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of the Book of Isaiah**

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Introduction

Critics attack the Christian faith in various ways, and their attacks gain a hearing. One such critic is Christopher Hitchens, a self-designated “anti-theist.” He critiques Good Friday and vicarious redemption by asserting that accountability, responsibility, and guilt remain on the perpetrator and must always remain on the perpetrator. He claims it is non-transferable. In his view the notion of vicarious punishment leads the guilty to evade their own responsibility.¹

With that critique in the background, I wish to explore the book of Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 53 within the theology of the book. To use the analogy of Irenaeus, all the pieces together form a beautiful mosaic of a majestic King.² In the mosaic of Isaiah the central diamond is the Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah 53.³ In order to appreciate that central diamond we need to understand the overall design of Isaiah’s mosaic. I will illustrate each piece of the mosaic with a few examples.

Isaiah 53 is rightly one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, the Suffering Servant Song. To fully appreciate this glorious chapter we must understand it in its literary, historical, and theological context. Here I will focus on its theological context.

Method

A brief word about method might prove helpful. In the current state of Isaiah studies redaction critics typically treat the book of Isaiah as the end result of a lengthy process of composition, one that took place over about 300 years and involved numerous interpolations and additions along the way and at least four redactional strata (from

1. Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (Basic Books, 2001).

2. *Adversus Haereses* 1.8.

3. Technically the song is Isa 52:13-53:12. The verse numbers and translations follow the English Standard Version.

740 to ca. 450 B.C.).⁴ Such an approach makes it rather difficult to say the least to treat the book as a whole.⁵ Yet, the book currently does in fact exist as one book.

All 66 chapters are written on one scroll. The oldest copy of this Hebrew scroll is the Great Isaiah Scroll of Qumran, dated to about 125 B.C., and it includes all 66 chapters. There is, in fact, no external evidence to the contrary. The opening verse of the scroll gives the heading for the entire scroll. It attributes the scroll to Isaiah ben Amoz during the reigns of the Judahite kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This scroll claims to present “the vision of Isaiah ben Amoz” (1:1), whose ministry covered a period of about 60 years, 740-ca. 680 B.C.⁶

All 66 chapters are written on one scroll. The opening verse attributes all 66 chapters to Isaiah ben Amoz of the eighth-early seventh century B.C. Because of these two unassailable and indisputable facts, it is legitimate and wise to take a holistic approach and consider the entire scroll as it now exists. The scroll invites readers to treat it as one scroll, and in this article I will do so.

To a great extent, biblical exegesis is a process of addressing questions to the biblical text. The book of Isaiah certainly requires attention to its literary design and historical dimension, but here I will address theological questions to the text. My goal is to describe how Isaiah 53 fits into the theological framework set forth and projected by the entire scroll of Isaiah. Every individual verse could be explored in more exegetical detail, but in this article I will survey the entire landscape with a wide-angle lens. Specifically I will consider how Isaiah 53 fits into the book’s presentation of how the God of Israel deals with sin and sinners.

What Is the Language Used for “Sin”?

Isaiah uses several terms to refer to the semantic domain of sin: “sin, iniquity (also translated guilt), transgression (better understood as rebellion), evil, wickedness, and unclean.” With these terms Isaiah designates both individuals and collective groups, both their individual actions and their condition itself. Their very thoughts and plans are bent on iniquity (59:7). Israel’s condition is unclean before their God (6:5; 64:6).

4. On the current state of the discipline, see *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, eds. David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson (InterVarsity Press, 2009); *Bind Up the Testimony: Explorations in the Genesis of the Book of Isaiah*, eds. Daniel I. Block and Richard L. Schultz (Hendrickson Publishers, 2015).

5. Some scholars accept redaction-critical work and then attempt to interpret the entire book in a holistic way. The interest in a holistic reading is a positive step forward. However, the twofold approach can end in two very different interpretations of the same evidence. Moreover, assuming the legitimacy of source-redaction “slicing and dicing” of the text can hinder or interfere in the effort to read holistically. See the observations by Edgar W. Conrad, *Interpreting Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 12-20.

6. The earliest date in the scroll is the death of Uzziah in 740 B.C. (6:1), and the latest date is 681 B.C., the year of Sennacherib’s assassination (37:38). According to early tradition, Isaiah was sawn in half under Manasseh (cf. Hebrews 11:37).

Usually Isaiah employs this language for Israel, but he can also include Gentiles under these terms (13:9-11). In the book of Isaiah, the indictment of “sinner” applies to all people (26:21).

What Is So Bad about Sin?

“Sin” is defined by the God of Israel. Isaiah speaks of sinners doing “what is evil in the eyes of Yahweh” (65:12; 66:4). What the doers think or believe is not the criterion. In fact, what they think and believe can be fundamentally wrong. Isaiah condemns “those who call evil good and good evil” (5:20). The key consideration is what the God of Israel thinks and has revealed. Sin is against Yahweh. It is not walking in his ways, not hearkening to his Torah (42:24). Sin is first and foremost to be understood in a theocentric way, what the Holy One of Israel opposes.

Let us ask the scroll of Isaiah a simple question. “What is so bad about sin?” For one thing, sin directs people’s attention away from the God of Israel to false objects, things that cannot actually help. Very often the God of Israel condemns his own people for turning away from him and looking elsewhere for their security and life. For example, his own children take refuge in Egypt and in Egypt’s military but “do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD,” even though the “Egyptians are man, and not God” (31:1-3). Sinners despise God’s own word and revelation and instead put their trust in their own oppressive actions (30:12). They deny and turn away from Yahweh (59:12-13).

Isaiah often condemns idol worship. One of the hardest hitting passages in all of Scripture against idolatry occurs in Isaiah 44. Idol worshipers make their own wooden images and then call out to what they made, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” (44:17). First things always come first. Yahweh, the God of Israel is the only God who deserves to be worshiped and looked to, because he is the creator of all things and all people. This particular God, whom Isaiah frequently calls “the Holy One of Israel,” wants his own people Israel and in fact all Gentiles to fear, love, and trust in him above all things, to turn away from their weak, impotent, futile, invented images to the God who made the heavens and the earth (17:7-8; 45:18-22).

Sin turns a person or a collective group inward, toward self. Thereby the focus of people turns to self-autonomy, self-determination, self-security, self-honor, and self-glory. Isaiah frequently condemns human pride and hubris. “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (2:11; cf. 2:11-17). Isaiah exhorts his hearers, “Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is [mere] breath, for of what account is he?” (2:22). The Lord is coming in judgment against all human arrogance: “I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless” (13:11).

Moreover, sinful actions do harm to the neighbor. Isaiah frequently accuses and specifies how sinful activity ruins the lives of others, the wicked rich taking

advantage of the lowly and vulnerable (5:23), the liar falsely accusing others (29:21), the innocent becoming prey to the ruthless (59:15). Because of their false dealings with each other, the people's worship of Yahweh is rejected as hypocritical (1:10-17).

Most important of all, sin offends the God of Israel. In his purity and righteousness the Holy One of Israel cannot casually coexist with sin and sinners. The "unclean lips" of Isaiah and his people put their lives in danger before Yahweh of Hosts, who is "holy, holy, holy" (6:3-5). Israel's iniquities and sins made a separation between Israel and their God; they caused God to hide from them his face of kindness and favor (59:2; 64:7). With their sins they despised and taunted their God (1:4; 5:19). Israel's sins and iniquities burdened and wearied God (43:24). Sin provokes God to wrath (57:17; 64:9). God desired Israel to seek him, but with their idolatry they were "a people who provoke me to my face continually" (65:3). Throughout Isaiah the reader sees accented both the horizontal and the vertical dimension to sin.⁷

How Does the Holy One of Israel Respond to Sinners?

The God of Israel responds to sinners by executing his just judgment. Divine judgment is shown to be deserved, to be caused by human sinners, by both their condition and their actions or inactions. It comes to human sinners themselves "in exchange for" their own human sin (50:1; 57:17).⁸

The alternative to this response would be apathy. It would be a god of Deism, aloof and indifferent to what is going on. But the Holy One of Israel is zealous for his own holy name. He is the only God who actually exists, because he alone created the heavens and the earth and all people. The God of Israel is zealous for human righteous behavior, desiring that his own people walk in his ways. As much as he is zealous for his holy name and for righteous activity, to that same extent he is zealously opposed to idolatry, self-glory, and unrighteous activity. The God of Israel is zealous, not apathetic, indifferent, or aloof.⁹ To sin and sinners the Holy One of Israel does not simply say, "Whatever."

Isaiah refers to the response of judgment in several different ways. First, he depicts sinners as bringing evil upon themselves (3:9). They receive the consequences of their own actions. Second, his language conveys the thought of retributive punishment (13:11; 26:21). God responds in conformity with *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye, a

7. Both dimensions are typically emphasized throughout the Latter Prophets. See Mark J. Boda, "Prophets," *T&T Clark Companion to the Doctrine of Sin*, eds. Keith L. Johnson and David Lauber (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016): 27-43.

8. The preposition *b* denotes "in exchange for."

9. See the classic work by Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets II* (Harper & Row, 1962). I sense that the "god" expected by the "new atheists" is essentially the god of Deism. In their mind if "god" wants to "forgive" sinners, he should simply "forgive" them. But that would amount to apathy projected onto the level of "god." This kind of "god" resembles the "anonymous god" promoted by American civil religion. For helpful essays, see David L. Adams and Ken Schurb, eds., *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society* (St. Louis: CPH, 2004).

tooth for a tooth, a life for a life”: “Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have dealt out shall be done to him” (3:11). This emphasis on “tit for tat” communicates that the punishment is appropriate, fair and just; it corresponds to the crime.¹⁰ Third, Isaiah refers to the transgenerational dimension of judgment. God repays the iniquities of the present generation and previous generations (1:4; 14:20-21; 57:4; 65:7). Fourth, human sin and rebellion provoke God to wrath, and he responds in his just wrath (5:25; 63:10). In exchange for their iniquity God was angry and hid his face of compassion from them (57:17; 64:7; 8:17). Isaiah frequently speaks of God enacting his holy wrath against the wicked.¹¹ It is not an inevitable impersonal process of sin-consequence but the response of the personal God.

The wages of sin is death, and God will remove sinners away from his holy presence. “Woe is me,” Isaiah said, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (6:5). God sold Israel into exile in exchange for their iniquities and rebellions (50:1). God will destroy and remove sinners from upon the earth (13:9). Sinners cannot dwell with the consuming fire (33:14).

How Does the Holy One of Israel Respond to Sinners?

Isaiah can also speak of the divine response in the very opposite way. The God of Israel responds to sinners with his gracious favor and compassion, by forgiving them, by reversing their plight and restoring them. Yahweh will again have compassion on Israel (14:1). This response is completely undeserved and uncaused by human behavior. Addressing Israel God promises: “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake” (43:25). God attached his name and honor to his people Israel. For the sake of his own name he will spare Israel; he will not give his glory to another (48:9-11).

Isaiah speaks of God no longer holding sinners accountable for their sin. God will remember their sin no more, no longer count it against them (43:25; 64:9). God will remove their sin from his holy sight. God will blot out their sin, make it disappear and vanish from his sight (43:25; 44:22). God will forgive (55:7). Though “your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18). He will “take away” and “make atonement” for the uncleanness of Isaiah and of the people (6:7).

What Is the Connection Between the Two Responses?

The scroll of Isaiah depicts the Holy One of Israel responding to sinners in two radically contrasting ways. In some texts God executes his just judgment against

10. See Patrick Miller, Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis* (SBL, 2005); Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, “Tit for Tat: The Principle of Equal Retribution in Near Eastern and Biblical Law,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 43 (1980): 230-234.

11. For a good introduction to the topic of God’s wrath, see Bruce Edward Baloiian, *Anger in the Old Testament* (American University Studies, series 7, Theology and Religion vol. 99; New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

sinner, but in other texts he shows his love and mercy toward them. So, which one is it, his deserved punishment and wrath or his undeserved mercy and restoration? The one scroll of Isaiah speaks both ways. Moreover, the reader encounters both types of discourse in all parts of the book and in numerous texts. What is the inner logic of this? Are they simply two unrelated responses?

Often the scroll depicts the two responses as chronologically sequential. God first used the Assyrian army as his instrument of judgment against northern Israel and Judah, and, as Isaiah predicts in chapter 39, God will use Babylon against Jerusalem. The second half of the book assumes that has happened and then announces a new stage in God's dealings with Israel, the future restoration of Israel and the return of exiles back to Zion. These two sequential stages can be articulated together: "For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you...my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed" (54:7-10; cf. 60:10; 10:24-27).

Yet, the hearer/reader still wonders how God will ultimately deal with sin. There is one place where the two responses are tightly connected in one event. That text is the famous Suffering Servant Song. While the literature regarding Isaiah's Servant is vast, here I will direct your attention to a few key features.¹²

Isaiah 41-53 use the singular noun "servant" to speak of "the servant of Yahweh." This figure is explicitly identified as Israel (41:8; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3). We should take that textual identification seriously. At the same time, in chapters 42-48 collective Israel is condemned for being blind and disobedient. But the Servant-Israel spoken of in chapters 49-53 is obedient and has been given a mission toward Israel, to restore collective Israel (49:5-6) and to be stricken and put to death for the transgression of collective Israel (53:8). Therefore the reader should understand the "Servant of Yahweh" who is to restore collective Israel and atone for collective Israel as Israel-reduced-to-one, God's Israel-in-one.¹³ This is the case for Isaiah 49 and 53.¹⁴ Within the book of Isaiah it is a legitimate approach to connect this Israel-in-one figure with the future promised Messianic king of the line of Jesse. Note how the language of 53:2 recalls the same language in 11:1. The Messianic king will represent, substitute for, and embody collective Israel.

God's Servant, Israel-in-one, is given a mission that extends beyond collective Israel. He is to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of

12. For a survey of views, see *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

13. The expression of "Israel-reduced-to-one" comes from Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: CPH, 1979). In several ways the New Testament stresses that Jesus the Messiah is true Israel, Israel in one. See David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

14. Especially Isaiah 48 seems to show a transition to the Servant as Israel-reduced-to-one. See R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40-55* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: CPH, 2011): 76-83.

the earth” (49:6; cf. 42:1-7). The term translated “nations” designates “Gentiles,” non-Israelites. As noted by Christopher Wright, “in the surprising purposes of God, the Servant enables the original mission of [collective] Israel to be fulfilled.”¹⁵

How will the Servant of Yahweh accomplish salvation? The Servant Song in Isa 52:13-53:12 spells it out. He will be God’s substitutionary, vicarious Israel. He will bear upon himself the sins and iniquities of collective Israel and the Gentiles. Regarding collective Israel the Song explicitly states: he was “stricken for the transgression of my people” (53:8). The Servant suffers and dies in the place of and to the benefit of collective Israel, “my people.” Regarding the Gentiles the Song speaks of his suffering and dying for “the many.” What does the term “many” mean? In biblical Hebrew the word “all” (*kol*) denotes totality viewed as a singular. The way to express “all” viewed as a numerical plural is with the word “many” (*rabbim*), “many,” not a “few.” A better translation would be “multitudes.” These “multitudes” include Gentiles. Note the expression “many nations” in 52:15, where the Song states that the Servant will “sprinkle many nations,” that is, he will function as a priest toward the multitudes of Gentiles.¹⁶

The Song clearly says that the Servant will die: “he was cut off out of the land of the living...they made his grave with the wicked” (53:8-9); “he poured out his soul [*nephesh*—“his self”] to death” (53:12). By his suffering and death the Servant will be a substitute. He will not suffer and die for his own offences and deeds. In fact, the Song stresses that he will be innocent and righteous, “although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth” (53:9). Instead, he will bear and carry the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of others. The language of “bearing/carrying iniquity” denotes enduring the punishment for iniquity (e.g. Lamentations 5:7).¹⁷ The Suffering Servant will endure the punishment for the iniquities of others; he will be a sacrificial guilt “offering” (53:10).¹⁸

How can the Servant bear the sins of others? Sinners do not have the ability to transfer their guilt, responsibility, and sins to another. By their own reason and strength sinners must bear their own sin and its punishment. Israel is heavy “laden with iniquity” (1:4). But the God of Israel is the One who will transfer them to the Servant, “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6). God is behind what is going on, “it was the will of the LORD to crush him” (53:10). The Servant will die, and then he will bodily rise again. The Song speaks of his bodily resurrection as well:

15. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992): 162.

16. The Masoretic Text employs the Hiphil of *nazah*, “to sprinkle,” used in sacrificial priestly contexts. See Christopher W. Mitchell, *Our Suffering Savior* (St. Louis: CPH, 2003): 100-104.

17. This language is also used of the scapegoat who carries Israel’s iniquities away in the wilderness on every Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:22). Does that meaning also apply here?

18. On the Servant as a substitutionary sacrifice, see Angel M. Rodriguez, *Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1979): 276-302.

“he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days” (53:10). This is not metaphorical language. He will physically come back to life.

Half of the story is that the Servant will deal with the sins of Israel and Gentiles. The other half is stated in 53:11: by means of his death and his resurrection, by means of his experiential knowledge “shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous.” There is a blessed exchange. God places the sins and iniquities of the multitudes on the Servant, and the Servant gives to the multitudes his righteousness. God accounts sinners as righteous.¹⁹

Where Is the Place of Life with Israel’s God?

To properly understand the entire mosaic of Isaiah one must include some additional emphases of the book. Very often Isaiah will make a contrast between in-Zion and outside-Zion. It is a spatial type of contrast, between those who take refuge in the God who dwells in Zion and those who locate themselves outside of Zion and take refuge elsewhere. This spatial dimension needs to be added to the picture. The Servant atones for the sins of the multitudes, of both collective Israel and the Gentiles. But Zion is the only place where divine favor can be found. Zion is not restricted to one ethnic group. It is the place for all peoples, both Israelites and Gentiles, and Isaiah often promises that Gentiles will be drawn in. Yet, only those in Zion will benefit and enjoy the blessing of life and fellowship with the God of Israel. Only in Zion do “the afflicted of his people find refuge” (14:32; cf. 28:16). In Zion where the God of Israel dwells, “the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity” (33:24). Outside of Zion, only death and destruction.

Moab, for example, illustrates those who stay put and refuse to come to Zion, those who remain in their Gentile condition and ways, “Moab shall be trampled down in his place” (25:10). In contrast Isaiah depicts “all peoples” in Zion as enjoying the eschatological feast and eternal life with the God of Israel, for he will swallow up physical death forever (25:6-10a). In fact, the book repeatedly promises the day when Gentiles from the ends of the earth will be drawn to the God of Israel who dwells in Zion. The mosaic reveals facets that stand in paradox with each other. One such paradox is this. The Servant atones for all, but only those in Zion enjoy the benefits. Only those in Zion enjoy the benefits and yet, Zion draws all peoples to herself. The promised centripetal movement of all Gentiles to Zion frames the entire book (2:2-4; 66:18-23).

19. The ESV gives an accurate translation here. The Hiphil of *tsadaq* has the forensic sense “to account as righteous.” It does not mean “to ontologically transform a person from doing bad works into a person doing good works.” See the lexicons.

Who Benefits?

Another dimension necessary for properly understanding the entire mosaic is Isaiah's stress on the importance of human faith. In the context of the Syro-Ephraimite threat, Isaiah's word play makes the point: "If you [plural] are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all" (7:9).²⁰ Those who look to the Holy One of Israel in faith are the only ones who benefit from God's gift of life and fellowship with him. Only they benefit from the atoning work of the Suffering Servant. Only they have a future life with the God of Israel. God promises "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (30:15). Isaiah adds "For the LORD is a God of justice, blessed are all those who wait for him" (30:18). Isaiah uses different expressions but each one is theocentric, focused on the Holy One of Israel, expressions such as: "turning from false ways and turning toward the God of Israel, looking to him, taking refuge in him, trusting in him, seeking him, and waiting for him."

What Kind of Life Characterizes Those Who Benefit?

Only those who look to the Holy One of Israel in faith have a future in fellowship with him. Only they benefit from the Servant's atoning work. And they actively live in a certain way, by walking in the Lord's ways. The one who will dwell with the Holy One of Israel is the one who "walks righteously and speaks uprightly...and shuts his eyes from looking on evil" (33:14-16). The kind of fast that God chooses is "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house" (58:6-7). Yahweh is intent on having a people who do not rebel and forsake him but who walk in his righteous ways, the ways he has designed and commanded. From faith flows an actively righteous life.

Who Does Not Benefit?

In contrast are those who do not benefit. Their future is to be removed from God's sight. In several texts Isaiah makes a distinction between those who look to Yahweh in faith and those who do not. Such a distinction appears already in chapter 1: "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed" (vv. 27-28). Another example occurs in chapter 57 where God addresses the idolaters in Israel: "When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you...But he who

20. The wordplay employs the root *'aman* in both the Hiphil ("to believe in, trust") and the Niphal ("to be steady, made firm, unmoved"). Here the ESV captures the wordplay. Translations could capture wordplays and sound plays much more frequently than they typically have done. See, for example, Eric Fudge, *Translating Pun and Play: Wordplay and Sound Play in Hosea* (Ph.D. dissertation; Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2018).

takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain” (v. 13). Chapter 65 stresses the different futures between those who forsake Yahweh and those called Yahweh’s “servants,” namely Israelites who benefit from the atoning work of the singular Servant (65:8-16).²¹ The end of the book reveals the ultimate separation between the two groups (66:15-24). Those who worship Yahweh will inherit eternal life with him in the new heavens and new earth, while those who rebel against Yahweh will experience eternal separation and hell itself.

What is the Ultimate Desire of God?

The entire book clearly reveals the ultimate desire of the Holy One of Israel, to bless and save, not to condemn. Unlike human ways that think only in terms of just deserts and punishment, the ways and thoughts of Yahweh are fundamentally different and unique, characterized by compassion and abundant pardon. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth,” so are his pardoning ways higher than human ways (55:6-9). The book is saturated with exhortations for sinners to turn away from their wicked and rebellious behavior and to look to the God of Israel for their refuge and future. All of the discourse in the book of Isaiah has rhetorical purposes.²² Isaiah’s proclamations are not simply setting forth information for the sake of information. They need to be understood as threats, accusations, and promises designed to move the hearers. The ultimate desire of the Holy One of Israel is simply this: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other” (45:22).

A Response to the Critique of Hitchens

Now we are ready to respond to the critique of Christopher Hitchens. His criticism is part of his entire agenda to reject theism. With respect to what he calls “vicarious redemption,” Hitchens argues that accountability or responsibility for criminal behavior cannot be transferred to another. The perpetrators are and always will be accountable for their own misdeeds. According to Hitchens, to believe in a substitutionary atonement is to evade personal responsibility.

Clearly Isaiah 53 sets forth a substitutionary atonement. Yet, such a critique fails to understand how Isaiah 53 fits within its own theological context, within the overall

21. Only after the discourse with the singular “the servant of Yahweh” does the plural usage “the servants of Yahweh” occur (54:17; 63:17; 65:8, 9, 13, 14, 15; 66:14). Since Gentiles have been drawn to Zion, Gentiles would be included among these “servants.”

22. The approach of “speech acts” proves to be very helpful with prophetic discourse. For introductions, see John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, eds. J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisá, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 2003): 275-292; Walter Houston, “What Did the Prophets Think They Were Doing? Speech Acts and Prophetic Discourse in the Old Testament,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1992): 167-188.

theological picture given in the book of Isaiah. In the analogy of Irenaeus, we have to see how the mosaic pieces fit together to picture a majestic King.

We who believe in the Suffering Servant do not evade our responsibility. On the contrary, we willingly acknowledge our own culpability without hiding it or lying to ourselves. We admit that by our own will and power we cannot transfer our guilt to someone else. No sinner can do that. In and of ourselves we are heavy laden with iniquity. We are guilty before our Maker and Judge, the Holy One of Israel, just as he himself has accused us through his prophet Isaiah. We have no excuse. We agree with Isaiah's own self-assessment of being of "unclean lips," and we say with Isaiah 64:6, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." We confess before the holy God himself our own sins and iniquities, and admit that we deserve temporal and eternal punishment. We do not pull any punches regarding ourselves but confess the truth about ourselves. And we pray "Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever" (64:9).

Then we hear a completely different word from God himself spoken through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 53 announces a completely different word, the "good news" (52:7), the glad tidings that the God of Israel out of his own abundant steadfast love took the initiative and did something to change our plight. He created a different future for guilty sinners. The Holy One of Israel laid upon the Servant, Israel-reduced-to-one, the iniquity of us all, the iniquity of both collective Israel and of all Gentiles. The Holy One of Israel did not simply ignore or overlook our guilt and sinfulness. He took it seriously, as seriously as could be.

The just Judge did not condemn the multitudes as we deserved but provided a substitute. Why would the just Creator and Judge do that? Not because sinners deserve it but because he desired his treasured people Israel and all Gentiles to enjoy a different future, not condemnation but life with him. Why would the Holy One of Israel provide a substitute? Not because sinners deserve it but for the sake of his own holy name and because of his compassion and everlasting love (48:11; 54:7-8). In fact, the event of the Suffering Servant fully displays God's grace and mercy. On the basis of the Suffering Servant the Holy One of Israel now says to you what he said through the seraph to Isaiah, "your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (6:7). The Holy One of Israel not only condemns but also makes holy (4:3-4). Believe the good news, come to Zion, and enjoy fellowship with your God, the Holy One of Israel.

Basically Hitchens disallows the "gospel" and allows only the "law" to be true. The wages of sin is death, and he insists that you yourself must carry your own iniquities and your own guilt. That is the only future he permits. Actually, that is the only conclusion that naked human reason can reach.²³ However, the Holy One of Israel reveals a radically different action on his part. It is the action of forgiveness and pardon

23. Hitchens reaches the same conclusion as Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, translated and edited by A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (1996): 113 (at 6:72).

for guilty sinners, an action that in ordinary human interaction would simply amount to overlooking guilt. But the ways of Israel's God are higher than our ways. Out of his abundant steadfast love and on the basis of the substitutionary atonement of the Suffering Servant, God gives full and free pardon to guilty sinners. He promises the day when physical death will be swallowed up and we will enjoy eternal life with the God of Israel in Zion (25:6-9). He promises the day when he will "create new heavens and a new earth" for all those who look to him in faith. All of this, and in fact every promise given in the book of Isaiah, flows from God's abundant steadfast love and is ultimately based on the work of the Suffering Servant.

In the end Hitchens takes the side of the Satan, the accuser, who always accuses sinners as responsible and guilty for their own misbehavior.²⁴ Hitchens and those who agree will hear and believe only the law, only the accusation and the sentence of guilty.

But in fact, the Satan, the accuser, has been hurled away from God's holy presence. He is no longer permitted to accuse us before the heavenly throne (Revelation 12). The status of being accused and guilty before the Holy One of Israel is no longer the last word. Now by faith we hold on to the last word from God himself, that we stand forgiven, innocent, righteous and free before our Maker and Judge. And all this by virtue of the vicarious suffering and death, all this by virtue of the bodily resurrection unto life of Isaiah 53's Suffering Servant.

Who is this Suffering Servant, this Israel-reduced-to-one, this Messiah of Israel? Who is this figure in history? The Ethiopian Eunuch asked that question two millennia ago, and it is still the crucial question (Acts 8:26-39). Jesus of Nazareth is his name. This Jesus is the Suffering Servant "who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). Turn away from yourselves or the world's invented idols. Turn to the Holy One of Israel and give thanks to him, the God and Father of his incarnate Son, the Lord Jesus the Messiah, the Suffering Servant. Give thanks with the song composed by Isaiah in chapter 12, an eschatological song meant for people like you and me:

"I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might comfort me... .
Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.
Sing praises to the LORD,
for he has done gloriously;
let this be made known in all the earth.
Shout, and sing for joy,
O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

24. See Zechariah 3; Job 1-2.