Isaiah and the suffering servant: A look at Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (biblical references: English standard version)

Laura Helmke
University of Northern Iowa

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Isaiah and the Suffering Servant:  
A Look at Isaiah 52:13-53:12  
(Biblical References: English Standard Version)  

Laura Helmke  
Dr. Robert Seager, College of Natural Sciences  
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Introduction:

As I read the book of Isaiah and the prophecy it holds, it gives a certain insight into something much bigger than my own understanding. As an Orthodox Jewish man once spoke about prophecy, Isaiah takes the viewpoint as one looking down from a precipice. It isn’t necessarily looking directly into the future; instead, it takes the divine big picture and tries to explain it in human terms. So, when looking through the 66 chapters of Isaiah, I understand why this section of Scripture draws curiosity, debate, and passion.

As a child growing up with the Bible as a common place in my life, I have always heard that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 relates to the future Messiah. But, over the years, I am the first to admit my lack of understanding of the connection between the passage and the Book of Isaiah as a whole. So, this is the time to step back and look at Isaiah 52:13-53:12 through the historical and cultural context. As the prophet looks down from a precipice, one needs to understand the world he was living in influences the words in the text. By looking at the culture and the context of the passage, one can then form an interpretation of the suffering servant found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

Historical/Cultural Context:

The book of Isaiah covers centuries of Jewish history from before the attack of Assyria on Jerusalem (740 BCE) to the end of the Babylonian captivity (530 BCE). Scholars view a split between Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 as it appears that the setting of the writing switches from Jerusalem to Babylon. The controversy of authorship continues to be debated whether Second Isaiah (40-66) was written by Isaiah, another author, or multiple authors. For the purpose of studying Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the authorship of
Second Isaiah appears irrelevant when understanding that certain themes and literary elements are continual throughout the whole book. All of Isaiah 1 through 66 stays with us from 740 BC, through the Dead Sea Scrolls, into the Masoretic Text, and Hebrew Bible. The continuity of the text states that it is important to look at the book as a whole because it has value as a whole to Ancient Judaism. One can then conclude that authorship was not a concern to Ancient Jews in considering the Isaiah text inspired by God.

Second Isaiah focuses in the latter part of the Babylonian captivity. As the Jews were discouraged by being held in Babylon, Isaiah cries out to Israel that the Lord is not finished with his chosen people. He offers encouragement that the Lord,

(Isaiah 40:11) ...will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

God promises the return to Jerusalem through his servant, Cyrus of Persia.

(Isaiah 45:1, 4) Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue the nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed. (4) For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. (2 Chronicles 36:23) Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up. (Also see Isaiah 45:1-13, Ezra 1-2)

The Lord not only promises the return to Jerusalem through Cyrus but also restoration of Zion (Jerusalem).

(Isaiah 62:1) For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness and her salvation as a burning torch.
Known as the fourth servant song, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is an apostrophe in the middle of a joyful description of the return to Zion. In Isaiah 52:1-12, the text shouts, “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem” (52:1), and “Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing” (52:11). The description of a suffering servant interrupts this exclamation of return as one who “bore the sin of many; and makes intercession for the transgressors” (53:13). After the apostrophe about the servant, the joyful exclamation about Zion continues through chapter 54. Though the apostrophe appears interruptive, it is not misplaced or added when looking at chapters 52-54. The first exclamation (52:1-12) takes the perspective of one who is still in Babylon first hearing the news that Jews can return to Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 52:7) How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

The second exclamation (54:1-17) continues to describe what should happen once the Jews return to Jerusalem.

(Isaiah 54:2) Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.

The suffering servant then blends the two exclamations as he is the one creating the righteousness in order for the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

Exegesis:

After looking at 52:13-52:12 as a whole, the suffering servant brings reconciliation between the chosen people of Israel and the Lord through the placing of transgressions on the servant. With the surrounding text, this act then allows the people
to return to Jerusalem. Scholars are left with the confusion if the suffering servant is the coming Messiah, Cyrus from Persia, the nation of Israel, or Isaiah. While pulling the verses apart, one can continue to gather information to draw appropriate conclusions on the identity of the suffering servant.

(13) Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. (14) As many were astonished at your appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind- (15) so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

Isaiah 52:13-15 is the first of three sections in this specific apostrophe. The Lord introduces his servant with the command to stop and “Behold, my servant...” (52:13). The perspective switches from the Jews rejoicing in their freedom from Babylon to how the Lord will use his servant to silence to the nations in understanding. The servant’s final outcome is given as “he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (52:13). This outcome only comes through the suffering of the servant because through his suffering, “so he shall sprinkle the nations” (52:15).

The connection between the Lord and the nations is consistently one of reverence and fear.

(Isaiah 41:2b) He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with this sword, like driven stubble with his bow.
(Psalm 105:15) Nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory.
(Psalm 76:12) ...who cuts off the spirit of princes, who is to be feared by the kings of the earth.
(Psalm 138:4) All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth.
(Job 12:21) He pours contempt on princes and loosens the belt of the strong.
It appears that the servant is continuing to reveal the Lord as he sprinkles the nations. The Hebrew word “nazah” means to sprinkle or spatter. In most contexts, it refers to the purification process or the sprinkling of blood.

(Exodus 29:21) Then you shall take part of the blood that is on the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments, and on his sons and his sons’ garments with him...

(Lev 4:6) and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the veil of the sanctuary.

(Lev 4:17) and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the Lord in front of the veil.

(Lev 5:9) and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering.

(Lev 14:7) And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird into the open field.

(Lev 16:14-15) And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in the front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

(Lev 16:19) And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleanesses of the people of Israel.

By his disfiguration and suffering, he sprinkles the nations with his blood in a purification process in the same way that sacrifices were made to atone the Jews from sins. As the nations see the Lord through the blood of the servant, the “kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.”

(1) Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Here begins the beginning of the second section of the apostrophe (53:1-9). This section tells the means of the servant’s sufferings. Verse one brings a transition into the
description of the servant. After claiming that the servant will be exalted and the kings silenced, the prophet makes a statement of frustration that people are not listening. A similar account is given in Isaiah 28:9 where the prophet is frustrated that the chosen people will not listen because they are like a child weaned from their mother’s breast.

(Isaiah 28:9) To whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast?

The prophet again claims peoples’ ignorance as they are not listening and the arm of the Lord has been revealed. The arm of the Lord is the metaphor to the Lord’s salvation and judgment.

(Psalm 98:1) Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.
(Isaiah 30:30) And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and store and hailstones.

So, the Lord has promised action and salvation, but the people continue to ignore Him.

The verse is used again in the New Testament by Paul and John to claim the frustration of trying to convey the message of salvation when no one is listening.

(Romans 10:16) But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?”
(John 12:38) so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

This verse also brings a sense of wonder and excitement to the work of the servant. The prophet saw the need to interrupt the description of the servant to exclaim that the Lord is revealing His arm through the servant. The prophet uses the word “aman” to express the need to believe, trust, and stand firm in the message, and the word “galah” to express the revelation of the message as an intimate process. Through this
interruption, one can conclude that the prophet wanted to emphasize the importance of
the work of this servant and the need to have the chosen people of Israel to stand firm in
the message given to them.

(2) For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry
ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no
beauty that we should desire him. (3) He was despised and rejected by
men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom
men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Our first description of the servant is that he grew up not in wealth or pomp but as
vulnerable and unnoticed. It is difficult to grow roots in dry ground, and young plants or
tender shoots are extremely vulnerable and not expected to last. When looking at this
passage in the perspective that the servant is the nation of Israel, we see Israel as a small
nation that was weak and vulnerable until the Lord built the covenant with them. If the
Messiah is seen as the servant in this passage, we see the connection to Isaiah 11:10 and
Jeremiah 23:5 that he is a shoot from the line of David.

(Isaiah 11:10) In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as the signal
for the peoples- of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall
be glorious.
(Jeremiah 23:5) Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I
will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and
deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

The dry ground symbolizes that the line of David will be dry at the time of the Messiah,
but, yet, the shoot will appear from dry ground.

Secondly, this description gives an account that the servant was unattractive and
repulsive. Therefore, he was rejected by men. Culturally, the sense of community and
oneness were crucial to survival. Loneliness was seen as a terrible plague that appears
continually throughout the laments in the Old Testament.
(Lam 1:1-3) How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemy. Judah has gone to exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

(Lam 3:7) He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago.
(Lam 3:14,17) I have become the laughingstock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long...my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;
(See also, Job 19:13-19, Ps 38; 88; 102)

He was “acquainted with grief” which uses the Hebrew word “yada” meaning that the servant did not just know about grief, he intimately knew grief through experience.

Through this grief, he was a “man of sorrows” which “men hide their faces.” This visual image is commonly found when dealing with lepers of the time. They were not worthy of people looking at them; they were despised and not thought of. The correlation between the servant and a leper gives a visual of the extremes of the servant as one who suffers greatly but will ultimately be exalted.

(4) Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. (5) But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Starting in verse 4, a transition is found as the prophet claims that the servant is suffering because of peoples’ unrighteousness and sorrows even if they consider the servant “stricken by God.” The servant “borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” The Hebrew word “nasa” translated to “borne” was a correlation to atonement, the carrying of one’s burdens, or bearing guilt (Lev 10:17, 16:22).
(Lev 10:17) Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary, since it is a thing most holy and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord?
(Lev 16:22) The goat shall bear all the iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

The servant, in carrying the guilt, was still seen as one that God was punishing and afflicting. In verse 5, the contrasting thought comes through, “But, he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities.” No matter how the people viewed the servant, he not only carried their sorrows, but he was wounded and oppressed for their wrong doings.

The servant was wounded for their transgressions. The Hebrew word for transgressions is “pesa” and it means to revolt, rebel, willful deviation, and breach a civil or religious agreement. He was wounded for their disobedience in not following the covenant of the Lord. In contrast, the servant was crushed for their iniquities. "Iniquities" is a translated word from “awon” meaning to do wrong, perverseness, guilt, punishment. “Awon” encompasses both the wrong doing and the consequences. The servant was crushed in order to cover both the wrong action and the punishment of the Jewish people.

Through the wounding and crushing of the servant, the people received peace and healing. The Hebrew word for peace is “salom.” By definition, “salom” refers to safety, completion, security, and wholeness. The punishment the servant undertook brought atonement, completion, reconciliation, and healing of their wounds. The prophet continues in verse six to clarify that all of the Jews have fallen into disobedience, and, therefore, all the Jews are in need of looking to the servant because their iniquities rest on him.
(7) He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shears is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (8) By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? (9) And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in this mouth.

In verse six, the sheep analogy begins and continues into verse seven as the death of the servant is described. Again, the prophet claims that the servant is afflicted, but now, we see the reaction of the servant as quiet and pious. In comparison when the other prophets went under trial and lamented about their suffering, the servant acts in a way that he seems to know that there is something more than his immediate suffering. The servant is lead through punishment and an unjust trial which leads him to the grave where no wrong speech comes from his mouth. In the middle of the description of his death, the prophet continues to remind the people that the servant is stricken because of their transgressions even though they recognize him as one being stricken by God.

Through the unjust trial, the servant is given “his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.” A “grave with the wicked” could imply death with the common criminal, and the “rich man in his death” relates to either the correlation between rich men and evildoers

(Micah 6:12) Your rich men are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.
(Jer 17:11) Like the partridge that gathers a brood that she did not hatch, so is he who gets riches but not by justice; in the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool.
(Prov 11:16) A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches.
(Prov 28:11) A rich man is wise in his own eye, but a poor man who has understanding will find him out.
or the burial of the servant with the rich man.

Through Isaiah 53:1-9, the servant has been revealed through his actions as the one who will suffer because of the wrongs of the people of Israel. The people will despise and reject him. Though the servant acts and speaks with no violence, he will be lead to an unjust trial and death with criminals.

(10) Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. (11) Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. (12) Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

After the description of the servant’s actions, the third and final section of this apostrophe gives the results of the servant’s suffering. In the prior nine verses, the prophet explains the harsh punishment of the servant. Verse 10 starts with “Yet…” which offers a glimpse of hope that there is more to the death of the servant than pain. Through the death of the servant, we see the Lord’s will being carried through offering the servant as the sin or guilt offering. Found in Lev 5:14-6:7, the sin offering was made for restitution from wrong by bringing an unblemished ram to the priest.

(Lev 6:7) And the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and thereby become guilty.

Through being the atonement, the servant will see his offspring. His spiritual offspring will be those who are free from their transgressions, and his days will be prolonged through the lives of his offspring. Those who are free from their
transgressions are “accounted as righteous” because the servant carried their iniquities and interceded for the people in their transgressions. The substitutionary sacrifice of the servant brings righteousness to the people and a reward of the spoils to the servant.

When looking at the apostrophe as a whole, themes reoccur of the servant’s unattractive appearance (52:14; 53:2-3), his affliction (53:3-4, 7-8), and his bearing of others’ transgressions (53:4-5, 8, 12). The apostrophe offers a poetic response to the coming servant who will offer salvation to the chosen people of Israel and all the nations as his blood sprinkles upon them.

**Who is this servant?**

After looking at this section of Isaiah verse by verse, conclusions need to be drawn if the servant is Cyrus of Persia, the nation of Israel, Isaiah, or the coming Messiah. Cyrus of Persia is defined in Isaiah 45 as one who the Lord has called to

(Isaiah 45:1b)...subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

The Lord exclaims to Cyrus,

(Isaiah 45:3) For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by name, I name you, though you do not know me.

Not only is there no mention of Cyrus suffering, but the suffering servant will “out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (53:11). The suffering servant knows the Lord and why he is suffering; otherwise, his actions would make little sense or have little purpose. Even looking at the account of Cyrus in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Cyrus proclaims the Jews freedom to return to Jerusalem not from the guilt for their transgressions.
(2 Chronicles 36:22-23) Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing. “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him. Let him go up.’”

Also, Cyrus does not follow the life of the suffering servant as he was born to the king of Persia and killed in battle in present day Kazakhstan. We can conclude that the suffering servant is not Cyrus even though Cyrus was God’s instrument in bringing the Jewish people back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile.

Others debate that the suffering servant is actually the author himself, Second Isaiah. This again does not seem plausible with the use of pronouns “he” and “we.” The prophet uses “we” placing himself in the category of those who despise and reject the servant. Though the prophet does experience the isolation from his people, he does not equate himself as the suffering servant as he sees his own wrongs. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way;” (53:6). One can also conclude it is not Isaiah because he was recognized and gave advice to the kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, (Isaiah 7:3-17; 37:5-38:22) which goes against that “he was despised and rejected by men...and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (53:3).

Thirdly, the suffering servant could be in reference to the people of Israel. They were a “young plant, and like a root out of dry ground” before the Lord gave them the covenant for them to be his people.

(Gen 12:1-3) Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And 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 him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

They were rejected and hated by men and thrown into captivity by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Also, in correlation to Isaiah 49:1-6, Israel is called the Lord’s servant.

(Isaiah 49:3) And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.

It can also be debated that Israel is not the suffering servant because of the use of the pronouns in the apostrophe. “We” refers to the Jewish people, or Israel, but “he” is referring to the suffering servant as an individual. The difference between the plural and the singular makes it difficult for Israel to be read as the servant, himself. The issue of pronouns especially becomes a difficulty in 53:6, “By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?” Here we have the suffering servant being oppressed and Israel as a separate identity cutting the servant off from the land of the living.

The final identity of the suffering servant could be found in the coming Messiah. Interestingly, before the medieval times, the major interpretation of this passage by Rabbis was that it referred to the coming Messiah. Examples of this rest in the Babylonian Talmud that states, “The Messiah -- what is his name?...The Rabbis say, the leprous one; those of the house of Rabbi say, the sick one, as it is said, ‘Surely he hath borne our sicknesses.’ (Sanhedrin 98b)” which refers to Isaiah 53:4. Another example rest in a disciple of Hillel, Rabbi Jonathan ben Uzziel, in 200CE who states in an Aramaic translation, “Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be high, and increase, and be exceeding strong: as the house of Israel looked to him through many
days, because their countenance was darkened among the peoples, and their complexion beyond the sons of men. (Targum Jonathan on Isaiah 53, ad locum).” There was a shift in interpretation as some Medieval Jews like, Rabbi Shlomo Itzchaki, 1040-1105, saw the passage relating to the “servant” being the Jews. Some think that this shift was done in order to keep Jews from Christianity because of the horrific way that Christians were acting upon the Jews in the middle ages.

Contextually, the idea of the suffering servant being the coming Messiah continues to fit the use of pronouns as “he” sprinkles the nations and takes on the transgressions of “we,” the people of Israel (52:15; 53:5). If the suffering servant is a singular man, then, it can’t be Cyrus or another one in power. It must be one who is unseen, yet “makes intercession for the transgressors” (53:12). This passage points to the coming Messiah as the suffering servant.

There is confusion why this apostrophe about the intended Messiah would be found in the middle of the joyful celebration of freedom from the Babylonian captivity. One might even wonder if there was question in the prophet’s mind why he said things when it didn’t seem to fit anyone, or maybe he thought it did fit someone that we are not even considering. Again, we return to the analogy of the precipice. He was viewing these words from the Lord as encompassing their past, present, and future. Prophecy may not specifically relate to one particular event alone, but they help us understand the bigger picture of how God views the things he is orchestrating here on earth.

**Jesus: The Suffering Servant:**

As the prophet looks down from the precipice, is it possible that he foresaw Jesus Christ as the coming Messiah? One can compare the apostrophe to the New Testament,
but how do we know that the New Testament was not written to the Old Testament prophecy? One must look at the cross-references across the gospels to see the consistency of the life of Christ with the description of the suffering servant.

Starting with the description that the servant grew up “like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground, and no beauty that we should desire him” (53:3). Jesus came into this world in an undesirable settings as his mother was only “betrothed” to Joseph, and his father was not a ruler of a kingdom but a Jewish man.

(Mt 1:18) Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.
(Lk 1:27) to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary.

He came out of “a root of dry ground” as the Davidic line had been seemingly dry for centuries as the Romans were in control.

As one looks at the end of the life of Christ, the parallels between the suffering servant being Christ as the coming Messiah are present. “He was despised and rejected by men; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (53:3). “Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (53:4). Jesus was despised by the crowd at his trial.

(Mk 15:12-15) And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.
(See also Mt 27:15-22; Mk 15:6-15; Lk 23:18-23, Jn 19:1-7).

He was betrayed by Judas

(Lk 22:47-48) While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to
Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, “Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?”
(See also Mt 26:47-56; Mk 14:43-50; Jn 18:15-18)

and denied by Peter.

(Mt 26:73-75) After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.
(See also Mt 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:54-62; Jn 18:25-26)

Even as Jesus hung on the cross, he received jeering and taunting.

(Mt 27:38) Those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

Before his crucifixion, “he was wounded” (53:5) and “he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (53:7).

(Matthew 27:26-30) Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.
(See also Mark 15:16-20, Luke 22:63-65)

“By oppression and judgment he was taken away” (53:8), Jesus was led through an unjust trial where a criminal was let go in exchange for the death of Jesus even though Pilate could find nothing wrong with Jesus.

(Lk 23:13-15) Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither
did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Look, nothing, deserving death has been done by him.

(See also Mt 27:15-22; Mk 15:6-15; Lk 23:18-23, Jn 19:1-7)

“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence” (53:9). Jesus died among criminals as he was crucified.

(Mathew 27:38) Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.
(See also Mk 15:27, Lk 23:32, Jn 19:18)

He also was buried in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea.

(Mt 27:57-60) When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.
(See also Mt 27:57-60, Lk 23:50-53, Jn 19:38-41)

Even if Jesus’ death seemed similar to the servant, the purpose needs to correlate not just the means of the suffering. In Matthew 26:27-29, Jesus claims the purpose of his death at the Last Supper with the disciples.

(Mt 26:27) Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

See the correlation to Isaiah 53:12, “...because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” In John 10:14-18, we see the correlation between the analogy of sheep in Isaiah 53:6-7 and Jesus’ purpose on the cross.

(Jn 10:16b-17) So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

Even on the cross in Luke 23:34, Jesus claims, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
Conclusion:

What picture came to the prophet’s mind when he spoke the words in Isaiah 52:13-53:12? Did he see the tribe of Israel as the one’s suffering or just a leper being oppressed by those around him? Did he knowingly speak of Jesus?

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 truly is a complex and poetic response that reminds me of my inadequacy to understand the mind of God. I think of how God has chosen to communicate through time, and his use of archetypes that we can wrap our small minds around. Archetypes take people or situations and give a small glimpse into a larger reality. Thinking of Moses, the Israelites’ circumstance put them in a desperate place in the need of a deliverer who came to save them. Not that Moses is the Messiah, but as we look back at the story, we obtain a clearer picture of what one is suppose to look like to be the Messiah or Deliverer. Similarly, as the Jews rest in captivity, they look for a deliverer. It comes in the form of Cyrus, yet another archetype to help them understand the larger picture of the need for spiritual deliverance and redemption not just physical rescue.

So, this is the uncanny part about how God communicates with us. He speaks so that we understand through our circumstances, joys, and struggles in our immediate needs, though in reality, there is such a bigger picture...from the precipice. As we try to climb up that precipice to see what the prophet saw, he was trying to bring comfort to his people, the Jews sitting in captivity. He maybe even saw them as the one’s suffering. In all of this, he gave them hope that this was not going to last forever, and he also saw something greater through the story of their return to Jerusalem. He saw that their
sorrows, transgressions, and iniquities were going to be atoned for by this suffering servant who was willing to take it all upon himself even amongst their rejection.

The amazing thing about prophecy is that as long as the world continues, the prophecy continues to be fulfilled. If we aren’t on the precipice, then we view things differently than those at different points in time. Some things are clearer as we look back over time, but some things have become hazy. Yet, the future is still a blur.

What is clear is that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is that Jesus does fit this description of the suffering servant, and I do think that this passage describes the death and purpose of Jesus Christ. One can find as many parallels between the two as they would like, and it appears that an intellectual approach still points to the direction of Christ. Though, when all conclusions are made and all excuses are on the table, a decision needs to be made in trust that Christ is truly the suffering servant and the one who intercedes for us. We can doubt and deny because “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6). Yet, it does not change that Jesus has already died and “bore the sin of many” (53:12). So, what response should we give?

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (I Peter 2:22-25)

The answer from the precipice to the past, present, and future....RETURN to the Lord!
References


