

# Isaiah 42: The Mission of the Servant

**Celiane Vieira**

**Abstract:** This study is intended to focus on some aspects of Isaiah 42 related to comprehending and connecting the mission and the servant, that is, how we, as the church and people of God, are to be a light to the world and to make the good news of God available to peoples outside the church, as well as to bring comfort and hope to the church herself.

In the books of Kings and Chronicles, we see Isaiah as a prophet with a long ministry of preaching to Judah. He probably began in 740 BC at age twenty-five and saw both times of peace and prosperity and times of destruction and suffering.<sup>1</sup>

It is possible and helpful to divide Isaiah 42:1–25 into sections:

- 1) 42:1–4: Presentation (description) of the servant and his ministry;
- 2) 42:5–9: Commission to restore Israel, reminding that the servant’s ministry as covenant and light will provide more confirmation of God’s incomparable power;
- 3) 42:10–17: Glorifying God and declaring His victory;
- 4) 42:18–25: Report of the blindness of Israel (especially verses 21–25), and the dispute between God and His own people.<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah 42:1–4 is known as the first of four Servant Songs.<sup>3</sup> The prophecies contained in these verses probably refer to events that occurred later, during the Babylonian exile, when Judah and Israel no longer existed as nations and when the only king was the Babylonian conqueror.<sup>4</sup>

In the second portion of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40–66), we read that the trust in God is expressed in

- 1) Giving recognition and honor to the true God over the idol-gods (40:12–26);
- 2) Glorifying Him for the transformation to justice, salvation, and forgiveness, all of which happens through His Servant (52:13–53:1–12);
- 3) Glorifying God in the Holy Mountain (40:9–11; 60:1–14);
- 4) Recognizing the destruction of everything that refuses to bring Him glory (41:11–12; 66:24).<sup>5</sup>

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*Celiane Vieira graduated from Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)—Brazil in History in 2011, and she is currently a Master of Arts student with emphasis in historical theology at Concordia Seminary—St. Louis.*

When we analyze Isaiah 42:1–4, the first question that arises is, who is this servant that does the Messiah’s work? The servant does not have a name. He is introduced as “*my servant*”—God’s servant, chosen by God, announced by the voice of God Himself.<sup>6</sup> In Matthew 12:18–21, the evangelist quotes this passage of Isaiah and refers it to Jesus. In this case, we can identify this Servant of Isaiah 42 as an individual, Jesus, the Messiah, who will be the perfect Israel.<sup>7</sup>

In Isaiah’s immediate context, the servant can also be identified with God’s people, Israel, the general Israelite audience that was listening to Isaiah 40:12–41:29.<sup>8</sup> This way of identifying the “servant” with the people is familiar in Isaiah,<sup>9</sup> as we see in 41:8–9: “*You, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, ‘You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off’*” (ESV). The fact that this servant is the offspring of Abraham is also noteworthy, for, as we will see later, the people receive from God a similar commission given to their forefather.

Why is Israel chosen? Israel is chosen not only for her own good but also to do what a servant is meant to do, namely, *to serve*, to serve as someone who will bring justice and as the channel whereby the world may be saved through a covenant relationship with God.<sup>10</sup>

This connection between the world and God is how *mission* was understood to take place in the Old Testament, that is, for God’s people to make the good news of God available to peoples outside of Israel,<sup>11</sup> as well as to bring comfort and hope to Israel herself. In the New Testament church, this Old Testament understanding of *mission* motivated and justified the young church’s practice of mission.<sup>12</sup>

In Isaiah 42:5–9, a mission is entrusted to Israel: they are called to be “*a covenant of the people*” and “*a light to the nations.*”<sup>13</sup> The first part talks about being a *covenant*. The question here is, to whom is this message addressed? The scholars are divided about their identity. Some identify *the people* as Israel, since they have concluded that the Servant is identified with an individual in the previous passage. According to this interpretation, this passage would be a reminder to God’s people that God Himself leads His people and sends them to serve the needs of others. The message is not immediately for the Gentiles but for those who are already a part of Israel.

Other scholars, who recognize the servant in Isaiah 42:1–4 as Israel, say that *the people* in this passage are humanity.<sup>14</sup> In Genesis 11, we learn that the sinfulness of the human heart that led to the confusion of all the nations required a plan of redemption. Abraham’s call dealt with this human sin and this division. In Genesis 12, God blesses Abraham: “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever dishonors you I will curse; and in you all families of the earth*

*shall be blessed*” (Gen 12:2–3, ESV). This is the first “Great Commission,” when, through Abraham, God blessed and blesses all the nations.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Abraham’s covenant with God is the beginning of God’s answer to the evil of humanity and “one of the key unifying threads in the whole Bible.”<sup>16</sup> It was the Gospel, the “good news,” to every person.

When God speaks to Moses in Exodus 19, He tells Moses to remind the Israelites of His grace because they had seen all the things that He had done to free them, His people, from Egypt. Being a *covenant of the people* (Is 42:6) is a reminder to them of God’s grace so that they will share it with the whole world.

But what does it mean to be *light* (Is 42:6)? When Isaiah talks about darkness it is usually a reference to chaos or negation (45:7; 60:2); thus, light is the opposite of it. Through the hands and mouths of the chosen servant, God’s people, the light will reach the world.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the people of God are to shine with a light—a visible and attractive one that will attract the nations ultimately to God Himself, and He will be glorified.<sup>18</sup> The word *light* is commonly related to salvation (Ps 27:1; Is 49:6); consequently, we understand that the servant is the one who will deliver the good news to other nations. Although it is difficult to understand how the faithless people of Israel could bring back the faithless Israel,<sup>19</sup> we have to see that it is not the people alone, but God who would guide them back, as He says in verse 6: “*I will take you by the hand and I will keep you.*”

Who says that? The Lord Himself: “*I am the Lord; that is my name.*” He is the one who created all things. He is the glorious one, not an idol or a made-up god. Isaiah 42:8–9 is addressed to the prophet’s audience, and it is possible that some people in that audience were still confused about who God was and what He was doing. God assures them that they can be confident that everything that the servant does will be accomplished through God’s direction and power,<sup>20</sup> under His guidance.

In verses 10–13 God is referred to in the third person, and verse 13 gives a reason why it is He whom God’s people should be praising: He is “*like a man of war.*” Therefore, we should praise Him for His victories.

In the next three verses, 14–17, God Himself speaks of His battle for His people. It is not just a promise that He will fight for His people; it is God’s own promise,<sup>21</sup> which means that He will not forsake Israel.

In the last section, verses 18–25, Isaiah explains God’s plans for the deaf and blind servant, Israel, who does not seem to understand God’s actions. On the one hand, Israel is deaf because it refused to listen. On the other hand, the use of the word *blind* is a reference to the people’s lack of insight; they were unable to perceive the repercussions and meaning of their experiences. They have seen and yet not seen; they failed to recognize what God was about and to learn their lessons.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence of their sinful behavior of blindly ignoring God’s covenantal

instructions in the law, God allows the plunder of the people as punishment. God wants to show His people that He is the true God; they are to put their trust in Him.

One could ask, “Is Israel herself the object of the mission?” If the question is whether Israel needs to hear again the saving word of God because she fails to understand and take seriously the message, the answer is yes, but it can never stop there. Mission is never done by perfect people. Even though Israel was a weak and disobedient people, they were still the means by which God intended to reach the nations who did not know Him. As Christopher Wright puts it, our entire mission comes from the prior mission of God.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, even after seeing many of God’s saving acts, Israel did not recognize their importance, and so she could not do God’s mission by herself. She is not the power by which God accomplishes His ends; that power is the Word. The Word alone can achieve God’s plan of redemption.<sup>24</sup>

It must never be forgotten that mission requires that the people of God put their faith in action,<sup>25</sup> that they be witnesses of God and carry the good news to the nations. As Israel was to be a vehicle of God’s mission,<sup>26</sup> so also the church was made for mission.

What does this text mean for us? We can see the Servant as an example for all believers who wish to serve God. As His special vessels, filled with the Holy Spirit, we try to accomplish God’s will on earth, by being the light that leads others to salvation. However, no one can fulfill this role like the special Servant, whom the New Testament (Mt 13:14–15) identifies as the Messiah. Only through that Servant will justice be established in the whole earth, and He alone will be a covenant to all the nations.<sup>27</sup>

In Luke 2, we read how this Messiah came to us as a child. Verse 25 says that a righteous and devout man named Simeon—who had also had a revelation from the Holy Spirit that he would see the Lord’s Messiah before his death—went into the temple while Jesus was being presented as the Law required at that time. Simeon held Jesus in his arms and uttered the first poetic speech in Luke, the *Nunc Dimittis*, (Lk 2:29–32).<sup>28</sup> “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel*” (ESV). In the form of a prayer of petition, the *Nunc Dimittis* demonstrates Simeon’s acknowledgement, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of God’s fulfillment of the promise<sup>29</sup> and the “universal character of God’s provision of salvation,”<sup>30</sup> prepared in the sight of all nations.

Simeon was one of those who were waiting for the consolation of Israel, which was fulfilled in Jesus; and now this consolation was prepared for all peoples as salvation “to the Gentiles” and to Israel. His hope was the trust that God would accomplish His promise. The language used by Luke leads us to Isaiah, where Israel, after a time of humiliation, is “consoled” through the God’s restoration.<sup>31</sup>

The Isaiah passage is very close to the passage in Luke. Some recurrent themes in Isaiah are seen in Simeon's oracle: this salvation is brought by God to us and thus it is His work and not ours; this salvation is for all peoples, universal for both Jews and Gentiles; and God delivers this salvation in Jesus, His Servant, bringing glory to Israel as God's chosen people. The role of the Servant, announced by the voice of God at the beginning of Isaiah 42, through whom God works to bring forth salvation, is fulfilled later by Jesus. In this way, the identification of Isaiah's Servant as an individual, the Messiah, is the most natural understanding.

In addition, Simeon saw the salvation that the Child would bring and also the rejection of many when he blessed Jesus: "*This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*" (Lk 2:34–35 ESV). Jesus Himself says in Luke 12:51–53 that He will cause division, and this division will be between the believer and the ones who will reject the truth.<sup>32</sup>

As Jesus is the light of the world who saves us, we are to be the light in the world to share His salvation. All Christians, like the light overcoming darkness, are to illumine society and show it a better way,<sup>33</sup> the only way. The light we are to shine is not just of a verbal proclamation of the Gospel, but also the light of justice and compassion for our neighbors. God's people illuminate within the church by reminding people of God's promise, and outside the church through missional light,<sup>34</sup> which means the work of all Christians in attracting people of the world to worship the true God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Steinmann, *Called to be God's People: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 491.

<sup>2</sup> John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 130.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Henry Rowley, "The Servant Mission: The Servant Songs and Evangelism." *Interpretation* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 1954), 260.

<sup>4</sup> Steinmann, *Called to be God's People*, 519.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Smith, *New American Commentary: Isaiah 40–66*. Vol. 15b. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 76–78.

<sup>6</sup> Steinmann, *Called to be God's People*, 520.

<sup>7</sup> Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *New American Commentary: Isaiah 40–66*, 160.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 169.

<sup>10</sup> George Angus Fulton Knight. *Servant Theology: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40–55* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1984), 44, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Elmer A. Martens "Impulses to Mission in Isaiah: An Intertextual Exploration." *Bulletin For Biblical Research* 17, no. 2 (January 1, 2007), 216.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Henry Rowley, "The Servant Mission: The Servant Songs and Evangelism," 264.

- <sup>14</sup> Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 118.
- <sup>15</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 41.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, 71.
- <sup>17</sup> Knight, *Servant Theology*, 49.
- <sup>18</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 144.
- <sup>19</sup> Smith, *New American Commentary: Isaiah 40–66*, 154.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.
- <sup>21</sup> Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 125.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.
- <sup>23</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 24.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.
- <sup>25</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 39.
- <sup>26</sup> Knight, *Servant Theology*, 53.
- <sup>27</sup> Smith, *New American Commentary: Isaiah 40–66*, 174.
- <sup>28</sup> Raymond Edward Brown, "Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22–40)," *Worship* 51, no. 1 (January 1, 1977), 06.
- <sup>29</sup> Marion L. Soards, "Luke 2:22–40," *Interpretation* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 1990), 402.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.
- <sup>33</sup> John R. W. Stott, "Salt & Light: Four ways Christians can influence the world," *Christianity Today* 55, no. 10 (October 1, 2011), 41.
- <sup>34</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 139.