

Servant Song Sermons: Second Isaiah as Preacher and Homiletical Guide

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Abstract: *This paper explores a homiletical reading of Isaiah's Servant Songs. Surveying rhetorical analysis of Isaiah 40–55, it explores the degree to which Second Isaiah's genre can be understood as a form of preaching. It then examines Isaiah 42:1–9 as a homiletical test case that provides a different (i.e., rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights alternative models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher's response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights offer guidance for interpreting the text and for OT preaching today.*

In “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast,” Susanne Scholz argues that too often our hermeneutics ignore the biblical text's connection to contemporary suffering.¹ Violence, she says,

...is aided and abetted by the biblical hermeneutics dominantly practiced in the United States. Mainstream Bible scholarship does not make connections to internal US-American violence; it is silent about it, sometimes even endorsing it. In fact, it is grounded in exegetical methods and reading strategies that distance biblical meanings from the various forms of violence plaguing the country.²

Consider the interpretation of Isaiah's Servant Songs.³ These texts—perhaps more than others—bear the imprint of traditional biblical hermeneutics. Until recently, historical criticism marked them as separate from their literary context and relegated reflection on suffering to Babylonian and Persian periods of domination. Christological readings of the Songs also ignore the surrounding Isaian context while focusing reflection on suffering to the experience of Jesus. The problem here is not with historical examination and theological reflection, *per se*.⁴ The

¹ Susanne Scholz, “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast: About the Politics of Biblical Hermeneutics within the United States of America,” in *La Violencia and the Hebrew Bible: The Politics and Histories of Biblical Hermeneutics on the American Continent*. Susanne Scholz and Pablo Andinach, eds. Semia Studies No. 82 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 139.

² Ibid. 139.

³ Unless otherwise specified, “Songs” is not a generic assessment. Rather “Songs” or “Servant Songs” refer to the well-known passages marked off by Bernhard Duhm from Isaiah 42:1–4 (5–9), 49:1–6, 50:4–7, and 52:13–53:12. I agree with John Goldingay's and David Payne's assessment of Isaiah 49:1–6, which may be extended to all of the “Songs”: such a passage “might be described as a poem and/or autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony. It is not a song.” John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, Volume II (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 155.

⁴ Of course, interpreting the Songs as sermons does not eschew hermeneutics that engage historical and theological scholarship. Still, historical critical analysis has delivered new insights into the workings of Isaiah while also (paradoxically) obscuring the workings of Isaiah—especially when it comes to the Servant's identity. Thus, Patricia Tull asserts: “The relationship between Israel and the servant was obscured for decades by Bernhard Duhm's theory of four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53, [that were] discontinuous with their contexts.” “Isaiah,” 255–266, in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Third Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 263. So too, the impact of Christian messianism on these passages is striking. In the Revised Common Lectionary, Isaiah 42 is read

problem is that such endeavors alone have not enabled the Church to think critically and speak clearly about the suffering of people in the contemporary world. Indeed, too frequently our historical and theological study enables suffering and domination.

Scholz calls for an open and honest critique of the impact of our preaching and interpretation of scripture.⁵ On the one hand, we might label this approach a feminist post-colonial hermeneutic. But Scholz's call also evokes the work that a good preacher might do; exegeting a text, analyzing something of its history of interpretation, appreciating the ways in which the text's language and voice(s) come in contact with voices and language today, and looking for theological/political/ideological implications for a contemporary audience. In this way, Scholz is calling for a homiletical hermeneutic.

Dale Andrews argues something similar when he asserts that preachers need to learn to preach more like Second Isaiah.⁶ Andrews speaks specifically here of Second Isaiah as a "hearer-response" type of preaching that reimagines older texts in light of contemporary experiences of suffering. This homiletical hermeneutic seeks to discern how texts speak to congregations then and now. Such an approach highlights Second Isaiah's preaching⁷ in the "Belly of the Beast" and may contribute to unmasking contemporary hermeneutical bias by offering an alternative to traditional historical and theological approaches to Second Isaiah.

This paper asks: What if preachers read scripture, and specifically Isaiah's Servant Songs, with a homiletical lens? What new insights open up when these Songs are understood as some form of preaching?⁸ What preaching possibilities arise for proclaiming the OT when the Servant

on the Baptism of the Lord, Epiphany, Year A. Isaiah 49 is read a week later, also in Year A. Isaiah 50 is read in the Liturgy of the Passion and on Wednesday of Holy Week in all three years. And, Isaiah 52–53 is read on Good Friday every year. Such a reading practice in the Church creates the impression that the Songs, and Isaiah as a whole, are primarily focused on Jesus. Thus scholars like James Luther Mays can opine about Isaiah in ways that point as much to (later) christology as to textual evidence within Isaiah: "Simply put, Adonai is sovereign; there is a city of God; and there is a son of God." James Luther Mays, "Isaiah's Royal Theology and the Messiah," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, Christopher Seitz, ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39–40.

⁵ She proposes a hermeneutic that "fosters analysis of the various interpretation histories of biblical literature," highlights "the historical, theological, political, and ideological implications of biblical exegesis in the world," "exposes interpretations...as ideological constructs," and seeks to foster an "appreciation for textual fluidity, multiplicity, and 'creolization.'" Scholz, "How to Read the Bible," 156–7.

⁶ Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology in the Black Church: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 124.

⁷ A precise definition of preaching is elusive and should remain so. Homileticians continue to wrestle constructively with articulating the components of preaching and its borders as a genre, which are always shifting. For the purposes of this paper, I am thinking of preaching in Second Isaiah in several ways. These texts show evidence of a "sent witness," who speaks about God's claim about life to all peoples in ways that demand speech and action from hearers. See Tom Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 46. Second Isaiah also engages the six characteristics of African American preaching that Frank Thomas enumerates: these texts show the *centrality* of other scriptures in the language, imagery, and narrative arch of a proclamation that engages the senses, responds to human need, seeks the voice of God to speak through one's words, celebrates good news, and fosters an embodied response in preacher and hearer alike. Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997), 2–3. Finally, Jerusha Neal's wrestling with the definition of preaching helps us see that like all preachers, Second Isaiah is "negotiating a morass of uneasy borders between text and exegete, manuscript and performance, communal role and personal identity—not to mention the uneasy borders of a hurting world" as they seek to make present the absent person of God. Jerusha Matsen Neal, *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, The Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁸ Understood homiletically, the Servant in Second Isaiah's Songs can be seen to experience systemic injustice, economic depression, cultural disgrace, and theological abuse. In response, the Servant figure delivers "The word

Songs become our homiletical guide? Since space does not allow full engagement with all four of the traditionally demarcated Songs, this paper examines the first Servant Song (Isa 42:1–4 [5–9]) as a homiletical test case. Here, reading the Song as a sermon provides a different (i.e., rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher’s response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights can provide helpful guides for OT preaching today.

Second Isaiah as Preaching

While I claim only that the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah *can be* read homiletically as words responding to various forms of domination, it should be noted that Second Isaiah’s prologue begins with a call for multiple voices (plural imperative) to “cry out” or “preach” (*qara* in Hebrew). This call is followed by a voice crying out in the wilderness (*qara* 40:3–5), a discussion about what to cry out (*qara* 40:6–8), and a call for a feminine herald⁹ to declare good news (*mevasheret*) from the mountaintop (40:9–11).

Perhaps guided by this homiletically-centered prologue, many biblical scholars have begun to reflect on Second Isaiah as participating in a form of preaching. For instance, in her summary of developments within the history of Isaiah scholarship, Patricia Tull notes that Second Isaiah has been treated as a collection of voices describing God,¹⁰ that recontextualizes older texts,¹¹ seeks to expand meaning,¹² engages in conversation and debate,¹³ learns from tradition,¹⁴ and speaks “a word in season.”¹⁵ Indeed, many scholars see in Second Isaiah marks of homiletic work.¹⁶ Claus Westermann speaks of “Deutero-Isaiah’s preaching” of “his gospel”

not heard in the street” (Isa 42:2b), has “A mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa 49:2a), speaks with the “Tongue of a teacher” (Isa 50:4a), and becomes “The startler of many nations” (Isa 52:15a). These passages offer a word in response to imperial domination. Further, homiletical reflection upon them can help uncover forces of domination within our own hermeneutics.

⁹ At least grammatically feminine.

¹⁰ Patricia Tull, “One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving of Isaiah’s Polyphonic Message,” in *As Those Who Are Taught: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL*, Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds. (Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 279–314. Specifically, Tull notes that the scholars of the Isaiah Seminar at the Society of Biblical Literature agreed broadly that the book of Isaiah is a sustained effort “to describe God’s dealings with Jerusalem over the course of several centuries.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 290 (emphasis added).

¹¹ The book of Isaiah grew and took its final form as a result of “*Reinterpretation and recontextualization* of the prophet’s words for generations beyond his horizon.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 291 (emphasis added).

¹² “Rabbinic Bibles presenting the Scriptures in the center of the page surrounded by commentary declare visually this expansion around the text that began with Isaiah’s transmitters.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 294.

¹³ Here Tull notes that scholars like Benjamin Sommer portray Isaiah as “*a record of debate, of conversation, of revision within tradition.*” Others, like Claire Matthews, assert that Isaiah is “*the product of a multiplicity of voices adding, generation by generation, to an original body of ‘authentic’ Isaianic prophecy, as that prophecy was reactualized, supplemented, and reinterpreted ... a kind of prophetic chorus—and sometimes cacophony.*” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 312 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Tull’s own view on Second Isaiah, and especially Isaiah 49–55, is that the prophet engages traditions from Jeremiah, Lamentations, Nahum, several Zion psalms, and First Isaiah. Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 304–5.

¹⁵ For Tull, Second Isaiah and its interpreters exemplify “the ongoing rhythm described by the prophet, of hearing and teaching, of listening in order to speak a word in season.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 314.

¹⁶ This understanding of Isaiah as preacher likely began in the NT period. In his study of Paul’s use of Isaiah in Romans 9–11, Ross Wagner demonstrates that Isaiah’s insights and images shape Paul’s rhetoric. Even for something as important as Jewish and Christian relation to God, Paul will turn to the branches and roots of Isaiah’s tree imagery (Rom 11:16b–24). These observations lead Wagner to conclude that “Paul finds in Isaiah a fellow preacher of the gospel... a veiled prefiguration of his own mission to proclaim the good news.” Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul <In Concert> in the Letter to the Romans* (London: Brill, 2002), 356.

and “proclaiming God’s word.”¹⁷ R.F. Melugin argues that Isaiah 40–55 “is a collection of originally independent units, but the arrangement is kerygmatic.”¹⁸ Klaus Baltzer reflects on Deutero-Isaiah as “liturgical drama” set within “the act of worship.”¹⁹

Shalom Paul’s description of Isaiah’s rhetoric also sounds like a description of preaching. He observes “the repetition of words for emphatic purpose,”²⁰ the use of “rhetorical questions,”²¹ “the employment of triads for the purposes of accentuation” and “insertion of quotations” often as dialogue.²² He describes further elements of proclamation, including multiple examples of assonance and alliteration,²³ the use of leitmotifs, and “the repetition of words and expressions.”²⁴ He finds poetic articulations of synonymous phrases and parallelisms and the engagement with many different literary genres, including: hymns, polemics, poems, words of consolation, rebuke, mock court scenes, eschatological tropes, and Servant Songs among others.²⁵ For all these reasons, Paul argues that the witnesses in Isaiah 40–66 demonstrate “a proclivity for words, expressions, and phrases.”²⁶

Joseph Blenkinsopp argues this point even further. He asserts, “One could find in these chapters [Isa 40–55] examples of practically all of the numerous types [of rhetoric] catalogued in books 8 and 9 of Quintilian’s classic *Institutio Oratoria*.”²⁷ Far from merely acknowledging good rhetoric employed within a written manuscript, Blenkinsopp offers a generic assessment of his findings. He holds that Isaiah 40–55 “stood at the oral end of the orality-literacy continuum.”²⁸ These chapters point to an orator, trained in public speaking.²⁹ They participate in a homiletic tradition that arises following the fall of Jerusalem and continued through the early years of Persian rule.³⁰ Their peers include a group of “public speakers, or preachers”³¹ whose proclamation is documented in parts of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic strand in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and parts of Zechariah.³² Blenkinsopp asserts further that the context of Isaiah 40–55 should be understood as a place of preaching, “perhaps an inchoate synagogue network of some kind—in which this activity was going on.”³³ He points to similar preaching settings for

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*. The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 14, 21.

¹⁸ R.F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55*, BZAW 141 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 175, cited in Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 32.

¹⁹ Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, Hermenia, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 22. John Wilks is not convinced of Second Isaiah’s focus on liturgical drama. He argues that the textual evidence suggests, at best, that Second Isaiah was an “incompetent dramatist.” However, Wilks finds ample evidence of Second Isaiah was a poet. John Wilks, “The Prophet as Incompetent Dramatist,” *Vetus Testamentum* Vol 53 no. 4 (2003): 530–543, 542.

²⁰ Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24.

²¹ Ibid. 25.

²² Ibid. 26.

²³ Ibid. 27.

²⁴ Ibid. 30.

²⁵ Ibid. 31.

²⁶ Ibid. 27.

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 19a (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 63–4.

²⁸ Ibid. 64.

²⁹ “...there is enough prosodic indeterminacy in these chapters to justify speaking of their author as orator rather than poet... The orator, trained in an elevated, declamatory style of public speaking, makes use of as wide a range of linguistic resources as the poet.” Blenkinsopp, 68.

³⁰ Ibid. 53.

³¹ Ibid. 66.

³² Ibid. 53.

³³ Ibid. 53.

correlative works.³⁴ Taken together, these observations about Second Isaiah's rhetoric, form, peers, and context lead Blenkinsopp to conclude: "The core of 40–55 may then properly be described as a rhetorical composition and its author as an orator or preacher."³⁵

All these observations do not prove that Second Isaiah is a form of preaching. Definitive evidence of oral communication from a marginalized group in the late Babylonian/early Persian period may always remain elusive. Nevertheless, these rhetorical studies show that there is enough support for reading Second Isaiah homiletically. The question then remains, How does a homiletical lens affect the interpretation of these chapters?

Importantly, if Isaiah 40–55 can be understood as preaching, then the Servant Songs become not just influential texts within Jewish and Christian traditions, but snapshots of exemplary preaching moments that are worthy of further homiletic reflection.³⁶ These Songs preach and can shape the way we think about preaching the older testament in contexts of domination today.

Preaching in Isaiah 42:1–4 (5–9)

Reading the first Servant Song homiletically affects the interpretation of the text in at least three ways.

First, it offers a different perspective on many of the exegetical issues with which interpreters often wrestle. Rather than seeking to solve the text, a homiletical approach looks for what might be the impact of the text's open-ended rhetoric. This Song's poetic, flexible, and imaginative language refuses to be pinned down.³⁷ This polyvalence is not mere ornamentation, but, when framed as a preacher's work with a congregation, becomes a strategy for engaging multiple listeners and perspectives. To capture this dynamic we might ask, Who is the servant in Isaiah 42:1?³⁸ On the one hand, historical approaches might argue that the servant was just described in Isaiah 41:8–9 as the people of Israel.³⁹ Or, as many commentators hold, the servant

³⁴ Here he proposes a context for Isaiah 40–55 like "the elders gathering in Ezekiel's house (Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) and the religious center at Casiphia in southern Mesopotamia (Ezra 8:15–20)...a kind of clergy training center...where religious learning and training went on." Blenkinsopp, 64–5.

³⁵ Blenkinsopp, 69.

³⁶ For more on the homiletic nature of the Songs see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Carolyn Sharp, "The Prophets and Homiletics" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, Carolyn Sharp, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016), 627–651, and Arvid Kapelrud, who expounds upon the idea that Second Isaiah "preached at the end of the Exile." See Kapelrud, "The Main Concern of Second Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, 1 (1982): 50–58, 50.

³⁷ Of course, poetic-prophetic preaching is not a new homiletical insight, for instance see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) and Cleo LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), especially LaRue's chapters "Imagination and the Exegetical Exercise" and "Why Black Preachers Still Love Artful Language." Also, Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014); Zachary Guiliano and Cameron E. Partridge, eds., *Preaching and the Theological Imagination*, Studies in Episcopal and Anglican Theology 9 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015); Kate Bruce, *Igniting the Heart: Preaching and Imagination*, (London: SCM Press, 2015); Linda Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2003); and Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997). Still, its application as an interpretative lens in Second Isaiah opens up new possibilities, namely that the author may intend to hold open their proclamation as a homiletic strategy for navigating domination and engaging a broad range of listeners and perspectives.

³⁸ "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1).

³⁹ Jacob Stromberg notes that other linguistic connections between these two passages suggest that Isaiah 42:1–4 developed with an awareness of the servant material in Isaiah 41. He writes, "42.1–4 (which was considered

language here could refer to Cyrus and may evoke language from royal inscriptions about ancient kings.⁴⁰ Of course, the Church has also read this passage christologically as prophecy of Jesus.

However, reading Isaiah 42:1 with a homiletic hermeneutic presents this passage as an address to an audience that could identify themselves with the servant.⁴¹ Homiletically, the preacher in Isaiah 42 intentionally leaves the referent open to the hearer's interpretation. For example, Cyrus and his supporters might hear affirmation of his rule, thus protecting the preacher/people. At the same time, exiled Israel, as an oppressed people, might hear this word as a royal panegyric spoken over them, thus inverting the expected hierarchy.⁴² The effect of a homiletic interpretation is that the hearer is invited to join in God's work of justice and in the work of returning from exile.⁴³

What this brief example illustrates is that shoehorning Isaiah 42:1–9 into one meaning sacrifices the depth of this Song's rhetoric and the breadth of its impact upon an audience. Forcing one take above all others flattens out the preacher's words and saps them of their poetic potency as a resource for reflection and response. At the same time, this brief look at Isaiah 42 shows that polyvalent poetic-prophetic preaching is not the same as rambling, unfocused proclamation.⁴⁴ What the preacher does in this Song is lead the hearer to reflect on what it means to be a part of God's work in subverting systemic injustice.

secondary) is clearly related to 41.8–10 (which was not). In both, one finds reference made to the 'servant' and 'chosen one' whom God will 'uphold' (*tmk*)—a verb occurring only one further time in the book where the connection is quite different. (33.15)." Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 33.

⁴⁰ Paul asserts that there may be a parallel in Isaiah 42:1 with Akkadian royal inscriptions that single out the king as the god's "beloved one" and "favored one" (Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 185). In this light, a third appellation, the one "in whom my soul delights," could also be seen as evoking the Akkadian trope of divine favor for a leader. Such connections would put the servant in the place of a king. For this reason, Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that "servant" here is a reference to Cyrus (compare 45:1), though he admits, "Much of what is said in these verses could also be said of Israel" (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 211).

⁴¹ To this point, see also the use of second person, direct address throughout Second Isaiah and inclusive references to "Jacob, my servant" (e.g., 41:8; 44:1; 45:4) and "my servant, Israel" (e.g., 41:8; 49:3).

⁴² David Reimer points to Norman Gottwald's work highlighting how Cyrus's policy of return was a "colonial situation" wherein a "ruling elite" were " beholden to the empire whose expectation was that the colony would be 'politically pacified and economically profitable'" (Reimer, "Isaiah and Politics," in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 101.

⁴³ A similar polyvalent, poetic dynamic lies behind other questions we might ask of this text: Is it YHWH's covenant in Isaiah 42:6 that is enacted by Cyrus, Cyrus's covenant that aligns with YHWH's, or perhaps YHWH's covenant that the people will help enact more fully? Is justice in Isaiah 42:1, 3 a Persian policy change or is it liberation from Babylonian and Persian control? Is the spirit's work in Isaiah 42:1, 5 creative, destructive, or liberative? Is the problem with idols in Isaiah 42:8 a reference to Nabonidus's reforms, to Cyrus's restoration of the gods, or to the power idols are granted in general? Is the preacher's audience a group of Jewish exiles, an individual prophet, or representatives of Cyrus? With all of these questions, there is good homiletic reason for a preacher to hold the answer open to multiple points of engagement.

⁴⁴ I write as a United Methodist teaching in an Episcopal context. Often preaching in these mainline traditions avoids a flattened, over-simplified resolution of the text and can even push beyond christological readings. At the same time, my tradition's poetic preaching can be so open-ended and unfocused that it offers little guidance for how hearers might respond to scripture and to the Word of God proclaimed in concrete ways. This is precisely Henry Mitchell's critique of white protestants. See *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 104. Second Isaiah helpfully models a poetic-prophetic proclamation that draws hearers into concrete action for justice and return from exile.

Second, reading this Song homiletically offers a distinct model for preaching Old Testament texts. In chapter 42, the preacher engages the older parts of her scriptural tradition.⁴⁵ This engagement with the “older testament” notably does not participate in many of the ways that Christians have preached the Old Testament. The preacher here does not simplify texts down to a sermon theme or concept. There is no allegorizing or typology that entirely ignores the context of older texts. The preacher does not develop a promise and fulfillment schema that speaks to the present by denigrating a shadowy past. The older testament does not become a source of proof-texting for arguing a point. Also, the preacher’s look at the history of salvation is neither linear nor developing from lesser to greater. Instead, the preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of scripture as that which *continues* to speak into the present moment. Here, the preacher has God preach words of scripture to the congregation:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen...he will bring forth justice to the nations.
Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens...
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness...
I have given you as a covenant to the people...
I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. (Isa 42:1, 5, 6, 8).

The preaching references YHWH three times in five verses (5, 6, 8) while twice employing the expression first introduced in Exodus: “I am YHWH” (6, 8). There are clear connections of YHWH’s name with covenant, liberation, torah, and return. Further, the verb “to bring forth” (*ys’*), which describes the task of the servant three times (42:1, 3, 7), is also the verb “used to describe the deliverance from Egypt.”⁴⁶ Along with these connections with the book of Exodus, the preaching of Second Isaiah develops subtle exodus nuances around the phrase, “I am YHWH.”⁴⁷ Taken together, these exodus connections remind Jewish exiles that their liberator was not Pharaoh and it will not be Cyrus. God’s “I,” which appears eight times in this sermon,

⁴⁵ Though if John Van Seters is correct, much of the biblical material that Isaiah cites is a newer version of older material: “the Yahwist and Second Isaiah were contemporaries, living among the exiles in Babylonia and very likely in very close contact with each other. . . . When the two works are read in tandem, with the Yahwist providing the ‘biblical’ text as a basis for much of the prophet’s message, this gives us remarkable insight into the new world of the diaspora community in Babylonia and the radical reshaping of their religion within a wider world view. Under the influence of the Babylonian universalistic religion of Marduk, the creator deity, or Nabonidus’s supreme deity, the god Sîn, both Second Isaiah and the Yahwist present their deity YHWH not just as a national god but as creator of heaven and earth and the God of all humanity. Such a religion is not under the control of a priesthood or temple in a particular place, and neither author makes any mention of priests or the Jerusalem Temple 40. The form of worship of YHWH used by the patriarchs may be practiced in any place and is open to all without restriction.” See John Van Seters, “Dating the Yahwist’s History: Principles and Perspectives,” *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 1–25, 24.

⁴⁶ S. D. Snyman, “A Structural-Historical Exegesis of Isaiah 1–9,” in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 258.

⁴⁷ Within Second Isaiah, the phrase “I am YHWH” is connected with calling generations (41:4), offering help (41:13), providing water to those who are parched (41:17), making covenant (42:6), claiming glory over idols and others (42:8), giving Egypt as a ransom (43:3), being the creator and king of Israel (43:15), providing treasures/riches (45:3), establishing the supremacy of God (45:5–7), raining down righteousness (45:8), speaking truth (45:18–19), recognizing a righteous, savior God (45:21), redeeming that leads Israel in the way it should go (48:17), and, problematically, to kings and queens being made to bow to Israel (49:23) and to oppressors consuming their own flesh and blood (49:26).

allows there to be focus on only one liberator.⁴⁸ Ultimately, it is God who will overthrow oppressors, end domination systems, renew covenant, and lead God's people to freedom and abundance.

As a part of the effort to have scriptural language speak today, the Isaian preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. The God of the exodus says repeatedly to the congregation, "I am YHWH." Here the God of the older testament is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the one who gave breath, gives breath. The one who liberated slaves, liberates exiles. In the preaching of Isaiah 42:1–9, God's nature and work are consistent—they do not change. What God has done in the past, God is doing now, and God will do more fully in the future. And the preacher leads the congregation to hear and to speak this reality of God's nature.⁴⁹

Finally, reading this Song homiletically highlights how the Old Testament is a resource for resistance to domination and for the alleviation of suffering. On the one hand, this Song preaches a public transcript to its overlords.⁵⁰ If Josephus's report is to be believed, Cyrus even read over some of these chapters and found them to be speaking affirmatively of him.⁵¹ At the same time, the prophet proclaims to hearers-in-the-know a subtle, hidden transcript that builds energy for liberation efforts.⁵² Thus, references to creation here can sound like a parroting of the flattering self-image of imperial elites.⁵³ At the same time, however, a Jewish exile would hear phrases like "created the heavens" (v. 5), "breath to the people" (v. 5), and light given to those in darkness (vv. 6–7) and be drawn to the creation accounts in Genesis. These references to the creator God of Genesis highlight One who is more ancient and more powerful than any current divine or human overlord. It is this Creator God—and not any earthly leader—who "calls," "takes," "keeps," and "gives" to the servant Israel (42:6). Thomas Mann calls this approach a

⁴⁸ Joan Cook also sees here an emphasis on the one-ness of God. Joan Cook, "Everyone Called By My Name: Second Isaiah's Use of the Creation Theme," in *Earth, Wind and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 42.

⁴⁹ For more on cultural-linguistic approaches to preaching (Jesus), see Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997) and David Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵⁰ James C. Scott describes the public transcript as the open way in which subordinates communicate to hide subversive messages in the presence of those who dominate (51). Examples of the public transcript include donning "the flattering self-image of elites" (18–9), engaging in rituals of subordination (35), "playing dumb" (133), and concealing "anger, revenge, and self-assertion" (55). James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Yale Press: 1990).

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.5–7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, among others, is skeptical about the accuracy of Josephus's report—especially the notion that Cyrus's reading of Isaiah 44:28–44:1 inspired him to liberate Jews from captivity and seek to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 81.

⁵² The hidden transcript employs a "politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors." Scott, *Domination*, 18–9).

⁵³ Creation references in verses 5 and 6 contain two different echoes of Mesopotamian texts. As Shalom Paul observes, the phrases "stretched out [the heavens]" and "spread out the earth" have an echo in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*: "Wherever the earth is established (*saknat*), and the heavens spread out (*ritpašu*)." Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 188, citing *BWL*, 58-9, line 37. So also, Isaiah's line, "grasped you by the hand" has a parallel in the Cyrus Cylinder wherein Marduk "reached for a righteous king whom he would support [lit. 'grasp by the hand']." Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 188, citing M. Cogan, COS 2:315. These connections might lead Babylonian and Persian overhearers to receive the words of this Jewish, exilic preacher as supportive of their agenda.

“theology of creative redemption” that is akin to liberation theology.⁵⁴ Brueggemann adds that the servant’s preaching here is meant to ensure that Israel is “well protected and irresistibly energized.”⁵⁵ The message to the exiles is that their fate depends not on Cyrus’s political calculations but on the one who made them and who gives them breath. Their liberation is not the work of any overlord but of the “lord of history” who is about to “create new things.”⁵⁶

So too, references to Exodus may reflect Akkadian language and logic.⁵⁷ Yet they remind hearers-in-the-know that it is God—not foreign superpowers—who has called, taken, kept, and given the people a covenant to bring justice, to bring out prisoners, and to shine light unto the nations (Isa 42:6–7). These resonances with the exodus narrative make clear that God will respond to rectify the abuse: “See, the former things have come to pass [i.e. the exodus], and new things I now declare” (42:9).

However, it is not only the material from the older testament that is a resource for resistance. Isaiah 42:1–9 itself has become a text for resisting oppressive regimes through preaching. For instance, an early rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 42:1–9 sees it as license to challenge Caesar’s domination and divine claim.⁵⁸ In the United States, this passage was used by

⁵⁴ Thomas Mann, “Stars, Sprouts, and Streams: The Creative Redeemer of Second Isaiah” 135–151 in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, William Brown and S. Dean McBride, Jr., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 150.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 43.

⁵⁶ Frederik Poulsen, *God, His Servant, and the Nations in Isaiah 42:1–9: Biblical and Theological Reflections after Brevard S. Childs and Hans Hübner* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107.

⁵⁷ Paul, op.cit., finds echoes of Akkadian language in verse 7, specifically with regard to references about showing light and setting free (190). Paul also asserts that the logic in 5–9 echoes the logic of the goddess Ishtar’s promise to King Esarhaddon: “Could you not rely on the precious utterance which I spoke to you? Now you can rely on this latter one too.” Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 191, citing Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. 10, lines 7–12. More importantly, however, because of earlier allusions to Marduk and Cyrus, verse eight’s prohibition against idols sounds differently in Babylonian and Persian ears. It may sound like a rejection of Nabonidus and his favored moon-god, Sin. As Nilsen narrates: “In the background of the [Cyrus] Cylinder stands Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (ruling 556–539 B.C.E.). Nabonidus claimed to restore the forgotten cult of the moon-god Sin; according to his critics, though, it was not a restoration, but a new invention. Be that as it may; the situation led to a neglect of the cult of other gods, including that of Marduk, who was Babylon’s city-god, and the highest god of the pantheon. Supposedly even the *akitu* (New Year) festival, thought to be vital for ensuring peace and fertility for both land and people, was abolished by Nabonidus” See Tina Dykestee Nilsen, “Creation in Collision? Isaiah 40–48 and Zoroastrianism, Babylonian Religion and Genesis 1,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. Vol 13, Article 8, (2013):1–19. In fact, if the Cyrus Cylinder is to be trusted, the priests of Marduk are the ones who opened the gates to Cyrus’s army, whereupon Cyrus destroyed all relics for worshipping the moon god and reestablished the gods Nabonidus had removed. Such connections may help slightly conceal elements of the preacher’s anger, revenge, and self-assertion that are expressed in the line: “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols” (42:8). For an exiled Jew hearing these words in the context of creation, covenant, and exodus, this verse is most clearly the rejection of all idols and those leaders who support them. Thus, it is not simply that “the text is criticizing the people who expect everything from ‘Cyrus,’” as Baltzer claims (135). Rather, the text criticizes Cyrus, the Persian rule, and Babylonian culture as committing idolatrous usurpation of God’s glory.

⁵⁸ In the story, emperor Hadrian seeks to be declared God. Three philosophers advise him, the last of which presents to Hadrian a problem of a stalled ship at sea. The emperor says that he will send ships to rescue it but the philosopher asks, “Sire, why trouble your legions and ships to go there? Dispatch a bit of wind there, and thus you will rescue it.” When Caesar admits that he is not able to create a wind, the philosopher states, “You cannot create a wind? How then can you make yourself God, in whose name it is said, ‘Thus saith the Lord, He that created the heavens, and stretched them forth, He that spread forth the earth and that which cometh out of it, He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein (Isa 42:5)?’” (Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken, 1992) 509–510:52.

the Rev. James R. L. Diggs to describe his work with Marcus Garvey to resist white nationalism in the South.⁵⁹ Most notably, in Latin America Oscar Romero preached on Isaiah 42:1–7 in response to the oppression of Salvadorans and the defamation of clergy by the government.⁶⁰ In his sermon, Romero eschews strictly historical or christological referents for the Servant's identity. Instead, he invites each member of the congregation to understand themselves, through Christ, as the Servant, working with God and challenging oppressive regimes. Romero's preaching of Isaiah 42 makes clear that it is in the interest of oppressive regimes for preachers to interpret the text with solely historical or christological connections. These moves keep the message of the scriptural witness at a safe distance and they limit its liberating agenda to one figurehead. To counter this dominating approach, Romero preaches with Isaiah 42: the God of the great deliverances of old is present here, speaking here, offering here an open call for all those who would resist oppression and co-labor with God in bringing justice to the world.

Concluding Reflections

What is suggested by examining Isaiah 42:1–9 can also be seen with regard to the other three Servant Songs:

1. *Reading these texts homiletically aids interpretation of the biblical text.* When Isaiah 42 is read as a sermon to people who knew traumatic experiences of exile and marginalization, the preacher's rhetoric sounds intentionally bi-vocal. Thus, the Cyrus/Israel debate is reframed. So also, understanding Isaiah 49 through the lens of testimonial preaching can help navigate the exegetical debate about servant Israel preaching to Israel about Israel: the preacher's voice becomes a witness that invites Israel's reimagined witness. Further, a homiletical reading of Isaiah 50 speaks into the debate about how this passage relates to its context. The sermon here can be seen as contributing to extended imaginative reinterpretations of the book of Lamentations. Finally, reading Isaiah 53 as dialogical preaching helps navigate the exegetical challenges of interpreting Isaiah 53 by showing that the sermon has a focus and function that seek to evoke a clear response and to provoke a directed reflection about suffering, domination, and hope in a wider range of hearers. This dialogue reframes the debate about the servant's biography or the (potential) use of vicarious suffering.
2. *Reading these texts homiletically provides a model for preaching older texts in new contexts.* The preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of scripture, especially Exodus, as that which speaks into the present moment. The God of Exodus is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. So also, the preacher in Isaiah 49 invites the congregation to imagine life through the perspective of Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah. In this way, the preacher uses older texts to build a bridge for the congregation to envision a

⁵⁹ See Alan Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 171, citing Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (Kingston, Jamaica: United Printers, 1963), 104.

⁶⁰ Romero, "BAPTISM, EPIPHANY OF THE MESSIAH," Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, The Baptism of the Lord, January 14, 1979. <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/baptism-epiphany-messiah> Accessed March 12, 2019. See the same sermon in "Baptism as the Epiphany of Messianic Reality," in *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People: The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero*, Volume 4, trans. Joseph Owens (Miami: Convivium, 2015), 165–183.

different future for themselves and the world. Isaiah 50 opens up the congregation's imagination to what the preacher perceives to be the most helpful word from Lamentations for the congregation in the moment. Other lines from Lamentations lie dormant. Here the preaching does not seek simply to repeat the older text nor argue against it. Rather, the preaching endeavors to read the older biblical text through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering. Isaiah 53 places Jeremiah and Leviticus in dialogue with each other and the congregation. Here the preacher reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow the ancient past, the recent past, nor the present to dominate the conversation.

3. *Reading these texts homiletically helps preachers engage the contextual and hermeneutical influence of domination.* The preacher in the first Servant Song can be seen drawing from Exodus and Genesis to offer resources for resistance to systemic injustice. So also, Isaiah 49 responds to economic depression caused by imperial neglect by calling for the congregation to take action materially as they “*bring Jacob back to YHWH*,” “*gather Israel*,” “*raise up the tribes of Jacob*,” and “*restore the survivors*.” In Isaiah 50, the Servant must navigate assumptions linked to suffering brought about by Babylonian culture and interpreted within a Jewish sub-culture that had accommodated itself to life in Babylonia. This leads the preacher to a radical reimagining of Lamentations as a source for identifying God's presence in suffering and as a guide to resistance. Isaiah 53 responds to theological domination about the nature of the servant's suffering. The preacher seeks to foster dialogue and emphasize the voice of numerous perspectives (both rhetorically and exegetically) in an effort to build unity but not uniformity within the exilic community around hope, resistance to injustice, and return from exile. By recognizing in each of these cases that Second Isaiah unmasks and responds to domination, the preacher can be better equipped to respond to the suffering and marginalization of people in the contemporary world with thoughtful interpretations of scriptural narrative, image, and turn of phrase.

Thus, reading the Servant Songs with a homiletical lens invites us to do more than apply the tools of historical critical method or christological focus to Old Testament texts. As these Songs preach, they invite preachers to listen for the ways scripture, and especially the Old Testament, speaks to ancient and contemporary suffering, offers a poetic-prophetic word, builds community, and proclaims a God of liberating possibility.