

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

BY

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HE author of the Acts of the Apostles tells how one day Philip the deacon was travelling south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. He caught up with an Ethiopian eunuch driving along the same way in his chariot, and, as he did so, he overheard him reading aloud to himself the prophecies of Isaias. Philip asked him whether he understood what he was reading, and the Ethiopian replied: 'How could I understand unless someone tells me what it is all about?' He had got as far as: 'He was led away like a sheep to be slaughtered, like a lamb that is dumb before its shearer, he would not open his mouth. He was brought low and all his rights taken away; who shall tell the story of his age? His life is being cut off from the earth.' Said the eunuch: 'Who is the prophet speaking of here? himself, or someone else?' Philip answered by telling him all about Jesus<sup>1</sup>.

This incident was the beginning of Christian exegesis on the Servant-Songs: one of the most disputed problems in the history of Old Testament interpretation has always been the identity of the Servant of the Lord in the fifty-third and related chapters of the Book of Isaias.

Early ecclesiastical tradition as well as the majority of commentators, says Père Condamin<sup>2</sup>, were right in identifying the Servant of Yahweh with the Messiah of the gospels, and in considering the four passages in question (42, 1-4; 49, 1-6; 50, 9; 52, 13 - 53, 12) as a direct reference to his work, sufferings, death and universal reign. The oldest commentary is that given by the Targum, which, although written at the beginning of our era, witnesses to Jewish opinion before the time of Christ. In the fourth Song (53, 13 - 53, 12), those verses which refer to the glory of God's Servant are applied to the Messiah, whereas his humiliations and sufferings are made to apply to the people of Israel. Later, a Messianic interpretation of the entire passage gained many Jewish supporters<sup>3</sup>.

The Christian Fathers and the Liturgies are, from the earliest times, unanimous in considering the Messiah expiating the sins of the world as the hero of this fourth Song; indeed, at all times, an

<sup>1</sup> Acts 8, 26 sqq.

<sup>2</sup> *Le livre d'Isaïe*, Paris, 1905, p. 344.

<sup>3</sup> J. S. Van der Ploeg, *Les Chants du Serviteur de Jahvé*. 1936, p. 2.

individualist interpretation has rallied more defenders than any other. The latest contribution to the literature of the subject comes from the Professor of Hebrew in Bangor University, and it constitutes an exhaustive treatment, complete with bibliography, of all the aspects of the problem<sup>4</sup>. Professor North tells us first of all about the many explanations put forward by Jews and Christians from the beginning until now. He then critically examines the text and the question of authorship of the Servant-Songs. He translates them for us. And he comes to the conclusion that, after all, the Messianic interpretation is still the most satisfactory.

Some recent scholars have not accepted this traditional view because of its apparent artificiality—but this only led them to adopt a pseudo-historical interpretation equally artificial really, whether in terms of an individual, such as Jeremias, or of a community, Israel. As has been said, Professor North's solution is the old one, but yet it has in it something new. 'The Servant is a soteriological, rather than a political, Messianic figure. The Prophet saw reality in a few brief but vivid flashes, and he pictured what he saw, not indeed in a portrait photographically exact, but full and exact enough for Jesus to recognise it as pointing to Himself. . . . May we not then, in the light of the principle of the unity of Scripture, believe that in the purpose of God the Servant-Songs were primarily intended to afford Him guidance?' In his moments of deepest insight the Prophet, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, did perceive something of the true nature of God's plan, and his vision found its fulfilment in Jesus.

The unity of Holy Scripture, thus affirmed by Professor North, is a concept familiar to those who strive to live the life of the Church in her liturgy. Moreover how could the Holy Spirit have intended one thing in the prophecy and another in the gospel? Read St Mathew VIII, 16: 'And when evening came, they brought him many persons who were possessed and he cast out the evil spirits with his words, and healed all that were sick, in fulfilment of the word spoken by Isaiah the prophet, He took our infirmities upon himself, and bore our sickness (Isaias 53, 4)'. Père Lagrange comments on this use of the citation from Isaiah: 'By taking the punishment upon himself, the Servant expiated the crime also; thus could he deliver his brethren from both the one and the other'<sup>5</sup>. Or again in 1 Peter 2, 21, the Apostle tells us that Christ died for us; he who had done no evil thing gave himself up to an unjust judge; he said not a word when they cursed him; he suffered without

<sup>4</sup> C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*. Oxford, 1948. 15s.

<sup>5</sup> *Evangile selon Saint Matthieu*. Paris, 1923, p. 169.

a complaint. St Peter goes on in this strain, leaving no doubt in the reader's mind as to his meaning: 'So, on the cross, his own body took the weight of our sins; we were to become dead to our sins, and live for holiness; it was his wounds that healed you' (cf. *Isaias* 53, 4, 5).

In these Songs, and particularly in the last one, we see our Saviour weighed down by every sort of evil, and, in the end, put to death after an unjust condemnation. Humanly speaking it seemed that all was ended for him, that his work had failed, and that he had hoped vainly in his heavenly Father. From the Man Christ was wrung the anguished cry: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' But, in reality, God so ordered everything that by his death his victory began. Christ is the grain of mustard-seed which after being buried in the ground grows into a tree, a great tree and bearing many branches, the Church<sup>6</sup>.

Man's evil will was the occasion of Christ's suffering, but it was in truth the divine Will which disposed the events that took place. We are often deceived, and at times disconcerted, by appearances. Men are restless, and bestir themselves, but above them divine Providence serenely orders all things unto the end which it has predetermined. St Augustine told the Jews that, unknown to themselves, they fulfilled by their cruelty the Pasch which they still celebrate in ignorance of its real significance<sup>7</sup>. God willed his Son to be crushed by pain because during his passion he would bear and expiate the sins of other men. Christ bore sin in his body, wrote St Hilary, but it was our sin he bore<sup>8</sup>. If he bore the sins of men, he bore too the sufferings which are the wages of sin—our sickness, our pain. His body even underwent, while enduring the appalling torture of crucifixion, the physical disfigurement which the result of intense pain. Certain writers, like Tertullian for instance, insist so much upon this in the light of *Isaias* 53, that they seem almost oblivious of other inspired passages which speak with equal force of the radiant beauty of the Son of Man<sup>9</sup>. In reality the beauty of God's Son was temporarily hidden from the eyes of men during the Passion, but became once more resplendent after his Resurrection.

The Passion and Death of Christ have the character of a true sacrifice in the strict sense of the word: there is priest, victim and

<sup>6</sup> See the magnificent sermon, Augustinian in inspiration, of St Caesarius of Arles, ed. Morin, p. 557. Also, St Gregory, *Moral.* XIX, 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Contra Judaeos*, V.

<sup>8</sup> *De Trinitate*, X. For the theological difficulties of this passage, see *Summa Theologica*, III. xv, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *De carne Christi, passim*. The teaching of the Schoolmen on this point is the subject of a paper by Padre Ferretti in 'Xenia Thomistica', vol. II. Rome, 1925, pp. 319-333.