed drink for Fortune [τύχη, ‘fortune, chance’].”



Isaiah 65:4–5 LXX makes further accusations of idolatrous worship and practices: the people sleep in tombs to receive dreams and eat swine flesh and broth from sacrifices. Therefore, God's anger flared against their sins and those of their ancestors, burning incense on mountains and reviling God on hills (v. 6). But for the sake of a faithful minority, God will not destroy the whole people (v. 8; cf. Abraham and God concerning Sodom, Gen 18:23–32). Rather, God will bring the offspring of Jacob and Judah to inherit his holy mountain (Zion) and dwell there. And those who sought God shall have herds and flocks (vv. 9–10). But those who forsake God and “prepare a table for the demon and fill a mixed drink for Fortune,” God will deliver to the slaughter because they did evil in his sight (vv. 11–12).

The book of Isaiah ends with a prophecy spelling out true and false worship of God. Isaiah 66:1–2 LXX is quoted verbatim in the climax of Stephen's speech (Acts 7:49–50). Stephen's speech had pointed out that God had rejected David's request when he asked to build God a house to replace the tent of God's presence in the wilderness. However, Solomon did build God a house (Acts 7:44–47). Stephen comments, “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands” (Acts 7:48). The expression that houses are “made with hands” alludes to prophetic references to idols made with hands (Isa 31:7; Bel 5), and is here applied by Stephen to Solomon's building the temple. As God is not present in idols, neither does he live in houses made by human hands.

Compare Paul's argument to the philosophers of Athens in Acts 17:24–25: “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything” (RSV). Stephen's speech then justifies this critical commentary on Solomon's building the temple by quoting Isa 66:1–2 LXX in Acts 7:49–50: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is the footstool of my feet; what kind of house will you build for me, or what kind will be the place of my rest? For all these things my hands have made.”

Isaiah 66:3–5 LXX goes on to reject several forms of sacrifice and worship, but it adds to the Hebrew a reference to “the lawless” (*ἀνομος*), in order to make the context and point clearer than the more cryptic and disturbing contrasts in the Hebrew. The Hebrew shockingly equates, “He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man, he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog's neck” (Isa 66:3 RSV). The LXX has instead, “But the lawless who sacrifices to me a calf is like one who kills a dog,” providing a reason for the rejection of his sacrifice, because he is lawless and does not

follow God's ways. Likewise those who offer fine flour are like those offering swine's blood. These rejections by God are also explained as due to the people choosing their own ways instead of God's (v. 4).

Isaiah 66:18–21 LXX is a prophecy of God gathering the nations that points to important context for the later ministry and events in Acts. "I am coming to gather all the nations and tongues, and they shall come and see my glory" (v. 18). "And I will leave signs [σημεία] upon them, and from them I will send forth those who are saved to the nations, to Tharsis and Phoud ... and to Greece and to the islands far away—those who have not heard my name nor seen my glory, and they shall declare my glory among the nations" (v. 19).

"They shall bring your kindred [ἀδελφούς] from all the nations as a gift to the Lord ... into the holy city Ierousalem" (Isa 66:20a). They will do this "as [ὡς ἄν] the sons of Israel bring to me their sacrifices with psalms into the house of the Lord" (v. 20b, my trans.). "And I will take for myself some of them as priests and as Levites, said the Lord" (v. 21). Finally, month after month "all flesh shall come before me to do obeisance in Ierousalem, said the Lord" (v. 23).

There is some doubt about whether this refers to Diaspora Jews or Gentiles, but with my translation they can be understood to be Gentiles. Especially when read as an inclusio with Isa 56:1–8 about foreigners and eunuchs being accepted into God's people and invited to worship in the temple, the reference here seems to be to Gentiles. At least, that may well have been how Luke could have interpreted it.

Gentiles would thus be portrayed as coming in pilgrimage to Jerusalem, with some of them even being accepted in God's people as priests and Levites. It is not a strained construal for Acts to reinterpret and apply Isaiah's influx of Gentiles into God's people in Jerusalem as the influx of Gentiles into God's people when Paul and Jesus' disciples convert them in their native places, without their having to go to Jerusalem or to be circumcised and accept the law (cf. Acts 15), as Isaiah pictures them doing.

#### PAUL'S MISSION AS CONTINUING ISRAEL'S WITNESS TO THE ONE GOD AND OPPOSITION TO IDOLATRY

There remains space only for some brief examples from Paul's Gentile ministry that illustrate how it continues the mission of the Isaian servant of the Lord to witness to all nations about the sole living God and to combat Gentile idolatry and worship of pagan gods. Kavin Rowe treats the

reaction to Paul and Barnabas after the healing of the lame man in Acts 14:12–19 and to Paul and Silas after the exorcism of the fortune-telling spirit from the slave girl in Acts 16:16–23.<sup>16</sup> At Lystra, Paul and Barnabas utterly reject the pagan interpretations of their healing of the lame man as the appearance of gods in human form, as well as their attempts to sacrifice to them as Hermes and Zeus. Because Paul's message about the one living God working through human instruments completely undermines their cultural worldview about gods and sacrifices, the crowd's sudden shift from worshiping to attempts to kill Paul and Barnabas is understandable.

Similarly, the vulnerability of the fortune-telling spirit in Philippi to expulsion by the greater power in the name of Jesus Christ destroys not only the source of income for the owners of the fortune-telling slave, but in principle is a threat to all in Philippi who profit from magic or spirits (Acts 16). Likewise, Paul's preaching against idolatry in Ephesus in Acts 19 leads to riots inspired by a silversmith whose living by making idols is threatened by Paul's message. Even in the more "philosophical" setting of Athens, Paul's speech pointedly attacks idolatry, polytheism, and the alleged need of the one living Creator God for houses or for anything humans could supply for him (Acts 17:16–32).

These are just some examples of what scholars have treated as merely humorous novelistic tales to enliven the narrative of Acts. But they illustrate how, throughout much of Paul's ministry to Gentiles in Acts, his preaching had to be rooted in the message of Jewish monotheism and attacks on pagan idolatry and religiosity. Before Paul could proclaim Christ, he had to first substitute for pagan cultures based on idolatry and polytheistic worldviews the biblical message and worldview of the sole living Creator God who created all things and will judge all humans (e.g., Acts 17:22–32). Because this biblical worldview so radically undermined the prevalent polytheistic cultures of their time, Paul and early Christians suffered intense persecution from many of the Gentiles whom they tried to evangelize as God's servants.

#### EPILOGUE

In this essay I have suggested that emphasis in the later chapters of Acts on the role of the servant of the Lord (especially but not exclusively from

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16. Rowe, "Acts and Identity of God," 248–63.

Isaiah LXX) portrays the evangelistic mission of Paul and later Christians as an organic development from Israel's servant mission to witness to all nations about the sole living God and to combat Gentile idolatry and worship of pagan gods. If this is so, Christian accentuation of the one living God in evangelizing Gentiles seems to recommend increased attention by contemporary scholars to the central importance of monotheism in the earliest Christian message. This early Christian emphasis illustrates the importance of focusing interpretation of Luke-Acts on New Testament "theology" strictly speaking—that is, on study of (the one living) God.

