Eyes to See, Ears to Hear

ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF

J. ALAN GROVES

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"He Bore Our Sins": Apostolic Reflections on Isaiah 53

Karen H. Jobes

There seems to be no better way to honor the memory of a colleague, scholar, and brother in Christ than to call attention to the work he has left as part of his life's legacy. In 2004, J. Alan Groves contributed an article to a festschrift entitled "Atonement in Isaiah 53: 'For He Bore the Sins of Many'" to honor one of his esteemed colleagues. This present essay extends his work on the atonement in Isaiah 53 by briefly considering his conclusions about the Hebrew text in light of its ancient Greek translation and by surveying the use of Isaiah 53 by the NT writers.

Isaiah 53, a conventionally shortened reference to the passage that actually extends from Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12, is one of the passages best known to Christians from the book of Isaiah, if not the best known, perhaps because it speaks of the Suffering Servant. The Hebrew phrases in Isaiah 53:11 and 53:12 include two different verbs in the Hebrew, which Groves translated "to bear guilt" and "to carry sin," respectively, and he related these phrases to the overall concept of atonement in the book of Isaiah. Since the end of the nineteenth century it has been argued that Isaiah 53 cannot be about atonement because it contains none of the language found in passages about sacrificial atonement performed by Israel's cult elsewhere in the OT. Against this view, Groves concluded that "bearling guilt" is uniquely presented in Isaiah 53 and that it is indeed vicarious and therefore accomplishes an atonement. Groves pointed out that the distinction between cultic and noncultic language has led in the wrong direction when discussing Isaiah 53 for three reasons: (1) the concept of "making atonement" in the Hebrew Bible is not limited to cultic contexts only; (2) Isaiah's vision of Yahweh's global presence makes atonement centered on the cult of the Jerusalem temple moot because the vision implies that a more universally efficacious atonement is needed; and (3) in Isaiah's vision, Yahweh has rejected the cult and its sacrifices.

After studying atonement language throughout the Hebrew Bible, Groves based his conclusions on the observation that the context for atonement is not limited in the OT to the setting of priestly sacrifice as a cultic ritual but "is best understood as made by an act that purifies something in such a manner that the outbreak of Yahweh's holy wrath is either arrested or prevented, which is appropriate in a particular situation." He further countered the argument that Isaiah 53 could not be about atonement by pointing out that Isaiah predicts a universally efficacious purification corresponding to Yahweh's global presence. Isaiah envisions "Yahweh's glory, the signature expression of his presence in the holy of holies, to be everywhere when the seraphim of heaven declare that "the whole earth is full of [God's] glory" (Isa. 6:3). Because Yahweh's glory is everywhere, his holy wrath might break out anywhere, and hence holiness is needed everywhere, not just in the temple precincts.


2. The word cult is used here in the sense of "a particular system of religious worship esp. with reference to its rites and ceremonies," in this case the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem temple (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College ed., s.v. "cult" [New York: Random House, 1968]).


4. Ibid., 65.

5. Ibid., 66.

6. Ibid., 67. All quotations of Scripture in this chapter are from the CNT, unless otherwise indicated.

Third, Groves argued that according to Isaiah’s vision, Yahweh has rejected the efficacy of ancient Israel’s sacrificial system, declaring at the beginning of the prophecy, “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats’” (Isa. 1:11). In fact, Isaiah’s vision promises a purification from sin that the cult with its ritual sacrifice could not achieve; therefore, “the cult plays little or no positive role in Isaiah” and atonement language shifts to a different context, that of the atoning work of the Suffering Servant. Groves identified “the real problem [as] whether or not Isaiah 53 uses the language of atonement (an action that arrests or prevents Yahweh’s wrath), and if so, how the suffering and death of a human being to make atonement can be explained.”

Groves pointed out that the uniqueness of an atonement achieved by the Suffering Servant is reflected even in unusual syntax within the Isaiah 53 passage. After a thorough and detailed examination of the syntax and context of the phrases “bearing guilt” and “carrying sin” in the Hebrew Bible, Groves observed that “the syntax of the two bearing-guilt clauses in Isaiah 53:11–12 are unique” within the OT corpus and that therefore they may “have a meaning peculiar to their syntax.”

The Old Greek (OG) translation of Isaiah 53 seems to amplify the theme of atonement, corroborating that long before the coming of Jesus, those Jewish translators also saw atonement language in the passage. Because of differences in the structures of the Hebrew and Greek languages, it would not be expected that the OG translation necessarily preserve the unique Hebrew syntax that Groves observed, and it doesn’t. But two other features of the OG of Isaiah 53 corroborate that the passage was indeed read as referring to atonement. Where the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:4 reads, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,” the OG reads, “This one bears our sins and suffers pain for us.” Furthermore, in Isaiah 53:11–12 the OG translates the Hebrew verbs and their corresponding direct objects in the phrases “he will bear their iniquities” (53:11) and “he bore the sin of many” (53:12) with the same Greek verb ἄναπησσω (“bear”) and noun ἁμαρτία (“sin”) in both phrases, even though the Hebrew words are not the same in both phrases. The collocation of this particular Greek verb and noun is found in only three other places in the OG canonical books that refer to atonement (Lev. 9:10; 16:25; 2 Chron. 29:21). It appears that the ancient Greek translators of Isaiah saw more atonement language in Isaiah 53 than many modern interpreters today will allow.

This amplification of the idea of atonement in the OG translation of Isaiah 53 is one example of how the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures is, in God’s providence, congenial to the purposes of the NT writers as they proclaim the gospel in Greek. Adolf Deissmann once commented that Hellenistic Judaism had with the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures ploughed the furrows for the gospel seed in the Western world. F. F. Bruce added that it was the Christian preacher quoting the Septuagint who sowed that seed of the gospel. Bruce noted several places “in which the Septuagint translators used a form of words which (without their being able to foresee it, naturally) lent itself to the purposes of the New Testament writers better than the Hebrew text would have done.”

In addition to the unique syntax of the Hebrew phrases of Isaiah 53, Groves pointed out other unique features of the Isaiah 53 passage “that suggest a unique action in the Servant’s ‘bearing guilt’” that, because of its unique nature, is naturally unprecedented elsewhere in the OT. Isaiah 53, with all its unique qualities, describes “the extraordinary nature of the purification of which Isaiah spoke,” which is “its most distinctive contribution to redemptive history.” Groves explained:

“The Torah knew no atonement that produced the universal and permanent purification envisioned in Isaiah. Such extraordinary purification required an atonement of equally extraordinary and radical nature. . . . Only an atonement based on the Servant’s sacrifice could accomplish the purification that Isaiah envisioned.”

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 69 (emphasis added).
10. Ibid., 77.
14. Ibid., 53.
16. Ibid., 88 (emphasis in original).
17. Ibid., 88–89.
APOSTOLIC REFLECTIONS ON ISAIAH 53 IN THE NT

The book of Isaiah is directly quoted, most often in its ancient Greek translation, in six NT passages written by the apostles Matthew, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter. Given the differences among these men and the audiences to whom each wrote, it seems clear that Isaiah 53 was widely known and deeply rooted in the earliest proclamation of the Christian gospel. Luke suggests that the origin of this tradition was indeed with Jesus himself.18

Luke 22:37, Quoting Isaiah 53:12

On the last evening of Jesus' life, Luke reports that Simon Peter, in a moment of sincere bravado, told Jesus, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33). Jesus immediately predicted that instead, before that very night was over, Peter would three times deny that he even knew Jesus. Jesus went on to quote Isaiah 53:12, saying, “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’” (Luke 22:37). He concludes, “And I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me, Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.”

Poignantly, the clause in Isaiah 53:12 immediately before the one explicitly quoted by Jesus is “he poured out his life unto death.” Jesus quotes one part of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 53 to allude to another. NT writers often use phrases from the OT to bring to the reader’s mind an entire passage. By quoting a line from Isaiah 53:12, Jesus invoked the entirety of Isaiah 53, to which he is referring when he says, “And I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Luke 22:37). The point apparently was not lost on the disciples that night. Their minds must have gone to the violence that the Servant is predicted to suffer, for their immediate response is, “See, Lord, here are two swords”—implying their readiness to defend Jesus (Luke 22:39). What had been written all those many centuries before about “the extraordinary nature of the purification of which Isaiah spoke”19 reached its fulfillment in the life, and the inevitable execution, of Jesus.

Matthew 8:17, Quoting Isaiah 53:4

In Matthew’s Gospel, the Prophets are frequently quoted to show that the events of Jesus’ life fulfilled ancient prophecy. Matthew 8:14–17 relates the story about Jesus coming into Peter’s house in Capernaum, where Peter’s mother-in-law lay in bed with a fever. Jesus touched her hand, and she recovered well enough and quickly enough to wait on him. Later, many demon-possessed and ill people were brought to Jesus, and Matthew reports that Jesus drove out spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

As Matthew observed and later reflected on these remarkable acts of healing that Jesus did in Capernaum and elsewhere, he recognized a fulfillment of prophecy. After telling the story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, Matthew quotes from the Hebrew version of Isaiah 53:4, “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.” Matthew’s connection of Jesus to this prophecy shows first, and perhaps most significantly, that he understood Jesus to be the One of whom Isaiah spoke in the Suffering Servant passage. Second, Matthew construes this part of the prophecy to mean that the Servant has the power and the will to take up and take away human maladies, including both the physical and the spiritual. Matthew does not seem to pick up on the aspect of atonement in his use of Isaiah 53. As Robert Gundry pointed out, however, “Insofar as Mt. represents Jesus’ healings as illustrations of his redemptive work, visible pledges of his taking away sin, and the compassion exercised and the healing virtue expended as beginnings of his passion, the evangelist has caught the thought of Is.”20

John 12:38, Quoting Isaiah 53:1

The Gospel of John includes a narrative of events from Jesus’ life structured around seven miraculous signs that John presents as evidence that the long-promised Messiah is none other than God himself in human flesh (1:19–11:57). Within this narrative of Jesus’ life, the “first of the signs through which he revealed his glory” was to change water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:11). The revelation of Jesus’ glory culminated in that most spectacular sign of raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1–44) that was accompanied by Jesus’ declaration, “I am the resurrection and the

life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (vv. 25–26). At the conclusion of the seven signs, John 12:37–50 forms a summary of Jesus’ public ministry. In this summary John marvels that even after all of Jesus’ miraculous signs and powerful teaching, those who had witnessed these things “still would not believe in him” (12:37).

The rejection of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah by the very people who were being prepared through the centuries for his coming—through the Prophets, the Law, the temple, the sacrificial system—is surely the greatest irony of human history. And it no doubt was one of the nagging questions in the minds of the apostles as they began to preach Jesus as the resurrected Messiah. John announces this perplexing fact in the prologue to his Gospel, that “he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). It is within this context of the rejection of Jesus and his message that John quotes Isaiah 53:1. The NT writers consistently point to the experience and message of the prophet Isaiah as they reflect on the stunning rejection of the Messiah (cf. Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; Rom. 10:16). John’s summary of the public ministry of Jesus seems to say that it was largely ineffective because “even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him” (John 12:37).

One of the great ironies in John’s Gospel occurs when Jesus explains and demonstrates that he is “the resurrection and the life” by calling Lazarus out of the tomb (11:25, 43–44) and when that very sign provoked a meeting of the Sanhedrin in which they “plotted to take his life” (John 11:53). It is a great blindness indeed that any should presume to take the life of the One who is Life! That they succeeded in executing Jesus was a fact that the apostles themselves struggled to understand.

John and other NT writers point to the forewarning that God gave to Isaiah at his commissioning as a prophet, an ominous forewarning that his message of repentance and mercy would go largely unheeded (Isa. 6:1–13). And yet Isaiah was to go and preach, for though rejected by the people his preaching would nevertheless fulfill God’s purpose. As John ponders the widespread unbelief in Jesus, he quotes OG Isaiah 53:1, “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed” (John 12:38). The phrase “the arm of the Lord” was familiar to readers of the Jewish Scriptures. It refers to God’s mighty acts in the exodus story—for instance, in Deuteronomy 7:19, “You saw with your own eyes the great trials, the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and outstretched arm, with which the Lord your God brought you out” (see also Ex. 6:6; 15:16; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8). In spite of the great signs that God displayed to the exodus generation, their hearts grew hard toward God. And centuries later at the consummation of the covenant God made with Israel, the arm of the Lord had again been revealed in the signs of Jesus, but their significance was again not comprehended by the people most prepared to understand them.

John recognizes a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in the people’s unwillingness to allow the signs of Jesus to lead them to faith in him. John’s words in 12:38 are an exact quotation of the OG version of Isaiah 53:1, which exactly follows the syntax of the Hebrew text, adding only the vocative “Lord” at the beginning. John then reaches to another part of Isaiah’s prophecy ( Isa. 6:10) to explain this amazing blindness of those who failed to recognize Jesus as the Suffering Servant: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them” (John 12:40). Here John’s quotation of Isaiah 6:10 follows neither the Hebrew nor its Greek translation exactly, but the statement of God’s willingness to heal in John’s quotation stands closer to the Greek OT text.21

The tragic effect of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry would be to make the ears of the people dull and to close their eyes, even though its purpose was to reconcile God’s wayward people to himself. Similarly, the purpose of Jesus’ signs was to reveal his glory as the Word made flesh and to bring people to faith in him as the Messiah, who was none other than God himself (John 2:11; 20:30–31). And as John points out, many did in fact come to faith in Jesus through his public ministry (John 12:42). But the simultaneous effect of Jesus’ signs was to harden others who saw the miracles but had priorities and motives that caused them to miss the significance of the signs Jesus performed and consequently to reject him as a threat to their self-interests.

John includes a pronoun when he alludes to Isaiah 6:10 that is found neither in the Hebrew of Isaiah 6:10 nor in its OG translation: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts” (John 12:40). Although the pronoun (“he”) is most often taken to refer to God, in John’s context it more

specifically refers probably to Jesus, whose signs at once both drew some to faith and hardened others. Hearts were hardened and ears dulled by the prophecies that Isaiah pronounced; the signs that Jesus performed had the same effect. But for those who did see and hear Jesus and turn, God ("I") did heal them.

John goes on immediately to say that Isaiah "saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him" (John 12:41). In other words, John claims that in Isaiah 6, where the prophet sees the glory of the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted, Isaiah was seeing the glory of Jesus (if not the preincarnate Jesus himself) and that the rejected message of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53:1) was a prophetic prediction that the Messiah, despite signs that revealed his glory (John 2:11), would be rejected.

Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus' teaching highlights the sovereignty of God in drawing people to himself (e.g., John 6:37, 44, 65). And yet those who reject him are not absolved of responsibility, as if this blindness and hardening were happening without their culpable involvement. Throughout John's Gospel the presence of Jesus forces a difficult decision on those who encounter him. Many responded from self-interest, choosing to reject Jesus rather than suffer the losses that would come by following him as the Messiah. When Caiaphas the high priest heard about the raising of Lazarus, he acknowledged that if Jesus were not stopped, "everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation" (John 11:48). While responsible discharge of duty is admirable and preservation of the nation was a noble cause, both were achieved at the cost of rejecting the One for whom that nation had waited for centuries. John was not the only NT writer to reflect on that incredible fact and to find an answer in Isaiah 53. The question also concerned the apostle Paul.

Acts 8:32–33, Quoting Isaiah 53:7–8

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth" (Acts 8:32–33, quoting Isa. 53:7–8). After reading this passage from the book of Isaiah, the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet speaking about himself or someone else?" (Acts 8:34). And then "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). As we saw above, Luke records in his Gospel that Jesus himself quoted from Isaiah to explain to the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane what was about to transpire (Luke 22:37). In his sequel to his Gospel, Luke here again quotes the OG of Isaiah as he relates the story of how Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch as he was reading the prophecy of Isaiah.
Being prompted by the Spirit, Philip approached the eunuch and engaged him in conversation that led the eunuch to ask, “Who is the prophet talking about . . . ?” Philip was one of the earliest leaders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1–7), and his answer indicates that the identification of Jesus as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 was present very early in the development of Christian thought. Though Luke does not record Philip’s exposition of Isaiah 53 with respect to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it must have been quite compelling, for the eunuch jumped down from his chariot to be baptized by Philip into faith in Christ. Another of the Lord’s apostles, Peter, quotes this same verse to give us the fullest exposition of Isaiah 53 in the NT.

1 Peter 2:20–25, Quoting Isaiah 53:4–6, 9

From the OG translation of Isaiah, the apostle Peter gives us the most fully developed reflection on Isaiah 53 among the NT writings. He does so, however, not as an exposition of Isaiah 53, but as a reflection on how Jesus suffered in the last days of his life. Writing his letter to Christians who were suffering in various ways because of their faith in Christ, the apostle Peter sets forth the suffering of Jesus as the model of the Christian life. Peter creatively weaves a description of Jesus’ suffering with phrases and allusions from the Isaiah 53 that interpret aspects of his trial and suffering. As Hooker notes, Peter does not simply use Isaiah 53 as a proof text, but moves beyond a “simple appeal to ‘what is written’ to the explanation of its significance.” The extensive and creative use of Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:20–25 is highlighted by quotations of it in boldface and allusions to it in italics:

2:23—[He], who when reviled did not retaliate, when he suffered he did not make threats [Isa. 53:7c, d], but instead trusted [Isa. 53:6c, 12] the one who judges justly [Isa. 53:8a];
2:24—[He], who himself bore our sins [Isa. 53:4a, 12] in his body upon the tree, so that being separated from sins we might live to righteousness; [He], by whose wounds you are healed [Isa. 53:6a].
2:25—For you were like wandering sheep [Isa. 53:6a], but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

As Paul Achtemeier notes, Peter uses the language of Isaiah 53, but the order of 1 Peter 2:22–25 follows the sequence of events in the passion of Jesus, with verses 22 and 23 alluding to the trial and verse 24 to the crucifixion. Leonhard Goppelt has also pointed out that this passage reflects three fundamental aspects of the passion narrative as described in Mark’s Gospel:

1. Jesus is the target of verbal abuse, referring to slander by the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:65), ridicule by the Roman guards (15:12–20), and derision by the crucified thief (15:29–32).
2. Jesus accepts injustice without retaliating; in fact, he accepts it in silence (14:61; 15:5).
3. Jesus entrusts judgment to God, thereby leaving the preservation of justice to God the Father alone (14:62).

That the description of Jesus’ suffering in 1 Peter should follow the passion narrative as found in Mark supports the theory that Mark’s Gospel preserves Peter’s memories of the Lord.

Peter’s use of Isaiah 53 demonstrates that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was not only a historical event but also a hermeneutical event that opened new understandings of the OT. Apparently Peter did not set out to do an exposition of Isaiah 53; rather, he began with the fact of Jesus’ suffering and death and searched the OT to make sense of the tragedy and to understand its significance (cf. Luke 24:25–27, 44–48). First Peter 2:21–25 is a remembrance of Jesus’ suffering as explained and

interpreted by Isaiah’s prophecy that allowed Peter to make sense of the sufferings of the Christ. But conversely, Jesus’ suffering also allowed the apostle to make new sense of Isaiah 53. Peter’s new understanding of the ancient prophecy allowed him to explain that it was the Spirit of Christ who inspired Isaiah and other prophets (1 Peter 1:10–12), bringing continuity between the Jewish Scriptures and the writings of the Christian apostles.

In citing Isaiah 53, Peter puts the atonement at the center of this teaching. In 1 Peter 2:24 he writes that Jesus himself bore our sins (cf. Isa. 53:4a, 12) in his body on the tree. The crucifixion is the heart of atonement in Peter’s reflection on the significance of Jesus Christ as understood through Isaiah’s prophecy. Contrary to liberal Protestantism, which rejects the supernatural and places Jesus’ moral and ethical teachings at the center of the Christian message, Peter elaborates on what it meant to bear our sins. The Suffering Servant atones not by providing ethical and religious instruction but by bearing our sin—and just to make certain what “bearing our sin” involved, Peter adds a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion, in his body as he hangs upon the cross. As Groves pointed out, the universal and permanent purification envisioned in Isaiah was of such an extraordinary and radical nature that its fulfillment would require an unprecedented, and indeed unique, event. The apostle Peter considered that fulfilling event to have been the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Peter’s use of Isaiah 53 also explains why the prophecy both in the Hebrew and in its Greek translation seems to shift in pronouns and syntax between the singular and plural. The Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah can be read to refer to an individual or collectively to the nation of God’s people. The apostle Peter’s reflections on Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:24 explain that the purification envisioned by Isaiah means being separated from sins and living to righteousness. Choosing not to sin in a society that doesn’t know the meaning of the word, however, will inevitably lead to suffering at times and to some extent. Just as it was God’s will that his Servant should suffer (Isa. 53:10), Peter writes that it is God’s will for Christians to follow in his footsteps and choose to suffer rather than to sin (1 Peter 3:17). Isaiah envisioned both the singular suffering of the Servant and its consequences for those who follow him.

28. Ibid., 61.
29. The author wishes to acknowledge and thank her teaching assistant, Laurie L. Norris, for her assistance in preparing this article.