

THE SUFFERING SERVANT: AN INVITATION TO REPENT

Christian Rutishauser

Dear Fellow Strugglers in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,
Dear Friends of the Hebrew Bible,

I was asked to interpret the fourth Suffering Servant Song (Isa 52:13 – 53:12) and at the same time to say something about the state of Jewish-Christian dialogue. These are two themes that at first sight have nothing to do with one another. At the same time, they are so all-embracing that one would have to speak about each topic for at least an hour. But nevertheless, I am happy to accept the task of speaking on both topics in one talk, because a difficult task can only lead to growth if you accept it. And perhaps we'll end up discovering connections between the fourth Suffering Servant song and Jewish-Christian dialogue.

1. A Poem with a Frame

Let's turn to the Suffering Servant song. In the 19th century, Bernhard Duhm isolated four pieces of text from the Book of Isaiah that until today we call the Suffering Servant Songs. He developed the thesis that they had been added later to the text of the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, so to chapters 40 – 55. My talk is not about how the historical-critical method reconstructed the creative process. However, today Christian exegesis is based on the belief that on the one hand, the Book of Isaiah has three parts, and on the other hand, that the Suffering Servant Songs represent special sections in the text. From this follows that 1) the simple meaning of the words in the fourth Suffering Servant Song is to be seen as part of Isaiah 40 – 55; in this, the direct context of chapters 52 – 54 plays a decisive role. 2) It is the last of four songs and is to be interpreted along these lines. We shall first of all develop the simple meaning of its words. Only in a second step, will we look at how the text was interpreted in the New Testament and in later Christian tradition. As is well known, this text plays a central role in the interpretation of the death of Jesus. As you may know, rabbinic tradition preferred to avoid Isaiah 52/53. Nor is the text part of the synagogue's order of readings. Today, the explanation given for this is that it is a consequence of the Jewish-Christian argument.

Read 52:13. The Suffering Servant Song begins with *hinnei*, an imperative. Readers of the text are called upon to look on *avdi*, "my servant". Immediately the question arises, who is speaking here. It is God. God speaks at the beginning of the song, but already in the first verse of the song, God's speaking seems to pass over to Deutero-Isaiah's speaking. In any case, God speaks again directly only at the very end of the song, starting with Isaiah 53:11, whereby Deutero-Isaiah's speaking turns into God's speaking at the end. So let's read the first and the last verses:

First verse: God raises up his servant and allows him to be successful. But the many had been horrified because of him, since he looked disfigured and inhuman. He will besprinkle the peoples, and the kings will become silent, because they have seen something that they did not expect.

Last verse: The verse begins with a condition: "If you use his life to cancel debt" ... God's servant will find favour. He will see light, will be filled with knowledge. In verse 11, Deutero-Isaiah's speaking passes over into the direct speaking of God: The servant creates justice for the many. He has part in their spoils, so he is successful and raised up. The first verse resounds again. The servant went into death and is terrible to look at.

The first and the last verses form a frame; various actors appear there: 1) God, who speaks to the readers about his servant; 2) the servant; 3) the many who are horrified, but whose sin was borne; 4) the kings and their peoples whom they represent; 5) Deutero-Isaiah who comments on the event at God's side. Of these five actors, two are easy to identify: God and the kings of the peoples. But who is the servant, who are the many, and who is Deutero-Isaiah?

2. The Historical Context

Deutero-Isaiah is a prophet or a writer, a collective of prophets or a collective of writers. At the end of the Babylonian Exile, so during the years after 520 BCE, Deutero-Isaiah picks up the prophet Isaiah, who lived during the 8th century, and his school, and writes a continuation. This Isaiah School was at home in Jerusalem and experienced among other things how, under King Hezekiah, the city was not conquered in 701 by the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib. Faced with this experience, the theology developed that said Zion had to trust entirely in Adonai's leadership. In the chapters Isaiah 1 – 39, it is said that God is with Zion. This prophetic school came into crisis and was silenced because of the conquering of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the deportation into exile of the elite during the years 597 and 587. But now, with the overthrow of the Babylonians and with the exiles' return to Jerusalem under the direction of the new Persian rulers Cyrus and Darius, this theology of providence developed by Deutero-Isaiah and his school is again picked up. God is faithful; God stands to Zion and Jerusalem. This is experienced because it becomes possible to return to Jerusalem. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God", the prophet calls in chapter 40. Roads are to be built for those returning home, because the hard labour is ended. In spite of the exile, God's fidelity can be relied upon. Thus in chapter 52, Zion is called upon to show itself in its former dignity. "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city" (Isa 52:1). In the whole of chapter 52, the Zion that is again to rise up is celebrated. But the prophet has to explain how God's fidelity goes together with the deportation into exile. This is where the servant of God comes in. The statements about Zion are the immediate context for each of the second, third and fourth Suffering Servant Songs. Indeed, the exaltation of Zion and that of the servant are the two sides of the same coin. Both will again be royally established in Jerusalem.

3. The Protagonists

So who is the servant? In the first Suffering Servant Song (Isa 42:1-9), he is introduced as the covenant for the people and the light of the nations. In the second Suffering Servant Song (Isa 49:1-13), the servant refers to this destiny and underlines the universal sending. In the third song as well (Isa 50:4-11), the servant himself speaks as the one who is suffering, but who knows that Adonai is on his side. In the fourth song, he is described in his rejected form and his debasement is interpreted. The servant stands for all those in exile. They were considered by the groups who

had remained in Jerusalem to be rejected, cast out and handed over to death. But now that they are returning to Jerusalem from the nations, those who remained behind recognise that the exiles are the servant of God and that the exile had a positive function: To carry the guilt of those who remained in Zion. So the servant is a fictional person, not a fictitious one. He embodies the collective of those in exile, just as the Bavaria stands for the Bavarians and Lady Liberty for the Americans. The fourth Suffering Servant Song gives the exiles a meaning, but not through distant theological reflection, but rather in direct relationship with those who remained in Jerusalem.

And thus we have also arrived at “the many”: For if the servant is the collective of those in exile who return, the many are those who remained in Jerusalem. They had been horrified and are now taught something better. After 70 years of exile, it is not easy to welcome the descendants of those who had been in exile and to integrate those who had in the meantime become strangers. But the many can be reconciled. Together they are to build Zion’s future. This will succeed on condition that they understand the lot of the servant as a “cancelling of the guilt” and therefore accept it in a positive way. So the many are not the kings and their peoples, as was often said in past interpretations. Rather, they are part of the people of Israel. They are *that* part of Jacob that remained in Jerusalem and that became guilty toward their brothers and sisters in exile by seeing them as punished and rejected by God. The former question, whether the servant represents an individual person, that is to say, the prophet Deutero-Isaiah, or a collective, which is to say Israel, didn’t go deep enough. The servant is a collective, just as the many are a collective, and both are part of the one people of God who are at home in Jerusalem and in exile. But the fourth Suffering Servant Song not only gives a theology of history by explaining how even in exile God’s debased people had an atoning function, but rather it speaks above all of a process of repentance, a *teshuvah* of God’s people who remained in Jerusalem. At the end of the exile their eyes are opened, they confess their blindness and are prepared to welcome again those who are returning as their brothers and sisters. With this repentance, also the many again become servants; the servant during the time of exile mutates in the text as well and becomes “the servants” in the post-exilic period, in which both parts of the people are united and will have descendants. All this occurs in the sight of the world, causing astonishment among the kings and the nations. They too are taught here and benefit thereby. Whatever happens to the people of God has an effect on all nations.

Let’s return to the Suffering Servant Song itself. If the verses 1 and 5 form the frame, the central verses tell of the process of repentance, of the turning back to a new perspective and to the teachings that can be drawn from it. In verses 2 and 3 we have “we-speech”. Here the many are speaking. They describe first, in the second verse, how they saw the servant, those in exile, before the change of perspective. *Read 53:1-3*. In verse 3 on the other hand, we have the view after the change of perspective. *Read 53:4-6*. These two verses are framed by the Name of God YHWH and underline that Adonai led history in this way and that it was also Adonai who brought about the change in perspective. In the fourth verse, Deutero-Isaiah then describes again how misunderstood those in exile were and how Adonai himself allowed those who had remained in the Land simply to forget him. *Read 53:7-10*. The fourth Suffering Servant Song as a whole thus describes a process of repentance and of enlightenment in the face of God’s unexpected working in history. Elements of penance and of understanding belong to this. We have before us a song about God’s history with his people.

4. Standing in the Place of Someone and Atonement

We cannot go into the details of interpretation of the entire song, but let us look at the fundamental question: How could the servant carry the guilt, the sickness, the errors of the brothers and sisters in Zion? Does God allow suffering in the place of someone else? Did the exiles have to

bring a kind of sacrifice, even be themselves a sacrifice for the others in the people of Israel? Is this text about atonement in the name of another, and if so, how is this to be understood?

Already in the first verse it is said that the servant “besprinkles” the many nations (Isa 52:15). Ulrich Berges suspects that this is a reversal of Lamentations 4:15, where the priests smeared with blood bring impurity with them into exile. But here, this blood on the priests’ hands is reinterpreted as a sprinkling for the nations. With this, in a transferred sense, the exile among the nations is said to have a priestly and atoning effect that is universal. However, the servant did not carry the guilt of the nations, but rather the sickness and errors, the guilt of the many, of the brothers and sisters on Zion, of the entire people of Israel. Each person in the people of God who makes this confession can load the guilt upon him and can join in God’s doing. For the speaking of the many comes to its summit at the end of the third verse: “And YHWH has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). When Deutero-Isaiah then speaks in the fourth verse of the servant’s “slaughter” like that of a lamb, the reader is not meant to think here of a sacrifice, for the verb *tbh* signifies profane slaughtering and beating and is clearly different from the words *shht* and *zbh*, which mean ritual slaughtering. The equivalent to exile is not a ritual sacrifice, not a *holocaustum*, but rather killing as an act of judging and of judgment. Thus being far from the land of the living and being handed over to death is not to be understood in a physical-biological sense. Rather, death means the loss of home and of closeness to God who lives in the Temple in Jerusalem and who over and over again gives life through the liturgy performed before him. When it is then said in the concluding verse that the “servant poured out his life” (53:12), this does not mean that the servant was slaughtered as in cultic worship. In Isaiah 53:10 as well, the word *asham*, canceling of guilt, is a juridical and not a cultic concept. When the many acknowledge the servant as a righteous person, as God himself has identified him, they themselves will become righteous. So the language here is chosen based on the court that creates justice. Thus everything goes toward the integration of the servant and the many, of the servant and Zion.

Adrian Schenker in a study comes to the conclusion that punishment in the place of another and suffering in the place of another do not exist in the Hebrew Bible, but that suffering and punishment by God can hit upon people in the surroundings, also over and beyond generations, when those who are guilty are called upon to render an account of their deeds. God does not punish unjustly. But people can be hit by the punishment suffered by others because they are intertwined in their deeds. Precisely the interpretation of the Name of God in Exodus 34:7ff, where the text speaks of the merciful God who pursues guilt unto the third and fourth generation, is an expression of divine forbearance. The later generations do not carry guilt in the place of another, but rather to the extent to which they do not repent, they carry their own guilt, which however can have become particularly great through a growth that has continued for generations. When Schenker then comes to speak of the interpretation of the fourth Suffering Servant Song, he sees the guilt carried by the servant in the contempt shown him by the many. When the servant does not hit back and does not pass on to others who are weak the violence he suffered, but rather remains silent, as the first Suffering Servant Song already emphasised, he interrupts not only the vicious circle of violence, but also frees the many of having to give answers. This is why the many do not even confess their sins in the fourth Suffering Servant Song. Rather, they are only called upon to change their thinking.

5. Christian and Jewish Interpretations

The greatest challenge for the disciples of Jesus consisted in interpreting his disgraceful execution on the cross and his death and in seeing in this flayed man the anointed of God. From the beginning, the fourth Suffering Servant Song helped to interpret the death of Jesus on the cross. And until today, the fourth Suffering Servant Song is read on Good Friday in the Roman Catholic litur-

gy. Here, the Gospel according to Luke should be named as an example: after the crucifixion, the disappointed disciples are walking along their way, and the risen Jesus interprets the death of Jesus based on “Moses and the prophets” (Lk 24:25-27). We can gather from the Acts of the Apostles, which Luke also wrote, that part of this is the fourth Suffering Servant Song. There it is reported that an Ethiopian official who had come to Jerusalem on pilgrimage reads Isaiah 53 on his way home, and Philip explains to him who the suffering servant here is: Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified (Acts 8:30-35). Just as Jesus is identified with the servant of God, Philip takes on the role of the “many”, and the Ethiopian official, a God-fearing person, corresponds with the “kings from among the nations”. Here too, it is about a change of perspective, from the expectation of an exalted Messiah to an anointed of God who had to suffer and who carries the guilt of the others, and who is only exalted through this. The official immediately lets himself be baptised by Philip. We have to assume “in the Name of Jesus”, so in the name of the servant of God in Isaiah 53. Finally, in the Gospel according to Luke, the passion of Jesus is composed entirely according to the Suffering Servant Songs, which can be seen above all in the farewell meal (Lk 22:14-38) and in the description of the crucifixion (Lk 23:32-49). It goes without saying that on the one hand, the fourth Suffering Servant Song receives a new interpretation in the New Testament, and on the other hand, the idea of the Messiah is marked by the Suffering Servant Song. Thus the Gospel according to Luke gives a wonderful example of how the biblical text was made fruitful in a new situation, which also shows how alive the Word of God is.

All later Christian interpretations of Isaiah 52/53 came about in this messianic-christological perspective. The Christians discovered the prophetic meaning of the Isaiah text, so to speak its mysterious inner side, in this interpretation. But it must be pointed out that the Christian theology of the death of Jesus “for our sins”, as Paul already formulated in 1 Corinthians 15:3, not only draws from Isaiah 54:4, but also connects with the concepts coming from the sacrificial worship in the Temple. Especially after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE, Jesus’s death as a martyr could be interpreted as a real sacrifice of atonement. The death of Jesus is interpreted as a sacrifice of reconciliation based on Yom Kippur, and it replaces it. This explanation at the same time had the advantage that it could also situate the destruction of the Temple historical-theologically. Thus a coherent theology was created that explains both the crucifixion of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. The Letter to the Hebrews is surely the crown witness of this interpretation. We can’t enter further into Christian thinking on atonement here; in our connection it is only to be remembered that not only Isaiah 52/53 is used as a biblical source for Christian theology, but also the theology of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.

Although the harsh criticism of the Book of Isaiah not only gave rise to sympathy among the rabbis, and although the martyrdom of the prophet Isaiah draws especially the attention of the Talmud, Isaiah 53 was interpreted anew starting already in the 2nd century BCE. During the time of the Maccabean revolts, the servant of God was referred to in interpreting the martyrs, as precisely the translations of the Hebrew text into Greek show clearly. Thus this Jewish interpretation is already in the perspective in which the disciples of Jesus would interpret the fourth Suffering Servant Song. During the rabbinic period, interpretations then again arose in which the Jews in the Diaspora saw themselves as servant of God. They saw themselves as those who may not open their mouth and who suffer under the burden of taxation by foreigners and who have to carry this. In this sense, Isaiah 53 is interpreted for example by the Karaite Salmon Ben-Yeruham in the 10th century and Ibn Ezra in the 12th century.

6. The Servant of God and the Jewish-Christian Conversation

After this reading of the fourth Suffering Servant Song, I now do want to pass on to the second topic, the present state of the Jewish-Christian conversation. Is there a connection between the

two topics? First of all, it must be said that for years now the Catholic Church has been calling upon Christians and Jews to study Scripture together. The Church emphasises that Jewish and Christian interpretations each have their own right. Precisely for the fourth Suffering Servant Song, it is particularly important that we become capable of acknowledging the original meaning of Scripture alongside rabbinic and Christian interpretations and adaptations. In this, Christians have to learn above all that the Christological interpretation is not the only one. Jews are invited to broaden beyond their own faith community the principle that Scripture has 70 faces. It goes without saying that each interpretation has existential respective significance, even if it is not followed intellectually.

In Jewish-Christian dialogue a further interpretation suggests itself for Christians along with the Christological interpretation: The Church can understand itself as the many, while it can see Judaism in the servant of God. Just as the many in Jerusalem had to learn that the people in exile are not rejected by God, the Church has learned since *Nostra aetate* that Judaism is not rejected. The Church has gone through a process of repentance by coming away from the teaching of contempt and rejection of Judaism as the people of God and speaking today of the “covenant” between God and Israel “that has never been rejected”. It sees itself like the many as part of the people of God, while Judaism is equally the people of God. Situating both parts in relation to one another would be the goal after the centuries of contempt of Judaism and its almost-annihilation in the Shoah, just as the many had to be reconciled with the servant after the Babylonian exile. The fact that Orthodox Judaism would be more inclined to count the Church among the kings and the nations than to identify it with the many, is another legitimate interpretation of the text. Even in dialogue, one doesn’t have to arrive at one single opinion, but rather to allow for a multiplicity of interpretations.

7. A Definition of the Relationship from a Roman Catholic Perspective

But with the definition of the relationship and in situating Judaism and Christianity, we have come to one of the central themes of dialogue today. For on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra aetate*, the Church published a document in December 2015 entitled “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable”. The document looks back on the history of the relationship between Judaism and the Catholic Church, and in one chapter it develops that the Jewish-Christian relationship cannot simply be situated in terms of interfaith dialogue, but that it rather represents a unique connection, at least from the Christian perspective. In saying this, Judaism is not seen as the mother religion nor as the root of Christianity. Rather, both faith communities represent a legitimate continuation of the biblical history and a new interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. The sibling metaphor is used. The text then develops how Jews and Christians belong together. For this, the Vatican document speaks of how the Old and the New Testament on the one hand, and the Sinai Covenant and the Golgotha Covenant on the other, relate to one another. On the one hand, Judaism and Christianity are not seen as two parallel paths to salvation. Jesus Christ and the New Testament have universal significance. But on the other hand, the Catholic Church recognises God’s covenant with Israel and emphasises that it does not have an institutionalised mission toward the Jews. For the universal sending toward mission, baptism and evangelization is with regard to the nations, to all human beings so that they might be led to God. But Israel is already in the covenant with God. The question remains open, what the claim of Christian faith then is toward Judaism. The document does not answer this; but experts are continuing their discussion. In the meantime, the Vatican points to Paul, who in Romans 11 speaks of a mystery regarding how, at the end of time, the Jews and the disciples of Christ will come together.

So with this 2015 document, the Church is trying to perceive Judaism as well as possible in its own self-understanding and at the same time to formulate a Christian theology in which Judaism

can have a positive role. Along with the definition of the relationship of the Church and Israel, the second big theological question in today's Jewish-Christian dialogue is that concerning the significance of *Eretz Israel* and of the State of Israel from a Christian perspective. This official document is silent regarding this. The Vatican has a relationship with the State of Israel according to international law and does not interpret the State's history theologically but rather in a profane historical and secular way. There are only a few Roman Catholic theologians who are working on a deeper theological understanding of it. In any case, they want to be an alternative to an evangelical Christian Zionism, which for them not only interprets the Bible in too fundamentalist a way, but also does not respect the differentiation between faith and politics. In addition, Christian Zionism does not reflect at all or not sufficiently on the significance of the Palestinian Church, as well as on fundamental human rights.

8. Jewish Theology of Christianity

In my last point now I shall turn to both Jewish answers to the 2015 Vatican paper. On the one hand, there is the short statement from renowned Orthodox rabbis from Israel, the USA and Europe entitled, "Doing the Will of our Father in Heaven". In eight points, they acknowledge that since the Shoah, the Church has undergone a serious process of repentance. This is also the precondition for Judaism to be able to interpret and assess Christianity anew. In saying this, the document does not seek points in common with Christianity, though these are named. Rather, Judaism's line of tradition is recalled, which does not see the creation of Christianity as "a chance occurrence", but rather as divine guidance in order to bring to the nations "ethical monotheism" and the Bible. Moses Maimonides and Yehuda Halevi, Jakob Emden and Samson Raphael Hirsch are quoted as examples. Connected with this positive view of Christianity is the internal Jewish discussion on whether Christianity must be seen as *avodah zarah*, idol worship, or not, because of its belief in the Trinity. Critics of the document add that the quotations from tradition are taken out of context. On the other hand, the document's statement that the Church is a partner in shaping the world based on ethics and in working toward the redemption of the world, finds great support. The fact that here a kind of theology of Christianity is presented on the part of the Jewish-Orthodox side is something new, since past Jewish documents that assessed Christianity in a positive way, as for example "*Dabru Emet*" in the year 2000, came from Jewish Liberal and scholarly circles.

Jewish-Catholic collaboration in ethical and social matters is also taken up by the 2017 document "Between Jerusalem and Rome", which was signed by the *Rabbinical Council of America*, the *Conference of European Rabbis* and the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. It looks specifically at the Jewish-Roman Catholic dialogue, and was written so to speak in the wake and under the pressure of "Doing the Will of our Father in Heaven". It goes less far theologically, and it underlines several times that it does not want any "theological dialogue" with the Church. Instead, partnership in commitment for ethical values, for freedom of religion, for the fight against religious extremism, etc. is at the centre. The document also appreciates as exemplary the Roman Catholic Church's commitment to dialogue with Judaism. It acknowledges the Church's new orientation in relation to Judaism without undertaking a theological situating of Christianity. Thus an explicit theological interpretation of Christianity or also of Jewish-Christian dialogue is avoided. In the face of the theological self-expressions that say Judaism is the keeper of biblical monotheism and light for the nations on the one hand, and the document's implicit theological statements on the other hand, the question arises above all, what is here to be understood as theology. To what extent is it possible to separate theology from ethical and social questions? The value of this document consists above all in the fact that it is not the work of a few rabbis, but of representative rabbinical associations.

At the conference last May in Frankfurt on the present state and the future of Jewish-Christian dialogue, three areas were named along with the topics already mentioned that today are at the centre of Jewish-Christian scholarly work: 1) the Jewish Jesus; 2) a new interpretation of Paul; and 3) the separation of the paths that led to rabbinic Judaism and to Christianity. The central desire to anchor the insights of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the various theological disciplines and in the broad public of Jews and Christians must be added. The Jewish-Christian relationship remains too much a matter of specialists and enthusiasts. The Bible Week in Ohrbeck is surely a tool for reaching many interested people. – Thank you for your attention.

*Fr. Dr. Christian Rutishauser, sj (*1965), has been provincial of the Swiss Jesuits since 2012. Theology studies in Fribourg and Lyon; 1992 entered the Jesuit Order; student chaplain in Bern, doctoral work in Jewish studies in Luzern with times in Jerusalem and New York; 2001-2012 head of education at the Lassalle House, Centre for Spirituality, Dialogue and Responsibility; work in the area of spirituality, retreats and contemplation; teaching posts in Jewish studies at the Philosophy College in Munich, at the Theology Faculty in Fribourg i.Ü., and at the Gregorian University in Rome; member of the Jewish-Roman Catholic commission for encounter of the Swiss and German Bishops Conference; member of the delegation of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, since 2014 permanent counsellor of the Pope in this matter. For two decades he has led study trips to Israel, and in 2011 he realised the project, "On Foot to Jerusalem".*

Translation: Sr Katherine Wolff nds

Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern, für Bau
und Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS 

 Bistum
Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages