

# **The Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12): Reflections on the Current Debate on the Symbolism of the Cross from the Perspective of the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In the current debates about the relationship of state and religion, the symbol of the cross has not been able to keep out of the headlines. On a political, legal as well as cultural level there continue to be disputes that cannot be resolved by merely referring to the Christian tradition. On the contrary: the controversial discussions challenge not only the Christian Churches, but also academic theology with its various disciplines. From the perspective of OT scholarship, and based on Isa 53,<sup>3</sup> an aspect is to be identified which has hitherto not been taken sufficiently into account when clarifying the values surrounding the cross.*

*Prior to this, several examples taken from the social debate will serve to illustrate to what an extent the Christian theology is challenged by it. The function of theological scholarship is, after all, not only or primarily to provide ecclesiastical self-reassurance, but also to inject the values of its own religious tradition into the free social discourse, and thus, in the sense of Habermas, to discursively fluidise them – not to dilute them!*

## **A THE CROSS IN THE CROSS-FIRE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) agreed on 3 November 2009 with an Italian mother who had lodged a complaint against the crosses in the school of her two children, and awarded her the sum of five thousand Euros in compensation (Ref. No. 30814/06). Contrary to lower court judgements, the court in Strasbourg ruled that the cross was not just the symbol of a cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This article constitutes the slightly reworked version of my inaugural address at the University of Bonn (19 May 2010). See Ulrich Berges, "Das vierte Lied vom Gottesknecht (Jesaja 52,13 – 53,12 ): Überlegungen zur aktuellen Debatte um die Symbolik des Kreuzes aus alttestamentlicher Perspektive," *ZKTh* 133 (2011): 159-174. I would like to thank Mrs. Klaudia Ringelmann (Pretoria, South Africa) for the excellent translation of this article and Alphonso Groenewald for the final editing.

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<sup>3</sup> To simplify matters, the specification Isa 53 will hereafter stand for the fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13-53:12).

identity, but rather a specific religious sign that influences children in their freedom to believe or not to believe.<sup>4</sup> This ruling is similar to the so-called Crucifix-verdict of the German Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht), dated 16 May 1995, which declared parts of the Bavarian public school regulations from 1983 to be unconstitutional and therefore null and void. Back then, three pupils, together with their parents, had lodged a complaint against the Bavarian school regulations, according to which a crucifix or cross had to hang in all the classrooms of public schools. The plaintiffs claimed that, due to their anthroposophical world view, they could not be expected to have to learn while sitting under the cross. The constitutional court agreed with them and ruled that the hanging-up of crosses in public schools violated Article 4 of German Basic Law (Grundgesetz), according to which all citizens are guaranteed freedom of religion and belief. That this was a very narrow decision can be discerned from the fact that three out of eight judges brought in an additional divergent extraordinary vote. In their explanation of the ruling, however, they state unequivocally that the cross is not a cultural symbol or even a symbol of inter-faith significance for humanitarianism and compassion: "The cross has always been a part of the specific symbols of the Christian faith. It virtually constitutes its prime symbol of faith as such. It epitomises man's deliverance from original sin brought about by Christ's sacrificial death and also Christ's victory over Satan and death, and his dominion over the world; suffering and triumph at the same time."<sup>5</sup> For the devout Christian it is therefore an object of worship and of practising his religiousness. To this day, putting a cross onto a building or into a room is understood to be an enhanced confession of the owner to the Christian faith. For the non-Christian or the atheist, the cross, exactly because of the importance that Christianity attaches to it and that it has had throughout history, turns into an emblematic expression of specific religious beliefs and into a symbol of its missionary expansion. It would amount to a profanization of the cross, which goes directly against the self-conception of Christianity and of Christian Churches, if one were to view it, as was the case in the rulings that were under attack, as merely an expression of Western tradition or as a cultic symbol without a specific religious reference."<sup>6</sup>

When politicians and church officials who want crosses to remain in public schools or buildings argue that the cross is the symbol of the Christian West – as illustrated by the election slogan "Abendland in Christenhand" (The West is in the hand of the Christians) of Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs = Freedom Party of Austria), who

<sup>4</sup> In late January 2010, the state of Italy appealed against this ruling so that new proceedings will be held before a Grand Chamber of this court.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. keyword "Cross": Gerhard Römer, "Kreuz," *LTK* 6: 605-610 and Erika Dinkler-von Schubert, "Kreuz," *EKL* 2: 1462-1468.

<sup>6</sup> 1 BvR (Bundesverfassungsgericht = German Federal Constitutional Court) 1087/91.

appeared holding a cross in his hand during the European election campaign – and that it must therefore, because of its history, also be tolerated by non-Christians and atheists, then the above-mentioned court rulings obstruct this path.

However, not only does the cross elicit discussions in legal and political circles, but also on a cultural level. Hence a scandal ensued prior to the awarding of the "Hessischer Kulturpreis" (cultural award of the Federal State of Hessen) to the German-Iranian Islamic scholar and literary figure Navid Kermani. After his article had appeared in the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" dated 14 March 2009, the two representatives of the Christian Churches, the retired Church President of the Lutheran Church ("Evangelische Kirche") in Hessen and Nassau, Prof. Peter Steinacker, and the Cardinal of Mainz, Dr. Karl Lehmann, objected to an award presentation with the representative of the Islamic faith on the grounds that he had disparaged the cross as being a symbol of barbarism. In pointedly literary style, Kermani had related a visit to the Roman Catholic church San Lorenzo in Lucina, where he had contemplated the crucifixion painting by the artist Guido Reni (1575-1642), which prompted him to reflect as follows:

My attitude towards crosses is principally a negative one. Not that I respect the people who pray to the cross any less than other praying people. It is not a reproach. It is a rejection. It is precisely because I take what it represents seriously that I reject the cross totally. Besides, I find the hypostatization of pain barbaric and somatophobic, a form of ingratitude towards creation at which we should rejoice and which we should enjoy together so that we might know the Creator. In my heart I can understand why Judaism and Islam reject the crucifixion. Indeed, they do it very politely, much too politely it often seems to me, when I hear Christians explaining the Trinity and the Resurrection and that Jesus has died for our sins. The Koran states that another man was crucified. Jesus escaped. I have a more drastic formulation for the rejection of the Theology of the Cross: blasphemy and idolatry.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the nature of the first part, the second part was ignored to a great extent, in which Kermani was, in spite of his hostile view, internally drawn to the Renaissance painter's depiction of the cross: "And there I sat in front of Guido Reni's altarpiece in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina and found it so captivating and filled with blessing, that I would have loved nothing better than to remain seated. For the first time I thought: I – not only I, but any person –

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<sup>7</sup> Navid Kermani, "Bildansichten: Warum hast du uns verlassen? Guido Renis «Kreuzigung»," n.p. [cited 18 November 2010]. Online: [http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/literatur\\_und\\_kunst/warum\\_hast\\_du\\_uns\\_verlassen\\_\\_guido\\_renis\\_kreuzigung\\_1.2195409.html](http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/literatur_und_kunst/warum_hast_du_uns_verlassen__guido_renis_kreuzigung_1.2195409.html).

could believe in a cross."<sup>8</sup> What had deeply touched the author and scholar of Islam was the indictment of the crucified Christ's suffering of his God: "Look at me, he seems to call out. But not only: look at me, but rather: look at the earth, look at us. Jesus does not suffer, as Christian ideology would have it, to exonerate God, Jesus reproaches: Not, why have you forsaken me, no, why have you forsaken us?"<sup>9</sup>

This interpretation of Kermani is in line with his book "Der Schrecken Gottes" (The Terror of God), in which he, by means of inter-religious comparisons, shows up the often neglected aspect of suffering and protest of the deity in a forceful way.<sup>10</sup> One of the few people who was not deterred by Kermani's harsh words from taking the justification for his rejection of the cross seriously, was the Lutheran pastor and theologian Friedrich Schorlemmer, winner of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (1993):

The question of what kind of God it is who needs his son's sacrifice to have mercy on us, remains a nagging one (for everyone) throughout the centuries. Does the loving God need a sacrifice? And the sacrifice of his beloved son at that?<sup>11</sup>

Then an important pointer follows towards the contextual interpretation of the cross:

At the same time, Kermani has probably not understood, would or could probably not understand that the contemplation of the suffering of Christ is able to comfort a person, lets him experience solidarity and is able to lead him into helping solidarity. A Christian learns, by contemplating the suffering of "the Servant of God", to come to terms with his own suffering, he is able to experience the presence of Christ in his suffering and can diminish and control any suffering in the spirit of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

The keywords "suffering," "solidarity" and "Servant of God" are subsequently to be explored from an OT perspective in order to present a meaningful stance, which might possibly find its voice, also towards non-Christians and atheists, in the social debate around the symbolism of the cross. The above-mentioned keywords draw attention to the vicarious suffering of the Servant of God in Isa 53. Before commencing to introduce a more recent OT approach

<sup>8</sup> Kermani, "Bildansichten," n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Kermani, "Bildansichten," n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Navid Kermani, *Der Schrecken Gottes: Attar, Hiob und die metaphysische Revolte* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Schorlemmer, "Warum hast du uns verlassen? Friedrich Schorlemmer zur Diskussion um den »Hessischen Kulturpreis«, n.p. [cited 18 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/149941.warum-hast-du-uns-verlassen.html?sstr=Schorlemmer>.

<sup>12</sup> Schorlemmer, "Warum hast du uns verlassen?" n.p.

concerning this text, an overview of the NT reception will aim to focus attention on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth has by no means been interpreted right from the beginning as being the Servant of God who is vicariously suffering death.

## **B JESUS AND THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF GOD OF ISAIAH 53**

It can be seen as fairly certain that the Jesus of the Gospels and probably also the historical Jesus understood his life, his proclamation as well as his death, which became increasingly inevitable, as one of sharing the violent fate of the unjustly persecuted prophets, if not of the righteous in general.<sup>13</sup> But did he recognise himself, or rather: did the early Christians recognise him outright and without any hesitation to be the Servant of God, who gave his life for the multitudes to atone for their sins, as portrayed in Isaiah?

This question still elicits controversial discussions resulting in minimum- and maximum positions confronting each other. Thus, Herbert Haag (amongst others), in his scholarly work on the Servant of God in Deutero-Isaiah, assumes the influence of the motif of the *suffering Servant of God* on the early Church to be only limited.<sup>14</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, on the other hand, holds an opposing view. It holds that texts like Rom 4:25 ("who was delivered up for our trespasses"), 1 Cor 15:3b ("Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures") Mark 10:45 ("The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"), Heb 9:28 ("so also Christ died once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people") and the longest citation from Isa 53 in 1 Pet 2:22-25 lead to only one conclusion:

The emerging Christological interpretation of Isa 53 was not initially and merely a product of a post-Easter understanding of faith, but its roots already lie in Jesus' own understanding of his mission and his death. He took up the verifiably early Jewish messianic interpretation of Isa 53, and understood his road to Calvary – totally independent with regards to tradition! – in the light of the Word of God which was set forth for him in Isa 43:3-4 and Isa 53:11-12. After the completion of Jesus' mission, embedded in the Cross and Resurrection, the Song of the suffering Servant of God referred, during the time of early Christianity, to a single historical figure for

<sup>13</sup> See still, Lothar Ruppert, *Jesus als der leidende Gerechte? Der Weg Jesu im Lichte eines alt- und zwischentestamentlichen Motivs* (SBS 59; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1972) in its entirety.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Haag, *Der Gottesknecht bei Deuterjesaja* (EdF 233; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), 78.

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the first time and with one accord, and the text in its entirety has become transparent due to the destiny of this figure.<sup>15</sup>

It is the responsibility of the colleagues from the NT exegesis to determine to what extent the historical Jesus actually understood his destiny to be in the tradition of the suffering Servant of God in the Book of Isaiah in such a direct way.<sup>16</sup> To my mind, whichever way one chooses to position oneself on this question, it remains surprising that the evangelists, in the Passion narratives in particular, with the exception of Luke 22:37 ("For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.'") do not make reference to Isa 53 anywhere else.<sup>17</sup>

With Paul, the findings are similar, and thus Dietrich-Alex Koch sums up that Paul does not yet know Isa 53 as a "seminal text in a passion-theological way".<sup>18</sup> Compared to this, the opening word from Ps 22 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" has been elevated to the most important horizon of the interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion by Mark and Matthew (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46).<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Luke and John omit this citation and reinforce the It-Is-Done-ness of the divine will. Why did the evangelists, who were, after all, familiar with Isa 53 (cf. amongst others Mark 10:45; 14:24; Matt 8:17; Luke

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, "Jes 53 in den Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte," in *Der leidende Gottesknecht: Jesaja 53 und seine Wirkungsgeschichte: Mit einer Bibliographie zu Jes 53* (ed. B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher; FAT 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 94, cf. also 98.

<sup>16</sup> On that point, comprehensively Jörg Frey and Jens Schröter, eds., *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament* (WUNT 181; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), in its entirety.

<sup>17</sup> Hans W. Wolff, *Jesaja 53 im Urchristentum*, (Gießen: Brunnen Verlag, 1984), 75-79.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus* (BHT 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 234; of different opinion is Otfried Hofius, "Das vierte Gottesknechtslied in den Briefen des Neuen Testaments," in *Der leidende Gottesknecht: Jesaja 53 und seine Wirkungsgeschichte: Mit einer Bibliographie zu Jes 53* (FAT 14; ed. B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 117, footnote 48. See Karl T. Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte: Die alttestamentlich-jüdische Tradition vom leidenden Gerechten und ihre Rezeption bei Paulus* (WUNT 2/13; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> With an eye toward the Markan representation of the Passion, which harks back to Pss 22; 41; 42; 43; 51; 55; 69; 110, Janowski argues that it is "for the most part Psalm-Christology"; see Bernd Janowski, "Das Leben für andere hingeben: Alttestamentliche Voraussetzungen für die Deutung des Todes Jesu," in *Für uns gestorben: Sühne – Opfer – Stellvertretung* (ed. V. Hampel and R. Weth; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010), 63.

22:37; John 1:29; 12:38), balk at representing Jesus in his Passion and death as the suffering Servant of God of Isaiah 53?<sup>20</sup>

Hans Walter Wolff has the following answer in his dissertation, completed in the middle of the war (1942) – he had obtained barely five months' study leave from the Front for this purpose: "Thus it must have come about that those who first portrayed the Passion refrained from an explicit reference to Isa 53; firstly because the realisation of the mystery of this chapter must have dawned on them very slowly, they were however not – as was the case with the Psalter – by any means familiar with it from their youth; secondly, however, because Isa 53 was even further from the minds of a wider circle at which their writing was aimed."<sup>21</sup>

This assessment cannot be satisfactory, as Isa 53 was indeed very well known to the authors and their audience; hence this reticence must have had other reasons. It is interesting to observe that it was only with the practical missionary work of the young Church (cf. Peter's address Acts 3-4) and with the expansion of propagation by the circle of seven disciples (Acts 6:1-7) beyond the walls of Jerusalem, that Isa 53 was applied to Jesus in a messianic way.<sup>22</sup> Thus Philip, talking to Candace's treasurer who is returning home to Gaza from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, construes the passage about the lamb that does not open its mouth before the shearers as referring to Christ. But even here, in Acts 8:32-33 and in Luke 22:37, where a reference to Isa 53 in the context of Jesus' suffering does indeed exist,<sup>23</sup> there is no mention of a *vicarious suffering* for others. It is astonishing that the NT in its reference to Isa 53, sparse as it is, only indirectly assumes a vicarious suffering of Jesus for others.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Wolfgang Kraus not only proves that the seven NT citations from Isa 53 – with the exception of Matt 8:17 – all refer to the LXX-version, but also that the

<sup>20</sup> This is also the question of Wolfgang Kraus, "Jesaja 53 LXX im frühen Christentum – eine Überprüfung," in *Beiträge zur urchristlichen Theologiegeschichte* (ed. W. Kraus; BZNW 163; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 171, footnote 113 on the position of Ulrike Mittmann-Richert, *Der Sühnetod des Gottesknechts: Jesaja 53 im Lukasevangelium* (WUNT 220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), who seeks to prove an incorporation of Isa 53 in the Lukan words of institution. Kraus ("Jesaja 53 LXX," 171) formulates it: "It would remain a mystery why there are not noticeably more frequent citations of or allusions to Isa 53MT in early Christianity, if it were indeed already a case of an interpretation of Jesus' death being ascribed to him."

<sup>21</sup> Wolff, *Jesaja 53*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Wolff, *Jesaja 53*, 92.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, five further references: Rom 15:21/Isa 52:15 LXX [mission, apostolate]; John 12:38/Isa 53:1 LXX [lack of faith/hardness of heart Isa 6:9-10]; Rom 10:16; Isa 53:1 LXX [mission/Israel's lack of faith]; Matt 8:17/Isa 53:4 MT [Jesus' acts of healing]; 1 Pet 2:22, 24-25/Isa 53:4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12 LXX [Christological creed in an ethical context]; thus Kraus, "Jesaja 53 LXX," 151.

<sup>24</sup> See Mark 10:45 with a possible but by no means confirmed inclusion of Isa 43:3-4.

concept of a vicarious absolving of iniquity for others does certainly not present itself.<sup>25</sup> Thus it says, amongst others, in LXX Isa 53:10: "The Lord also is pleased to purge him from his stroke. If ye can give an offering for sin, your soul shall see a long-lived seed [...]"<sup>26</sup>

The search for traces of Isa 53 in the NT can be discontinued at this point, as it has shown often enough that this text, being so pivotal for the interpretation of Jesus' suffering and death, was only received tenuously and at a surprisingly slow pace in the Foundation Charter of the Christian congregations.<sup>27</sup> This restraint can essentially be ascribed to the fact that the texts of the Servant of God in Isa 40-55 in the Jewish tradition referred, for the most part, collectively to Israel, and that an individual messianic interpretation was not paramount to any degree.<sup>28</sup> This remains applicable, even though – where Isa 52:13 is concerned – the oldest Jewish interpretation, the Targum on Isaiah as part of the Prophet Targum Jonathan, maintains that the text refers to the Anointed One (= Messiah), but then proceeds to keep all characteristics of suffering away from him.<sup>29</sup> This is in accordance with the focus of the subsequent early Jewish reception, which deals not with the *vicarious* suffering, but with the *innocent* suffering of the righteous man. This nurtures the hope that God, the Righteous One, will save the righteous man and see that justice is done. A clear indication of this is presented by the Wisdom of Solomon, having originated around the time of the birth of Christ, in which the opponents of the righteous man are made to say the following: "For if the just man be the son of God, he will help him, and deliver him from the hand of his enemies. Let us examine him with despitefulness and torture, that we may know his meekness, and prove his patience. Let us condemn him with a shameful death: for by his own saying he shall be respected" (Wis 2:18-20; cf. 2:10-20; 5:1-10).

<sup>25</sup> Kraus, "Jesaja 53 LXX," 158-159.

<sup>26</sup> See also Wolfgang Kraus and Martin Karrer, eds., *Septuaginta Deutsch: Das griechische Alte Testament in deutscher Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: DBG, 2009), 1276.

<sup>27</sup> On the reception of the Book of Isaiah in the NT, see Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja: Der Prophet und das Buch* (BG 22; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 174-193.

<sup>28</sup> See Henry A. Fischel, "Die deuterocesajanischen Gottesknechtslieder in der jüdischen Auslegung," *HUCA* 18 (1944): 53-73; Haag, *Gottesknecht*, 34-66.

<sup>29</sup> Jostein Ådna, "Der Gottesknecht als triumphierender und interzessorischer Messias: Die Rezeption von Jes 53 im Targum Jonathan untersucht mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Messiasbildes," in *Der leidende Gottesknecht: Jesaja 53 und seine Wirkungsgeschichte: Mit einer Bibliographie zu Jes 53* (ed. B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher; FAT 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 129-158. A Jewish argument against the Christian interpretation of Isa 53 does not exist with the Targum Jonathan – despite numerous voiced opinions to the contrary (cf. Ådna, "Der Gottesknecht," 129-133).



## C ISAAH 53 FROM AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

The principles of interpretation dictate, amongst others, that the receptive and effective history of texts cannot be assessed adequately until the initial intention of an opus has been more or less ascertained.<sup>30</sup>

To do justice to this maxim with regard to Isa 53, which is crucial to the debate around the cross, one has to firstly integrate it into its immediate context, and thereafter into the Book of Isaiah as a whole. At the same time, the coordinates have shifted significantly in recent years, as the notion of an exilic Anonymous "Deutero-Isaiah", who composed Isa 40-55 during the Babylonian exile, and his scholar "Trito-Isaiah," who added chs. 56-66 in post-exilic times is seen by a growing number of exegetes as no longer acceptable.<sup>31</sup> This hypothesis, essentially dating back to Bernhard Duhm and his Isaiah-commentary from 1892, owes its success to the idea that biblical texts had to present individual authors, even if these were merely anonymous ones. In contrast to this, what becomes prevailingly clear in scholarly research is that the texts of the OT cannot be ascribed to single authors, but rather to erudite schools of scribes. In this case, too, the Hebrew Bible is a child of its ancient Near Eastern environment, as the scripting of religious traditions resided, there as elsewhere, with educated literates.<sup>32</sup> Where Isa 40-55 is concerned, one must, due to its great affinity with the Psalms and the hymnic responsories, as well as the intensive incorporation of older traditions,<sup>33</sup> assume exiled temple singers who – around 520 B.C.E., during the political reign of the Persian ruler Dareios – brought their "Oratorio of Hope" to Jerusalem. There it was attached to the old Isaiah-Ben-Amoz tradition, which had already been in existence for 200 years at that time. This was, to use a modern term, a "win-win situation": On the one hand, the Isaiah-tradition of Jerusalem received an extension into the exilic-post-exilic era, as it would have lagged far behind the Books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel without this! On the other hand, the "Oratorio of Hope" (Isa 40-55)

<sup>30</sup> According to Karl-Heinz Menke, *Stellvertretung: Schlüsselbegriff christlichen Lebens und theologische Grundkategorie* (Freiburg: Einsiedeln, 1991), 29: "The better an exegetical insight integrates with the intellectual horizon of 'those days,' the more it can be accepted with a measure of certainty into the horizon of 'these days'".

<sup>31</sup> On this point, see Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40-48* (HTKAT; Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2008), 28-43; Ulrich Berges, "Farewell to Deutero-Isaiah or Prophecy without a Prophet," in *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007* (ed. A. Lemaire; VTSup 133; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 575-595.

<sup>32</sup> On this point, most notably Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> See Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusions in Isaiah 40-66*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); B. Sommer, "Allusions and Illusions: The Unity of the Book of Isaiah in Light of Deutero-Isaiah's Use of Prophetic Tradition," in *New Visions of Isaiah* (ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney; JSOTSup 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 156-186.

received its indispensable prophetic legitimisation by linking itself to the time-honoured Isaiah-tradition.

Apart from the authorship of an exilic Anonymous, the second hypothesis of Duhamel, the exclusion and differentiation of the Servant Songs from the overall characteristic style of the chapters Isa 40-55 has begun to waver. Admittedly, the so-called Servant Songs in Isa 42; 49; 50 and 53 continue to be considered as sections with a particular message and focus; they are, however, not isolated, but rather to be understood as being closely affiliated to the text in its totality. By and large, Isa 40-55 is about the new identity of the people of God whom Yahweh has tested and chosen in the furnace of adversity, the Babylonian exile (Isa 48:10). However, Nebuchadnezzar had not deported the whole of Judah and Jerusalem to Babel, but only the upper class, while the greater masses remained in the country (2 Kgs 24:10-17; 25:8-21; Jer 52:3-11, 12-27). The people with a literary education – the proportion of those who could read and write would have been below 5% – were the ones who gathered the religious traditions, scripted them and safeguarded them against oblivion far away from home. A significant proportion of the OT can therefore be referred to as exile literature. After having suffered the loss of country, king, temple and sacrificial cult, the questions were more urgent than ever: Did Yahweh's promises not hold any longer, could there still be a future after the catastrophe? The authors of Isa 40-55 were working on a new identity for the people of God, which was no longer guided by the Davidic kingship as a guarantor for divine commitment, but rather by those who wanted to belong to the true people of Israel, and who were prepared to accept their exilic fate as vicarious suffering for all of their people.<sup>34</sup> With this firm belief, the authors returned to Judah and Jerusalem around 520 B.C.E., whereas the foreign land of Babylon had already, for the majority of the descendants of the erstwhile deported people, become their new and permanent home after 70 years of exile. That heated discussions about claims of ownership and recognition arose between the returnees and the descendants of those Judeans who had not been exiled to Babel, is revealed by a word of God in the book of the prophet Ezekiel, who had been deported to Babel in 597 B.C.E. himself: "Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, 'Abraham was only *one* man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are *many*; the land is surely given us to possess'" (Ezek 33:24; cf. also 11:14-21). The exiled people or rather their descendants should therefore not pride themselves on Abraham, who had also set out from

<sup>34</sup> See Lothar Ruppert, "»Mein Knecht, der gerechte, macht die Vielen gerecht, und ihre Verschuldungen – er trägt sie« (Jes 53,11): Universales Heil durch das stellvertretende Strafleiden des Gottesknechtes?," *BZ* 40 (1996): 14: "Hence a small proportion of Israel has, in its capacity as Yahweh's Servant in exile, accomplished its mission of atonement and of mediator for salvation towards the people of God as a whole, precisely by its patiently borne Passion in Babylonian captivity with all its afflictions and sufferings."

Ur in Chaldea, to be sure, but only by himself, whereas those who remained at home in Judah are many, and therefore should take precedence over the returnees.<sup>35</sup> It is from this situation of the people of God during early post-exilic times that Isa 53 must initially be understood. Those exiles who were willing to return home and were returning home, were the ones who were presenting themselves in a literary way as the suffering Servant of God – on behalf of all the people.<sup>36</sup>

Is it possible in the OT, however, for a collective to play to the gallery with an individual figure to such an extent? A look at Isa 43:10 already confirms that this is indeed the case, where it says: “‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen.’” And in Isa 50:4 one reads: “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.” The exilic Ps 44 also shows that personal statements, in the singular as well as the plural, form a single entity: “You have made *us* the taunt of *our* neighbours, the derision and scorn of those around *us*. You have made *us* a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. All day long *my* disgrace is before *me*, and shame has covered *my* face” (v. 14-16). It can be assumed that, when the OT speaks of individual persons, frequently entire groups are meant.<sup>37</sup> The most striking example is the name “Jacob” or rather “Israel,” with which not only the progenitor but also each descendant and each member of God’s people can be denoted. When Isa 53 speaks about the horribly disfigured Servant who is abhorrent to his own people and the kings of nations, it actually refers to the group of returnees or rather a part thereof. It is the “we,” a fraction of the “many,” who are reporting on their about-turn in the assessment of the Servant, i.e. the returning group of exiles. Filled with astonishment, they inquire as to who actually believed that which was previously promulgated (MT Isa 53:1), namely that Yahweh would exalt the evident loser of the story, the repugnance of people and nations, from deepest humiliation to highest heights (52:13-15). The “we” belong to the people of God and are a part of the “many” (רַבִּים)

<sup>35</sup> Rainer Albertz, *Die Exilszeit: 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (BE 7; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), 91, 135, 192.

<sup>36</sup> See Volker Hampel, “Die Passion des Menschensohns: Die messianische Erwartung Israels und der gewaltsame Tod Jesu,” in *Für uns gestorben: Sühne – Opfer – Stellvertretung* (ed. V. Hampel and R. Weth; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010), 73-115, here 95: “The section of the people led into exile suffers and ‘dies’ vicariously for all the others. Thereby the Servant of God is not Israel in its entirety, but rather the ‘true Israel’ (= the exiles), which has thoroughly and profoundly atoned for the iniquities of all others (40:2).”

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen van Oorschot, “Nachkultische Psalmen und spätbiblische Rollendichtung,” *ZAW* 106 (1994): 69-86; Ulrich Berges, “The Literary Construction of the Servant in Isaiah 40-55: A Discussion about Individual and Collective Identities,” *SJOT* 24 (2010): 28-38.

(52:14; 53:11, 12). This expression means, according to linguistic usage of the OT, the people in their entirety, as is most notably the case in the Psalter's lamentations and songs of thanks (Pss 3:2-8; 31:12-14; 40:4; 71:7; 109:30). There, the supplicant, having been delivered from his tribulations, is once again accepted into the congregation of the "many." A similar situation unfolds itself at the end of the fourth Servant Song (Isa 53:11b-12) after the insight that he had borne their sicknesses, was struck by God for their transgressions and that they received healing through his wounds (Isa 53:4-5). Behind all that, the hope emanates that the people in Jerusalem, who had regarded those erstwhile deported ones as having been justifiably punished by Yahweh (why else would they have been struck with deportation?), would come to the conclusion that it was precisely this Servant who was punished for their sins. But what is the reason for the transformation of the "we" with regard to the Servant? It is God's adherence to him which led to this new definition: "The "we"-group is not able to comprehend the function of the vicarious suffering of the Ebed through their own insight, but only in the light of the manifestation of God's faithfulness to his Servant."<sup>38</sup>

That this idea of proxy is present in the profession of the "we" (Isa 53:4-5) is exegetically hardly disputed. However, how likely is, over and above that, the concept of a vicarious act of atonement by the Servant? The crucial verse reads as follows: "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin (םַשְׁנֵה) he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper" (Isa 53:10).<sup>39</sup> The term םַשְׁנֵה (sin-offering; guilt-compensation; offering of atonement) is so profoundly cultic in nature,<sup>40</sup> that this connotation also has to be taken into consideration here and may not be totally disregarded.<sup>41</sup> It is also equally true, however, that the Servant is not depicted as ritual sacrifice for atonement, particularly in view of the fact that a human sacrifice would have been unthinkable for Yahweh. The semantics of "crush" and "pain" would also rule out such an interpretation, as only pure, flawless sacrificial animals were admissible for a

<sup>38</sup> Eckart Otto, *Krieg und Frieden in der Hebräischen Bibel: Aspekte für eine Friedensordnung in der Moderne* (ThFr 18; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999), 136 (footnote 229).

<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the totally different version in the LXX: "The Lord also is pleased to purge him from his stroke. If ye can give an offering for sin, your soul shall see a long-lived seed." Lancelot L. C. Brenton, *The LXX Septuagint: Greek and English* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851).

<sup>40</sup> See only Lev 5:14-26 (sin-offering *Torah*) and Lev 16:10, 20-22 (scapegoat ritual); on this, Adrian Schenker, *Knecht und Lamm (Jesaja 53): Übernahme von Schuld im Horizont der Gottesknechtslieder* (SBS 190; Stuttgart: Katolisches Bibelwerk, 2001) in its entirety.

<sup>41</sup> As propounded in the excellent work of Frederik Hägglund, *Isaiah 53 in the Light of Homecoming after Exile* (FAT 2/31; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 67-73.

ritual act (cf. Mal 1:12-14).<sup>42</sup> The idea that human blood possessed the power of atonement in the cult of the OT is utterly grotesque, and therefore no mention is made of the blood of the Servant in Isa 53 either!<sup>43</sup> A similar argument will later apply to the theological interpretation of Jesus' death:

No author of the NT assumes that Jesus himself was cultically slaughtered as a sacrificial offering. Rather, a characteristic is always ascribed to Jesus' death, which also corresponds to the ritual sacrifice: both have in common that they effect a deliverance from sin and its disastrous consequences.<sup>44</sup>

With the term  $\text{כִּפּוּרִים}$  in Isa 53:10, where it means redemption of sin,<sup>45</sup> the authors, who were thoroughly acquainted with the cult in their capacity as temple singers, have brought into play a cultic metaphor with which they rendered a cultic concept that was familiar to their addressees in a non-cultic context.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, the authors, who were in close proximity to the cult, to be sure, but did not emanate from priestly circles, deployed the sacrificial term  $\text{כִּפּוּרִים}$ , which became increasingly important in post-exilic times in a provocative manner. Analogous to the priestly sin-offering that atones for the sins of the sacrificers, Yahweh has deployed and accepted the sufferings of the returnees as redemption of sin for the many, that is, for all the people of Israel!<sup>47</sup> The fact that the

<sup>42</sup> See also the inclusion in John 1:36 (Behold, the Lamb of God) and 19:33, 36 (no breaking of legs; see Ps 34:21; Exod 12:46; Zech 12:10).

<sup>43</sup> As opposed to, amongst others, Georg Fohrer, "Stellvertretung und Schuldopfer in Jes 52,13-53,12" in *Studien zu alttestamentlichen Texten und Themen (1966-1972)* (ed. G. Fohrer; BZAW 155; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), 41: "The blood of the 'Servant of YHWH,' too, had been shed at his execution, and this execution is equated with the sacrifice in Isa 53:10. The Servant was the sacrificial animal 'struck' i.e. slaughtered by God as the acting priest, as this was 'pleasing' to him, i.e. as he accepted the Servant as being worthy of sacrifice."

<sup>44</sup> Michael Wolter, "»Für uns gestorben«. Wie gehen wir sachgerecht mit dem Tod Jesu um? in *Für uns gestorben: Sühne – Opfer – Stellvertretung* (ed. V. Hampel and R. Weth; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010), 1-50, here 8.

<sup>45</sup> According to Bernd Janowski, *Stellvertretung: Alttestamentliche Studien zu einem theologischen Grundbegriff* (SBS 165; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1997), 88.

<sup>46</sup> The same applies to the Pauline translation in Rom 3:25 of *hilasterion* (Hebr. *kaporet*) as a place and means of atonement on the passion and death of Jesus. See Janowski, "Voraussetzungen," 55-72.

<sup>47</sup> Menke, *Stellvertretung*, 40 comes astonishingly close to this exegetic solution: "The Deutero-Isaianic Servant has no convincing religio-historical parallel. Thus there are many indications that his figure responds to the quest of the Jews, who had been transported into Babylonian exile, for the possibility of an atonement that was not bound to the location of the temple in Jerusalem and its liturgical calendar. The Ebed of Yahweh then appears as a corporate person who not only realises his specific obligation (representation) towards Yahweh's covenant with Israel, but, beyond that,

term  $\text{דָּוָן}$  is used especially when the sacred is inadvertently profaned and a votive offering is due (cf. 1 Sam 6), can be applied equally well to the contempt unwittingly expressed by the majority of the people toward the Servant:

The life of Yahweh's Servant is a "votive offering" to the benefit of "the many"; at the same time it is the misconduct, the sin of "the many" who have desecrated something sacred, i.e. belonging to Yahweh, the "Servant of Yahweh."<sup>48</sup>

The theme of the Servant's illness and weakness, moreover, harks back to the beginning of the Book of Isaiah: The welts and wounds with which Yahweh wanted to bring his people to its senses (Isa 1:5-6) were taken on by the exilic congregation for the benefit of all.<sup>49</sup> These marked people are stricken by God, not to atone for their own sin, but to pay for the iniquities of others. All in all, what transpires from the fourth Servant Song is the great yet ultimately illusionary hope of the returnees that the entire nation of Israel would acknowledge their vicarious suffering as being a redemption of guilt that was pleasing to God. The opposite is the case: The *Servants*, successors of the returning exilic congregation, are those who are being excluded from the temple congregation in Jerusalem at the end of the Book of Isaiah (Isa 65-66)!

#### **D INFERENCES FOR THE CURRENT DISCUSSION AROUND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CROSS**

Compared to the past, modern people live in such close social, political and economic coherencies, that they have to bear the consequences of acts committed by others on the one hand, but on the other hand are also complicit in the suffering of others in a more causative way. Concrete examples for this are the consumption of natural resources and the inherited burden of blame which is carried and simultaneously produced. In this context, the talk of *collective guilt* finds its justification: if not legally, then certainly from a historical and social point of view.<sup>50</sup> All humans wrong their fellow human beings and fellow crea-

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voluntarily incurs the consequence of the sin of others (the refusal of obligation or representation)."

<sup>48</sup> Adrian Schenker, "Die Anlässe zum Schuldopfer Ascham," in *Studien zu Opfer und Kult im Alten Testament: Mit einer Bibliographie 1969-1991 zum Opfer in der Bibel* (ed. A. Schenker; FAT 3; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 66.

<sup>49</sup> On this, see Zoltán Kustár, »*Durch seine Wunden sind wir geheilt.*« *Eine Untersuchung zur Metaphorik von Israels Krankheit und Heilung im Jesajabuch* (BWA(N)T 154; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 192: "In Isa 1, no-one is prepared to treat and heal the wounds of the people – in Isa 52:13-53:12 the Ebed has brought the people forgiveness of their sins and healing."

<sup>50</sup> From an OT perspective, see Konrad Schmid, "Kollektivschuld? Der Gedanke übergreifender Schuldzusammenhänge im Alten Testament und im Alten Orient," *ZABR* 5 (1999): 193-222.

tures to varying degrees and simultaneously carry the burden of guilt of others in different ways.

One also has to classify the vicarious suffering of the Servant, the returning exilic congregation in Isa 53, into this category of collective guilt and compensation. This corporate person had suffered for all the people of God, and had, because of his distress, previously been shunned and despised by the majority, the "many". The Song describes the hope that the "we", in their capacity as the mouthpiece of majority opinion, would radically change their attitude towards the sufferers.

Are there similar about-turns these days towards those who once were considered to be stricken by God? The speech by Pope Benedict XVI, dated 28 May 2006, and held in the former concentration camp of Auschwitz, presents a succinct example of this. Amongst other things, he drew attention to the Jewish atheist, nun and martyr Edith Stein, who was killed there with her sister. The German pontiff, born in 1927, admits:

The Germans who were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau in those days and who died here were portrayed as the scum of the nation. But now we gratefully recognise them as witnesses of truth and of what is good, which had also not foundered in our nation.<sup>51</sup>

The million fold crime committed against the Jews can and may not be theologically reduced to a common denominator and thereby be defused. Nevertheless – and it is for this reason that this sentence of the Pope is so important –, by focusing on the victims, the interpretation of history is altered. In doing so, the cross appears, charged with meaning, and is able to make its voice heard even in a secularised or rather pluralistically oriented society where religion is concerned. The cross draws the eye of the beholder – away from the victors – to the victims of history. It is a deeply disturbing symbol, as the oldest cross graffiti of the Roman Palatine (early 3rd century C.E.) demonstrates; it shows the crucified Christ with a donkey's head and the scornful inscription: "Alexamenos worships God." And, at the beginning of the National Socialist era, Alfred Rosenberg, the chief ideologist of National Socialism, vociferated against Jesus the Jew on the cross in his book "Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts" (Myth of the 20th Century):

Jesus appears to us today as a self-assured lord in the best and highest sense of the word. It is his life which has meaning for Germanic people, not his agonising death, to which he can attribute his success amongst the Alpine and Mediterranean nations. These days, the powerful preacher and the man filled with rage in the temple, who could enthral and whom "they all" followed, and not the sacrificial

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<sup>51</sup> Benedict XVI, "Wo war Gott?" *Die Rede in Auschwitz* (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2006), 17.

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lamb of Jewish prophesy, not the crucified Christ, is the formative ideal that shines out towards us from the Gospels. And if it cannot shine out, then the Gospels have died as well.<sup>52</sup>

How right Paul was when, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, he describes the cross as *skandalon*, as a stumbling block and foolishness (1 Cor 1:23-24), which only represents God's wisdom and power to the believers. Since Constantine's victory on the Milvian Bridge, the cross increasingly became the Christian symbol of victory and covered its conspicuous trail of blood – not the blood of the martyrs, but that of the victims of Christian perpetration of violence.<sup>53</sup> Thus it would be blasphemous, especially for Christians, to see in the cross only the symbol of victory by which the executed Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, would have become the triumphant Christ.<sup>54</sup> To counter any attempt towards triumphalist one-sidedness, Johann Baptist Metz reminds us that Christ's victory over death and sin should not obstruct the messianic-apocalyptic hope of an end to all tears, of a dispensation of righteousness towards the victims:

Whoever separates Christology and apocalypticism in an amicable way, and who, by way of an example, hears what is said about the resurrection of the Christ on the cross in such a way that the apocalyptic cry of the godforsaken Son therein is no longer audible, then that person does not hear the Gospel, but an archaic victory myth.<sup>55</sup>

If and insofar as the cross keeps the hope of a God alive, who does not let the victims be buried for evermore, but rather causes them to be high and lifted up and greatly exalted (Isa 52:13), this symbol of Christianity will be able to make its voice heard across religions and ideologies. Perhaps one can learn life's lessons under such a cross after all.

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<sup>52</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1943), 604.

<sup>53</sup> Karl H. Metz, *Geschichte der Gewalt: Krieg – Revolution – Terror* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2010), 18: "The Church virtually collected the treasure trove of suffering of its blood witnesses who had suffered passively and defencelessly, in order to compensate for the bloody deeds that had been committed in its name [...]"

<sup>54</sup> See Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens* (vol. 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, <sup>3</sup>1989), 17.

<sup>55</sup> Johann-Baptist Metz, "Auschwitz: Unverzichtbarer Ortstermin einer christlichen Gottesrede," in "Wo war Gott?" *Die Rede in Auschwitz* (ed. Benedikt XVI, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2006), 56.



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