THE MEANING OF SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ISA 53:11: A SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

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In current discussions regarding the doctrine of justification, one of the central points of dispute concerns the concept of imputed righteousness, specifically, whether the notion is present or absent in Pauline thought. While the OT is referenced as background to the arguments, studies with a specific focus on the doctrine from an OT perspective remain relatively sparse. This essay engages the question from the perspective of the suffering servant poem in Isa 52:13–53:12 and argues that the notion of imputation as understood in evangelical circles finds support in Isaiah’s description of the

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J. I. Packer, “Justification,” in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. E. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). See also the recent declaration by evangelicals in defining justification in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic viewpoint (http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/june14/53.0.html): “God’s justification of those who trust him, according to the Gospel, is a decisive transition, here and now, from a state of condemnation and wrath because of their sins to one of acceptance and favor.
servant’s ministry. It is contended that the substitutionary idea put forth in the poem includes both removal of sin and bestowing of righteousness. This granting (or bequeathing) of righteousness is seen as declarative (as opposed to transformative and participatory) in the same sense that the removal of sin is effected apart from the sinner’s own actions. Furthermore, the poem provides a basis for this substitutionary bestowal of righteousness: the servant’s own perfect obedience to Mosaic Law. He is the righteous king of Zion, a new David, who alone is able to fulfill the Deuteronomic requirements of covenantal faithfulness. This success (declared by Yahweh himself) allows him to grant his own righteousness to sinners and thereby prevent another exile, and, more importantly, death. The imagery is that of the warrior-king, who, as patrimonial head, distributes what he has earned as a free gift (a spoil of war) to his subjects. The well-attested universality of sin described in the poem provides the contextual explanation as to why the substitutionary syntax in the poem targets both the removal of sin and the bestowing of righteousness. Without the king’s own representative and substitutionary sacrificial intervention, righteousness would be ephemeral, a reality amply documented in Israel’s preexilic history. The status, in turn, frees righteousness to be manifested in the covenant community, through true worship and righteous deeds. However, the righteousness reflected by the people continues to be contrasted to Yahweh’s own. Before turning to the exegetical analysis of Isa 53:11–12, the essay briefly sets the context of Isaiah’s fourth servant song\(^4\) against the covenant lawsuit framework of the righteousness word-group (\(\pi\sigma\tau\omicron\nu\) in Isaiah’s prophecy. Equally important as a backdrop to the discussion is the motif of the restoration of Zion and its king that permeates the anthology.

I. THE FORENSIC PRIMACY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ISAIAH

A longstanding tradition in Isaianic studies equates the notion of God’s righteousness with salvation, particularly in the second half of the book.\(^5\) A crucial assumption governing this definition is the

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1. by virtue of Jesus’ flawless obedience culminating in his voluntary sin-bearing death. God ‘justifies the wicked’ (ungodly, Rom 4:5) by imputing (reckoning, crediting, counting, accounting) righteousness to them and ceasing to count their sins against them (Rom 4:1–8). Sinners receive through faith in Christ alone ‘the gift of righteousness’ (Rom 1:17; 5:17; Phil 3:9) and thus become ‘the righteousness of God’ in him who was ‘made sin’ for them (2 Cor 5:21).”


setting of chs. 40–66 as exilic and post-exilic.6 The parallelism of Isaiah’s poetry a priori seems to favor this usage: “and my righteousness will be forever and my salvation to all generations” (אִרְפָּא לְעַל תַּחְתּוֹ וַיִּשָּׁתֶם לְהוֹי (אִרְפָּא), Isa 51:8). The context of dislocation matters immensely in forging a working definition of God’s righteousness. A central question is how God will right this wrong (the exile) by returning the golah (the people in exile) back to the Persian province of Yehud. The return is anchored in the promises made to Abraham not only for his descendants but also for the nations (see Isa 49:6). Therefore, according to this construct, God’s righteousness is defined as “Yhwh’s returning and bringing exiled Judeans home.”7

To limit a definition of the righteousness of God to salvation as vindication is problematic on several counts.8 Within the corpus of chs. 40–55 alone, while God’s righteousness is indeed paralleled to

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6Even though the canonical-critical school (with its respect for the text in its final form) somewhat downplays the question of authorship (see R. Rendtorff, The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005], 168), the existence of three authors (or at least three compositional foci) for the book of Isaiah remains a fait accompli in critical scholarship. Isaiah 1–39 may have a general preexilic compositional setting and the book may signal strong literary and theological unity, nevertheless, the assumption is that the putative exilic and postexilic authors are the ones responsible for the book of Isaiah in its final form. Recovered preexilic oracles are thus integrated into an argument that essentially belongs to the exilic and postexilic era (H. G. M. Williamson, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27 [New York: T&T Clark, 2006], 14–15). This is a reflection of how wide the methodological and ideological chasm remains between mainstream evangelical and critical scholarship regarding the nature of predictive prophecy (see J. Barton, Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1986], 199; John Day, ed., Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar [New York and London: T&T Clark, 2011]). However, it is worth recounting the argument that a denial (or a radically redefined notion of foreknowledge) undercuts Isaiah’s argument to portray Yahweh as trustworthy to restore Israel. Isaiah claims that, as the God of the new exodus (which, like the original exodus, is framed in creation terms), he generates salvation, raises a deliverer, and, echoing primeval history, names him נָאשָׁב (Cyrus, see Isa 44:24, 28; 45:4). His argument is set in contrast to idols that cannot see or speak, let alone know anything about the future (Isa 40:18–20; see John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 5).

Turning to the prophet’s own Weltanschauung and prophetic “vision” (see Isa 1:1), it may not be a stretch for Isaiah, the eighth century b.c. Jerusalemite, both to versify the realities of Sargonid might in Judah (Isa 1), and the outcome of Zion’s future judgment (see Isa 64:11). In other words, to project the smoldering devastation of 701 b.c. onto Jerusalem in its future in 586 b.c. (and its resulting restoration) does not de facto necessitate a post 540 b.c. (chs. 40–55) and late sixth century b.c. (chs. 56–66) compositional and editorial settings (contra J. Goldingay, “The Theology of Isaiah,” in Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches [ed. David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009], 140; see Motyer, Isaiah, 25–30).


salvation (a righteous God [אֲרֵיהֶנָּא] and a Savior [מְשׁוֹשָׁא], there is no-one besides me,” Isa 45:21), it is also defined as the manifestation of a standard to be subscribed to, specifically, obedience to the law of Moses: “listen to me, knowers of righteousness (יִדְוַה, people with my law in their hearts (יִדְוַה בְּלבֵנָם), Isa 51:7). This understanding of righteousness is familiar in the earlier parts of the book where the term is paired with justice (שׁוֹשָׁא), which relates to obedience (or lack thereof) to the terms of the covenant that governs the relationship, namely Sinaiic law (e.g., Isa 1:21, 27; 3:10; 5:16, 24).° Yahweh, the judge, enacts his law and expects those who are in covenant relationship with him to obey his law. Hence, the well-known contention (בֵּית) that Yahweh has against his people (Isa 3:13)° presupposes Yahweh’s own righteousness: “But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice (יִדְוַה בְּלבֵנָם), and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness (יִדְוַה בְּלבֵנָם), Isa 5:16 ESV). Consequently, the revelation of Yahweh’s righteousness is one of judgment against his rebellious covenant followers (“they have rebelled [שׁוֹשָׁא] against me,” Isa 1:2), principally because he is “the holy one of Israel” (יִדְוַה בְּלבֵנָם).†

However, as Isaiah’s own name attests, the righteousness of God is also a revelation of his salvation. In keeping with Isaiah’s new exodus template, the outcome of Yahweh’s retributive justice is his salvation: as his judgments against the gods of Egypt revealed his salvation, so his judgments against his people prepare the way for his salvation (Isa 63:1-5).‡ In synthetic parallelism, the revelation of Yahweh’s righteousness as judgment accompanies his salvation (Isa

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° ידוה as word-pair with justice (שׁוֹשָׁא) is a well-attested relationship. In summary, in the first half of the book this occurs in 1:27; 5:7, 16; 9:6 [ET 7]; 28:17; 32:16; 33:5 (with uprightness 33:15); ידוה paired with justice (שׁוֹשָׁא) in the second half: 56:1; 58:2 (in the sense of judgment); 59:9, 14. The nominal ידוה can be used interchangeably with ידוה (see Isa 58:2). ידוה / שׁוֹשָׁא occurs in the first half: Isa 1:21; 11:4; 16:5; 26:9-10; 32:1 (related meanings of “faithfulness”: 1:26; 11:5; uprightness, 26:10). ידוה in judgment context in the second half: 41:1-2.

‡ For a review of the literature on covenant lawsuit, see Robert H. O’Connell, Concentricity and Continuity: The Literary Structure of Isaiah (JSOTSup 188; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 29-33.

The phrase, while not exclusive to Isaiah, certainly qualifies as a designation of choice across the Isaianic terrain (a well-rehearsed observation in the commentaries): Isa 1:4; 4:3; 5:16, 19, 24; 6:3; 10:17, 20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 30:11-12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 40:25; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14-15; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17, 49:7; 54:5; 55:5, 57:15; 58:13, 60:9, 14. The interrelated relationship between Yahweh’s holiness, glory, and righteousness in Isa 5:16 reaches an apex in the revelation of Yahweh to Isaiah in ch. 6. Holiness and glory as Yahweh’s attributes are made explicit in v. 3. The notion of righteousness as Yahweh’s legal standard to which one must subscribe, explicit in the context of 5:16, 24, is implicit in Isaiah’s confession in 6:5: The woes (לני) of Judah for not obeying Yahweh’s laws in Isa 5 (vv. 8, 11, 18, 20) are now Isaiah’s own woes (Isa 6:5).

§ See especially the relationship in v. 5 between Yahweh’s wrath and salvation: “My own arm brought me salvation (יֵשׁ יְהוָה לְהַנֵּיהוֹ; my wrath (יֵשׁ יְהוָה) upheld me.” Note that the concept is also present in the first half, as the “remnant” returns, “destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness” (Isa 10:22; see also v. 23). For a fuller discussion of the relationship between judgment and salvation against its theophanic backdrop, see J. J. Niehaus, God at Sinai (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
PETTER: SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS

51:6). We should, therefore, allow the dual dimension of righteousness as both judgment (resulting from Deuteronomic disobedience) and salvation to stand in the first and second half of the book.13

II. THE IDENTITY OF THE SERVANT: DAVIDIC PRIMACY

Multiple alternatives exist within Isaianic scholarship regarding the identity of the suffering servant (Isa 52:13–53:12).14 Among evangelicals, discussions on the identity of the suffering servant

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13 If Isa 40–55 were to be taken as an exilic document and the key to the interpretive framework of the book of Isaiah (see n. 6), the salvation (and vindication) language might of course apply to Israel: it has paid for its sin by that time (Isa 40:2), and it awaits Yahweh’s vindication by returning the exiles to the land (Isa 40:27). Likewise, the concept of vindication is certainly present in Ezekiel as an exilic document (Ezek 36:23–24). But Ezekiel also presupposes Yahweh’s righteousness as revelation of his judgment (the fall of Jerusalem motif) in order to manifest his salvation: “so that they shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezek 11:12, etc.).

The notion of vindication also forms a central plank in N. T. Wright’s understanding of the mission of Jesus, specifically, the purpose of his suffering on the cross. As “Israel’s representative,” Jesus acted a prophetic role of critique with the resulting rejection and suffering. This in turn prepared the way for Yahweh’s vindication of the Suffering Servant (Jesus and the Victory of God [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 595). Of significance is that the bulk of Wright’s argument is drawn from Isaiah 40–55, more specifically from the third servant song (Isa 50:4–9; e.g., v. 8: “he who vindicates me/declares me righteous is near” [נָא יְהוָה יְשַׁדֵּל מִי תּוֹאֵשׁ] as well as the fourth servant song (Isa 52:12–53:12, Wright, Jesus, 598; see also, idem, “The Servant and Jesus: The Relevance of the Colloquy for the Current Quest for Jesus,” in Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins [ed. W. H. Bellinger Jr., and W. R. Farmer; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity, 1998], 281–97). Thus, the foundations are laid for his definition of God’s righteousness as “Abrahamic covenant faithfulness” (Wright, Justification, 48). However, Seifrid rightly notes that, from a semantic perspective, the Abrahamic covenant faithfulness definition should not be singled out (Neh 9:8). Out of the seven instances where “covenant” and “righteousness” are associated in the same context, three times the Mosaic covenant is specifically in view, not the Abrahamic covenant (e.g., Dan 9:4, 7; Neh 9:32–33; Ps 50:1–5; Seifrid, “Righteousness Language,” 425). Perhaps more importantly, the Isaianic corpus confirms an Abrahamic rather than an Abrahamic understanding of covenantal faithfulness. For Isaiah, to be faithful to the covenant primarily means faithfulness to Mosaic standards (Isa 42:21; 43:24–27).

It is worth stressing that the role and function of the Abrahamic covenant in God’s restoration of Israel is not in question, especially regarding the destiny of nations (e.g., Isa 19:24–25). However, in the context of restoration by the hand of Cyrus (Isa 45:1, 8), where righteousness is mentioned in salvific and vindicative terms, the basis of Yahweh’s righteous act of salvation seems to be creation rather than the Abraham promise (45:7 and especially vv. 11–13). Therefore, Wright’s concept of God’s righteousness as principally Abrahamic covenantal faithfulness (God being faithful to his promise to Abraham) cannot be sustained from the available Isaianic data. Deuteronomic בָּרָא (rib, lawsuit) is primary and informs what it means to be faithful, a reality amply documented both by other preexilic prophets (e.g., Hosea, see below) and postexilic theological consciousness (Neh 9:32–33).

 seem to have gathered mostly around a kingly or Messianic\textsuperscript{15} and Mosaic prophetic figure.\textsuperscript{16} The appeal for a new Moses resides principally in the well-known new exodus motif that dominates Isa 40–55. The evidence marshaled to draw lexical and semantic connections between the suffering servant, the new Exodus, and Moses as priest cannot be easily dismissed.\textsuperscript{17} Further parallels may be drawn from incidents in the Pentateuchal record of the life of Moses.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, certain realities seem to exist within the poem itself that still point to kingship imagery as the determining interpretative framework. In the prologue of Isa 52:13 (ESV), “my servant shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted” (וֹרֵד וּבְנֵי יְהֹוָה מִסְדָּר), Isaiah uses the phrase “high and lifted up” elsewhere specifically to characterize Yahweh (Isa 6:1 [יְהֹוָה יָבִיא]; Isa 57:15 [יְהֹוָה יָבִיא]).\textsuperscript{19} The servant’s successful status elevates and exalts him like Yahweh himself. That a king figure is primarily in view seems to be supported by the context of Isa 6:5 and 57:15. The centrality of the restoration of Zion in Isaiah’s vision also favors kingship as the primary influence upon the identity of the Servant.\textsuperscript{20} In the Samuel narrative, the early history of Zion is embedded within the development of kingship in Israel. Without a king, Zion would not be established because it is David who ultimately secures Yahweh’s holy abode when he finally clutches Jerusalem from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5; see Exod 15:13).\textsuperscript{21} In light of Isaiah’s big picture, if Zion finds itself at the heart of his program of salvation (2:1–5), then a king needs to be present on Yahweh’s “holy mountain” as well (11:1, 9).


\textsuperscript{16}See Gordon Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure,” in The Lord’s Anointed, 129–38.

\textsuperscript{17}Hugenberger outlines twelve points in support of a second Moses figure. The role of Moses as priest (Ps 99:6) and his attempt to make atonement in the golden calf narrative (Exod 32:30–31) seem particularly significant (“The Servant of the Lord,” 129ff.).

\textsuperscript{18}See also K. Baltzer who has proposed Moses as the primary individual in view in Isaiah’s fourth song (Deutero-Isaiah [ed. Peter Machinist; trans. Margaret Kohl; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 394–426).


\textsuperscript{21}Thus David effectively fulfills what had been mandated to Joshua (Josh 15:63).
However, lest we drive too much of a wedge between kings and prophets, the articulation of the terms of the covenant drawn to kings via David (2 Sam 7) incorporates the Deuteronomic-Sinaitic terms of kingship (Deut 17:18–20):22 “when he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men” (2 Sam 7:14 ESV). Therefore, the “servant” is both prophet and king, inasmuch as David and his descendants are bound by the terms of the Mosaic law.23 Hence, that parallels with the life of Moses exist in the fourth song should not be surprising in light of the Deuteronomic origins of kingship, Moses’ and David’s shared roles as mediators, and the new exodus motif in Isaiah.24

If indeed the servant is related to kingship and the Zion oracles in Isaiah, then, a long-standing tradition that relates the poem to kingship and Zion texts elsewhere in the prophecy continues to be validated (Isa 2:1–5; 7: 9:1–7; 11; 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12).25 So in Isaiah’s comprehensive vision of a new Zion as a city of righteousness (1:26; 2:1–5; etc.), the fourth song is taken as another installment of that restoration (see 52:1ff.). Now, however, the focus

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22“That he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law... and doing them... so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.”

23The contrast with David and his descendants, however, is found in the relationship his covenant shares with the Abrahamic covenant of promise. Yahweh’s promise to Abraham and to David is ultimately guaranteed by Yahweh’s own oath: he will secure the seed of Abraham, quite apart from what Abraham might or might not be able to accomplish (in his old age). In Gen 16, with the eerie echo to the curse of the Fall as a backdrop (“Abram listened to the voice of Sarai,” Gen 16:2; Gen 3:17; see G. Wenham, Genesis 1–15 [WBC; Thomas Nelson: 1987]), Abram and Sarai’s failure to trust in Yahweh does not result in any threat that the promise might be cancelled. In the same way, Yahweh will ultimately preserve the seed of David (his dynasty), regardless of his descendants’ unfaithfulness to the law of Moses, including his own (the matter of Uriah is duly noted in David’s otherwise dislocated regnal formula, cf. 1 Kgs 15:5, “he did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh... except in the matter of Uriah”). In contrast, the relationship at Sinai is strictly conditional with its characteristic syntax (“if [28]... then []”; cf. Deut 28:1, etc.; “you shall not” [i.e. + imperfect], cf. Deut 5:7, etc.), and consequential curses for disobedience. Moses, who is now under his own covenantal jurisdiction, does not seem to enjoy the same largesse Yahweh grants Abraham. His disobedience (famously striking the rock twice [Num 20:11]), results in failure to obtain Yahweh’s promise of the land for himself (adumbrating the fate of his descendants in 586 b.C.; see Jer 7). Therefore, attempts to unify the Sinaitic and Abrahamic covenant relationships into one (see S. J. Hafemann, “Covenant,” in Central Themes in Biblical Theology [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007]) fails to account for some crucial differences between covenants (see J. J. Niehaus, “Covenant: an Idea in the Mind of God,” JETS 52 [2009]: 225–46; Michael S. Horton, Covenant and Salvation [Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox, 2007], 11–29).


is specifically on the priestly role of the king, a ministry that was adumbrated in Isaiah’s own experience in ch. 6.

Turning to the language of the poem itself, the Davidic primacy is present in the language of root (שָׁרֵש, Isa 53:2) that may be connected to Jesse’s descendant in Isa 11:1. The parallels become more direct in terms of the description of the suffering of the servant that appears intentionally related to the suffering of David as described in Psalm 38:

- 53:3b “אשׁ משׁאבות” // Ps 38:18 [ET 17]
- 53:5d "by his stripes" // Ps 38:6 [ET 5] “my stripes"
- 53:7 (2x) // Ps 38:14 [ET 13] "he did not open his mouth”

Thus, the case for a new David as the primary identifier of the suffering servant in Isaiah’s fourth song remains strong. However, the parallels with Moses’ life of suffering, his priestly and (functional) kingly role actually strengthen, rather than weaken, the case for a Davidic image since they underscore a certain continuity between the covenants and the ministry of covenant mediators. Historically, the exodus needed a Moses and the establishment of Zion needed a David. Conversely, just as Moses did not establish Zion, a new Moses will not establish the new Zion. Hence, the Davidic identity is fronted, yet without rejecting its Mosaic/prophetic roots.

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26A role anticipated by David and Solomon’s priestly activities as kings in establishing Zion and the temple (1 Chr 37:40, etc.).
27His atonement for sin implies that a sacrifice was performed in the heavenly temple (Isa 6:6-7). Thus, prophetically, it could be that Isaiah experiences the forgiveness that will be actualized in the sacrifice of the suffering servant in the fourth song.
28Chisholm, “Christological Fulfillment,” 395; Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah, 404.
29Psalm 38 also underscores the relationship between sin and a shattered, repulsive physical appearance, which results in rejection by others (Ps 38:4-6, 12; see also Chisholm, who points out the relationship between David’s sufferings and the Servant’s [“Christological Fulfillment”]). The motif of the king who does not act or look like one (Isa 53:2, “no beauty” [בְּחָיְצָתוֹ]) may also be recovered in the David-Goliath narrative: “When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance” (1 Sam 17:42). The idea appears to undergird both the narrative of his anointing and the Goliath episode (1 Sam 16:11; 1 Sam 17:14, 17-18, 28, 33, 38-40, 42, 45, and especially vv. 47, 50). Therefore, David’s “good looks” perhaps should not be perceived entirely as a positive trait in the Samuel narrative since it projects the wrong image for a warrior-king (contrast the well-known kingship iconography of the “larger-than-life” Near Eastern potentate; or, directly in the David and Goliath narrative, the elaborate description of Goliath the “champion”).
30Baltzer recognizes the fourth song’s function within the Zion tradition in Isaiah but he still views Moses as the figure in view in the song (Deutero-Isaiah, 426).
As we now turn to the poem itself and 53:11–12 in particular, we will examine the basis and extent of the Davidic servant’s obedience and what it achieves.

III. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ISA 53:11–12

A. The Legal Setting of the Poem

The fourth servant song itself seems to reflect these Sinaitic underpinnings by the targeted usage of “to be wise” (שבעל) in the introductory statement (Isa 52:13).\(^{32}\) שפל occurs frequently in Proverbs (13 times out of 60 as a verbal form, e.g., Prov 3:4) where the notion of wisdom is closely connected to legal imperatives (Prov 1:7; see Deut 4:5–6, 10; 29:8). Thus, a working contextual definition might be “wisdom or success obtained on the basis of proper conduct.” More specifically, the verb, paired with “having success” (ולא), is used in instances describing the succession from a covenant mediator to his successor: Moses to Joshua (Josh 1:7–8) and from David to Solomon (1 Chr 22:11–13). These texts share the language of “wisdom” and “success” that is tied to complete obedience to Yahweh’s law.\(^{33}\) The parallel to what might be termed a “dynastic succession” subgenre is further warranted by the usage of the designation “servant/my servant” (억).\(^{34}\) To have success implies obedience to the standard set for covenant mediators (those called “servants of Yahweh”), namely obedience to Mosaic law.\(^{35}\) Appearing to confirm this legal usage in Isaiah’s fourth song, the verb “to prosper” (לכל)\(^{36}\) in 53:10 functions as a recapitulating inclusio in the final stanza of the poem.\(^{37}\)

The final section of the poem (53:10–12) yields considerable interpretational fruit as it recapitulates the sacrificial ministry of the servant that was spelled out in the previous sections of the poem (53:4–6 and 7–9).\(^{38}\) It also adds significant information in terms of

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32Baltzer has made the case that the prologue sets the tone of the poem as a whole (Deutero-Isaiah, 47–85).
33In addition to the parallel frame of the charge, emphasis is signaled through “very” (增至), “every” (יבש), Jos 1:7.
34Moses (Jos 1:2, 7, etc.); Joshua (Jos 24:29); David (1 Chr 17:7, etc.). For a discussion of the distribution of the designation, see Stephen G. Dempster, “The Servant of the Lord,” in Central Themes in Biblical Theology (ed. S. J. Hafemann and Paul R. House; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 127–78. He notes that David is designated as servant of God 66 times, followed by Moses at 19 times (133).
35See 1 Kgs 2:3; Ps 119:99; Neh 8:13; Jer 23:1.
36See Ps 1:3; 2 Chr 31:21; within the context of Isaiah, see Isa 48:15; 54:17.
Yahweh’s role in the sacrifice,\(^{39}\) the nature of the sacrifice as a וָשָׁב (guilt-offering),\(^{40}\) what the sacrifice accomplishes in addition to the removal of sin; crucially, the servant’s own destiny after he has performed the sacrifice: a long life and a progeny (the “blessed life” in Deuteronomistic parlance). Although it was the will of Yahweh to “crush him” (יִשְׁחַר, “to crush”), now “the will of Yahweh shall prosper his hands” (יִרְרוּ יִשְׁחַר וְיִטְחְרֶה יֵשְׁחַר) and the servant is restored to his exalted place (see the prologue in 52:13). The question whether we can take this as “life after death” to be for the servant himself, for his progeny (“seed”; in a dynastic continuity sense), or for both himself and his progeny seems to be answered. The context supports that it is in fact the servant who will live “to see another day,” as it were. However, the implication that his progeny might participate in his “lengthened days” cannot be ruled out, especially since the context of his ministry is to perform a substitutionary act on behalf of the worshipers (“us”). The final line of the whole poem (v. 12; see below) aptly summarizes the prevailing theme of the entire poem: he stands in the place (מָשָּׁב, cf. 59:16) of the rebellious ones (לאשׁוּנִים) of Isa 1:2, etc.\(^{31}\)

In light of the above preliminary findings, we now turn to Isa 53:11, in order to ascertain the meaning of the key lexemes and their structural and syntactical relationship with each other.

**B. The Structure of Verse 11**

In discussing v. 11, commentators routinely summarize the problems encountered.\(^{42}\) The MT has the following arrangement:

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\text{א} & \text{ב} & \text{ג}
\end{align*}
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- [out of the toil of his life, he shall see, he shall be satisfied]
- [by his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant shall justify the many]
- [and their iniquities, he himself shall bear]

\(^{39}\)Expressed quite bluntly by Isaiah: it was Yahweh’s will to “crush” him (v. 10/ v. 5).


\(^{31}\)See D. Barthélémy, who proposes "leurs révoltes" (their rebellions) (Critique Textuelle de L’Ancien Testament: 2. Isaie, Jérémie, Lamentations [OBO 50/2; Fribourg, Göttingen: Editions Universitaires; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht], 407. However, in view of the parallel with “many” (see discussion below), to retain “rebels” seems warranted.

\(^{42}\)Westermann views the end of v. 10 and the beginning of v. 11 as too corrupt to attempt reconstruction (*Isaiah 40–66*, 267).
PETTER: SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS 175

Many add, following Qumran and Septuagint texts, “light” [יַסִּים] to the verb “he shall see.” To add the object stems in part from the problem posed by the absence of an object for the transitive verb “he shall see” in the MT. The pairing does occur elsewhere, including in Isa 9:1. However, in a different context, the two verbs taken together (“to see” and “to be satisfied[ed]”) can carry the meaning of covenental blessing: “with long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Ps 91:15 [MT]). We note also the close contextual proximity of the usage “he shall lengthen his days” (synonymous with “to be satisfied”) and “he shall see seed” (direct lexical link with “to see” [יָתֵן]) in the previous verse in the poem (53:10). Thus, it may be possible to conjecture a continuity to the theme of covenental blessings established in v. 10 from these two verbs, but now with implied objects. Perhaps the ellipsis of the objects was intentional (cf. v. 10b, “he causes sickness,” where the direct object “him” is left out) so that we would think of “seed” in line 11 as well. Additionally, when the context of inheritance is taken into account from v. 12 (see below), the notion of “light,” present in the servant songs to be sure (42:6), may not “fit” as well here. The ESV, reflecting a similar hesitation, retains the MT, but still provides the Qumranic/Septuagintal reading as an option in footnote. While Barthélemy prefers such a reading of the line, “Emerging from that which he has suffered, he will see the light, he will be satisfied,” he does note that Jewish Medieval commentators made the assumption that the objects were in fact implied and left unstated. In summary, according to this line structure, what is significant is “by his knowledge” modifies the causative hiphil verb “to declare righteous” in line 10b. Furthermore, the symmetry between the phrases “from the toil of his life” and “by his knowledge” is preserved.46

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45Editor’s translation. The original reads: “Emergeant de ce qu’il a souffert, il verra la lumiere, il s’en rassasiera.” See Barthélemy, Critique Textuelle, 405. So David Qimri explains the phrase “he will see prosperity so as to be satisfied therewith” (The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to Jewish Interpreters II [trans. S. R. Driver and A. D. Neubauer; New York: Ktav 1969], 54).
46Oswalt alters the MT/Qumran line structure so that “by his knowledge” modifies “he shall be satisfied” (Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 399):
   Line a: “From the trouble of his life, he shall see light,
   Line b: “he shall be satisfied by his knowledge.”
   Line c: “The righteous one, my servant shall justify the many;”
   Line d: “and their iniquities he shall bear.”
Williamson follows the same line arrangement but alters two significant components: “righteous”/”the righteous one” is elided on account of dittography and “knowledge” is translated as “rest” (see discussion below): “After his deep suffering, he will see light; he will be satisfied with his rest; my servant will justify many; and he
C. “By His Knowledge” (-notification)

Before we can revisit the question of the specific meaning of “knowledge,” questions linger whether we should take “his” as objective possessive (someone’s knowledge of him) or subjective (his knowledge) [of something or someone]. It seems the evidence from the syntactical context of the poem suggests a subjective reading. The grammatical parallelism with “from the toil of his life” points to the servant’s own trouble. Second, the worshipers (“us,” “we”) and other participants (the kings, “they,” 52:15) are unambiguously recognized elsewhere in the poem. Third, and perhaps more significantly, the servant himself is referenced in the third person singular throughout the poem. Finally, the construction has a parallel in Prov 3:20 (“by his knowledge, the deep broke open”) where the subjective relationship is in view.

The question now turns to the actual meaning of “knowledge.” The nominal notification occurs nine times in Isaiah. With the exception of 44:19, 25 (where it means “discernment”), the term is either legal (5:13; 11:2 [note the context of vv. 3–4]; 33:6 [direct parallel of knowledge/fear of Yahweh; see Prov 1:29]; 58:2) or, on one occasion, is paralleled with human “wisdom” (47:10). The forensic underpinning of the term is anchored in the introductory covenant lawsuit in Isaiah 5 when the judgment is rendered: “therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge” (Isa 5:13). In the


While these arrangements might be possible, they seem unnecessary (so Gentry, “Atonement”; Barthélémy, Critique, 407). Due attention to symmetry is obviously important (Oswalt, Isaiah 40–66, 399), yet it appears less problematic to retain the MT/Qumran structure which in turn preserves the parallel line-initial nominal prepositional phrases “from the toil of his life” and “by his knowledge.” In this respect, John Day, who otherwise follows Williamson’s lead in discarding “righteous and defining “knowledge” differently, nevertheless retains MT line arrangement (“da'at; Humiliation in Isaiah LIII 11 in the Light of Isaiah LIII 3 and Daniel XII 4, and the Oldest Known Interpretation of the Suffering Servant,” VT 30 [1980]: 100–101). 42See E. J. Young, The Book of Isaiah Vol II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 357.

40So ESV; Gentry, “Atonement”; etc.

4The question is raised with the phrase, whether it refers to his sacrificial death and the suffering of his “soul,” or to a life of pain as a whole. Following usage of “toil” (הֵן, ESV, “trouble”) elsewhere (especially in Qoheleth) and in keeping with the emphatic description of his troubled life narrative earlier in the poem (how he grew up in a dry land [53:2]; his appearance and rejection [52:14; 53:3]), it appears difficult to single out his death at the expense of his life as a whole. His death forms the principal source of his “trouble,” but his life seems also in view.

5The exclusive use of the third person is perhaps in keeping with the passive nature of his ministry in the fourth song (that is, Yahweh causes him to suffer). In this regard, the twice-repeated line “he would not open his mouth” (53:7) might also add to the overall mood in the poem.

5Here, as in 53:11, with the instrumental use of the preposition 2. See Ronald J. Williams, Williams’ Hebrew Syntax (rev. and exp. by John C. Beckman; Toronto: University of Toronto, 2007), 98.

5The option of “his knowledge of someone,” presumably Yahweh, might be possible as well (see below).
same setting, the reason for the impending Judean devastation is stated in unmistakable Deuteronomic categories:53 “They have rejected the law of Yahweh of hosts, despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel” (5:24). If we allow the verbal form to inform the inquiry, the lack of covenantal knowledge of Yahweh is among Yahweh’s first contentions against his people: “Israel does not know [יָדַע]; my people do not understand” (Isa 1:3). Hosea, Isaiah’s confrère in the northern kingdom, in striking intertextuality, suggests a similar diagnosis and also anchors the nominal in forensic terms: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because they have rejected knowledge [יָדַע] . . . since you have forgotten the law of your God” (Hos 4:6). Therefore, the problem Isaiah outlines in his introduction is framed in covenantal terms, with knowledge featuring preeminently.

Interspersed with judgments are also promises of restoration of Zion in the Isaianic “symphonic movements.” Here also the lexeme carries significant semantic clout. In the promise of a future king in Isaiah 11 (the Davidic king of the renewed Zion of Isa 2:1–5, where the law will find itself at the center of everyone’s attention, including the nations), the seven attributes of the Spirit upon the king culminate with “knowledge” that stands in symmetry with “fear of Yahweh” (v. 2).54 Thus, in sharp contrast to the house of David in Isaiah’s days (metonymically, Ahaz in Isa 7:2), the future king will stand out by his wisdom, knowledge, and fear of Yahweh above the current occupants of the Davidic seat.

In the second half of the book, another semantic strand for “knowledge” relates to Yahweh’s control (“purpose”) of the nations on the basis of his creatiorship (e.g., Isa 40:14). There, however, knowledge as “purpose” also retains a legal sense in that Yahweh’s knowledge is grounded in his justice in the context of the future restoration.55 The link to the definition in the first half of the book is also found in literary proximity to the fourth song: “Listen to me, knowers of righteousness [יָדַע יִשְׁרָאֵל], [in parallel line with] people with my law in their hearts [יִשְׁתֶר בְּלבֵיהֶם],” (Isa 51:7).

Turning to the fourth song itself the implied concept of knowledge as Yahweh’s purpose is emphasized in Isa 53:10–11.56 Furthermore, in 53:3, “knowing” is explicitly framed in the sense of experience of suffering: “grief was known.”57 Not unrelated to the

53 With knowledge carrying a strong ethical-covenantal sense of obedience to the law, Deut 31:12–13, etc.
54 A phrase related to covenantal obedience; see R. Chisholm, Handbook on the Prophets (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 44. See also Isa 50:10.
55 Note the parallelism of justice, knowledge, and understanding in 40:14.
56 Motyer takes the meaning as purpose on the part of the Servant, which he directly connects to the prologue’s “he shall act wisely” (Isa 52:13) in The Prophecy of Isaiah (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 441. With a different reading of v. 11, John Goldingay and David Payne also connect 52:13 with “knowledge” of 53:11 (Isaiah 40–55 [2 vols.; ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006], 2:325).
57 B. Childs, Isaiah (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 419.
knowledge as experience connection, John Day centers the meaning in 53:3 and 11 as humiliation.58 However, knowledge as experience does not necessarily create an antithetical relationship to knowledge as obedience within the mood of the poem, especially since “grief” in 53:4 (תָּשׁוֹךְ) and “stricken for the transgression of my people” in 53:8 (רָעָם) share the same judgment (“plague” [רעמ]) reserved for the wayward kings in the covenant made with David (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:33 [ET 32]; see also Exod 11:1). Therefore, the promise of success established in the prologue of 52:13 (with the expectation of Deuteronomic obedience), the explicit knowledge-as-obedience characterization of the Spirit-filled future king of Zion in Isa 11:2, the surrounding setting of the poem, and the problem of the people framed in terms of lack of knowledge of Yahweh’s law in Isaiah’s prolegomenon of chs. 1–6, all seem to point to a contextual definition of יפצא as “faithful obedience” to Yahweh and his requirements for kingship in Isa 53:11.

D. The Meaning Of יפצא As Forensic Declaration

The attested instances of the verb “to declare righteous”59 (דריסא, hiphil modal imperfect in 53:11)60 is unequivocally forensic in the book of Isaiah, that is, a courtroom verdict (Isa 5:23 [hiphil participle]; 43:9; 43:26 [gal perfect]). Included in the forensic declaration rests, also at times, the idea of exoneration. Contextual support is found in the third song: the servant himself will be vindicated (hiphil participle, 50:8). Likewise, the upshot of Israel’s deliverance from exile by the hand of Cyrus will be vindication (gal imperfect, 45:25). Israel has paid for its sin (40:2) and now it awaits its exoneration or vindication from Yahweh.

Turning to other instances in the OT, and keeping in mind the king of Zion framework of the poem, there are two examples that appear particularly helpful to elucidate the usage of the verb in Isa 53:11.61 As usurper of David’s authority as king, Absalom succeeded in swaying the hearts and minds of the people by dispensing his own version of kingly justice at the gate: “O that I were judge in the

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58Day views it as “humiliation” (“da’at Humiliation,” 98), whereas Williamson considers “rest” (less likely) to be its primary meaning (“da’at,” 120). See the discussion in Oswalt, Isaiah Chapters 40–66, 404.

59Westerman’s description of the verb as “internal causative” (i.e., reflexive) does not reflect a typical hiphil usage (Isaiah 40–66, 267). If a reflexive were intended, the hithpael (Gen 44:16) would have served that purpose here.

60In the last stanza of the poem, imperfectives predominate.

61Daniel 12:3: “those who turn many to righteousness” (יְהִישָׂכְרֵיהּ) a priori provides solid syntactical parallels with Isa 53:11 with the usage of hiphil and the presence of “many” as object. The text is routinely put forward in support of the argument favoring a corporate understanding of the suffering servant (see discussion in Day, “da’at”). However, as Tångberg has noted, lexical and syntactical parallels do not necessarily signal identical contexts (A. Tångberg, “The Justification of the Servant of the Lord: Light from Qumran on the Interpretation of Isaiah 53:11,” TTKi 1–2 [2001]: 32).
PETTER: SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS

land! Then every man with a dispute [בְּרֹנֶה] or cause might come to me and I would give him justice” (משפטון = “declare him righteous” [hiphil], 2 Sam 15:4 ESV). A second parallel is attested in Solomon’s priestly prayer at the temple dedication. When a person sins against another, Solomon calls on Yahweh to adjudicate from his throne room in heaven: “Hear in heaven and act and judge your servants to condemn the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and to declare righteous the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness” (ה לעבודו זadors יודע [hiphil infinitive construct], 1 Kgs 8:32). A courtroom decision for a person who is in the right in the first place justifies him and so, if the person had been treated unfairly, he might be exonerated/vindicated. Conversely, a courtroom decision against a guilty person condemns him. In the context of 53:11, the courtroom forensic meaning is reinforced by the adverbial “by his knowledge”: By the servant’s own faithfulness someone (see below) is declared to be in the right.

E. “The Righteous One, My Servant” as a Compound Subject

To some exegeters, the compound subject found in the MT, “the righteous one, my servant,” appears as an unacceptable syntactical construction. The problem is explained on account of ditography (duplication of רַע), so the subject is reduced to “my servant.”63 However, compound subjects with an initial adjectival, while unusual to be sure, are also attested.64 By adjoining the designation “righteous one” to the act of declaring righteous (the verb), the author perhaps intentionally introduced redundancy into his syntactical construction (a standard procedure in poetic parallelism) to underscore the status of the servant in legal-forensic terms.65 Furthermore, attested usage in Isaiah allows for the indefinite adjective “righteousness” (רַע) to be taken in both a substantive (nominal sense) and definite role, “[the] righteous [one].”66 Another option might be to view the designation as vocative (“[O] righteous [one]”) in view of the first person voice of the line signaled by “my servant,” but it seems less likely. The designation “my servant” connects the individual introduced in the prologue of 52:13 by virtue of the obvious lexical

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63Within the literary milieu of kingship, individual lament psalms are a well-known resource to encounter this particular sense of “vindication” to the notion of the רַעו word group (see Ps 18:21 [ET 20]).
66Gesenius cites “emphasis” for this particular word order (GKC 132 b).
parallel and by its pronominal suffix in the first person singular voice: “my” servant. The voice of Yahweh resumes in v. 11 and declares the servant’s authority to justify, signaled by the adverbial “by his [own] knowledge,” ultimately rests with Yahweh himself. Yahweh’s ruling stands in conformity with the statement earlier in v. 10, that it was “the will of Yahweh to crush him”: as the servant willingly gave himself up as a sacrifice, it is Yahweh who grants him the authority to justify. The reintroduction of the designation “my servant” also creates a grammatical and semantic relationship between the exaltation of the servant in the prologue in the same way that the verb pair “success-prosper” (52:13; 53:10, see discussion above) connects the servant’s ministry to Yahweh’s own status. Hence, the equating of the servant to Yahweh’s kingly exaltation (see Isaiah 6 for the verbal relationship) puts the servant on par with Yahweh, a notion already introduced in Isa 9:5 (ET 6). The king has been deified and is exalted alongside the deity. The status, then, grants him the authority to provide a righteous ruling (contrast Ahab’s interpretation of the law in 1 Kgs 21).

In summary so far, the combined usage of the hiphil causative (see 1 Kgs 8:32), the voice of Yahweh on his heavenly throne, the exaltation of the servant as the righteous one, who, by (“on account of”) his knowledge/faithful obedience, is able to pronounce righteous “the many” (see below), all add to the tremendous force of the ruling emanating from the heavens. The servant is uniquely the righteous sacrificial king of Israel, finding himself “high, lifted up and exalted,” just as Yahweh is characterized elsewhere in Isaiah’s prophecy.

F. Identifying the “Many” as Recipients of the Declaration

In searching for the identity of the pronouncement’s recipients (“the many”/פָּדַספָּד), indefinite or definite usage elsewhere in the poem (52:14, 15, and 53:12) provides ample support to assign an antecedent value: “many” functions, perhaps synecdochally, for “nations” and “kings” (52:15), “the mighty,” as well as the “transgressors” (53:12). The term is all-inclusive in the poem and extends to “us” (Isa 53:6, the covenant community) and “them” (the nations, 52:15: see Isa 2:3; 8:7).6

Thus, according to this interpretation, the Septuagintal reading of the poem, which views justification (or vindication) as something that the servant himself receives from Yahweh,6 is set aside in favor of the MT reading. That

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6The targeted use of the preposition ב emphasizes the passive role of the recipients. See the parallel syntactical construction of hiphil + ב ל in Dan 11:33 which further strengthens a notion of bequeathal: “And the wise of the people shall cause to understand the many” (מְשַׁפֶּרְךָ בֵּן פָּדַספָּד)

6b. . . and to fill him with understanding [καὶ πλάσαι τῇ συνέσει], to justify a righteous one who serves many [δικαιώσαι δίκαιον εὗ δουλεύοντα πολλοίς], and their sins he himself will bear [καὶ τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν αὐτός ἀναδικάσει].” In the context of the poem in the LXX, it is Yahweh who fills him with understanding and justifies him. See
some vindication for the servant is in view in the third servant song is not in question (Isa 50:8). However, the context of the fourth song returns to a much larger theme in the book of Isaiah, which is the problem to solution trajectory caused by Israel’s sin and rebellion against Yahweh. The strategic lexical connections between the fourth song and the prologue of chs. 1–5 (especially the vocabulary of sickness in ch. 1), and the lawsuit context (see 43:24–27), suggests we should not dislodge the poem from Isaiah’s prolegomenon.

The final line of v. 11 (“and their iniquities he himself [םְנַי] will bear”) adds a crucial dimension to this heavenly declaration and transaction: by framing the declaration of righteousness within the context of the substitutionary sacrifice (the focal point of the poem, including a return to the vocabulary of “iniquities” that are the attributes of the “many” and the use of the emphatic personal pronoun “himself”) suggests that we should not read this receiving of righteousness on account of the servant’s obedience apart from the removal of transgressions. His substitutionary ministry includes both.

G. The Spoils of Conquest

Verse 12 completes the poem as the language now turns to land grant/conquest of enemy territories and the resultant dividing of spoil (piel, to divide” [םָלֵל] + “spoil” [שֵׁלש]):

12a Therefore I (Yahweh) will distribute for him [םָלֵל] [possible gapping of “the spoil,” see 12b] among the many [םָלֵל]

12b and with the strong [םָלֵל], he will distribute [םָלֵל] the spoil [שֵׁלש]

The motifs of conquest, booty, and Davidic kingship coalesce elsewhere in the book of Isaiah (63:1–6) and have antecedents in the record of David’s life. After the conquest of Jerusalem (the “prize” in Yahweh’s scheme of redemption, Exod 15:17), David brought the ark of the covenant to Zion and offered burnt and peace offerings


69 A well-known motif in the individual lament Psalms of the king (cf. Ps 35, passim).

70 The lexical relationship between the prologue of Isa 1 and the fourth song are clearly laid out: Isa 1:2 and the context of rebellion (יָשָׁע); 1:5–6 and the context of sickness as a result of Deuteronomistic curses (Deut 28:22, 27, 35).

71 Balthzer, Deutero-Isaiah, 426.

72 NRSV: “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.”

73 Exodus 15:9 (the voice of pharaoh) and Judg 5:30 (the voice of Sisera’s mother).

(taking the ad hoc role of a priest). Then, “he blessed the people and distributed (פזר) among all the people, cake of bread, a portion of meat and a cake of raisins to each one” (2 Sam 6:18–20, emphasis mine). Earlier in the narrative, the contest with Goliath is cast in explicitly substitutionary terms. As a result of David’s representation (mediating for the king) and substitution, Israel receives the benefit of complete victory on the basis of David’s earned victory on the field of battle, including the spoil of war (1 Sam 17: 53). The same could be said of Goliath’s role, evidently with the opposite outcome. When the “champion” (אשישנין) lost the contest, the armies he represented also lost.

However, as lines 12c and d indicate (as in v. 11), the transaction of receiving the spoils of conquest (now viewed as a free gift from the king) is embedded within the sacrifice language of the whole poem: “because (=min in a substitute sense) he emptied unto death his life,” and line 12d, “and with the transgressors he was counted.” The return to the passive language of the previous stanzas appears intentional and enables us perhaps to connect the complete ministry of the suffering servant as part of the gift: forgiveness, righteousness, and new life.

IV. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

A. Sinners Are Declared Righteous

What is startling is that those who receive this righteousness are not “righteous” but sinners/rebels/those with iniquities (captured in 53:6, “we have turned everyone to our own way”; see also 43:26–27; 45:25). In parallel ruling proceedings in the corpus, the declaration of righteousness granted by the king, or Yahweh, are for those who are in the right (see 1 Kgs 8:32). They deserve to be in the right, because they have done what is right. In an ironic way, Absalom’s tactics as recorded in 2 Sam 15:4 might also support this observation. It appears that one of the reasons Absalom mounted a successful revolt against his father (the consequences of David’s extraordinary lapse of judgment notwithstanding [2 Sam 12:10]) was because, presumably, he granted righteousness to whomever came to him, regardless of their guilt or innocence. But here, and particularly in the first half of the book, there is no indication that the people were in the right in the first place, that is, that they came to the judge to receive “exoneration.” On the contrary, when the prophecy of Isaiah is taken as a whole and within the specific “sin” problem of the poem itself, they come to Yahweh (or more accurately Yahweh the divine warrior/judge comes down to them [e.g., Isa 66:15–16]) to receive their condemnation as the ones who have rebelled against him (53:4–6). Furthermore, if “the many” (= “all of us” of 53:6) as recipients of his righteousness are taken to include “the many” in the future restored Zion (“the many” of 52:3 = the “nations” of 2:4; the
“mighty” of 53:12 and Isa 8:7), then the point is further emphasized that no one is receiving vindication on the basis of one’s own righteousness. Justification is based on other grounds, apart from “the many’s” own obedience. Hence, according to this interpretation, the notion of “vindication” of Israel does not find much support from the perspective of the fourth servant song in Isaiah. This denial does not imply the absence of the nuance elsewhere in Isaiah (49:25), especially regarding the servant himself (e.g., 50:8).

B. The Servant’s Obedience Is Not Limited to His Sacrificial Death

The well-known dilemma created by the above (how could an unrighteous person receive a verdict of innocence?) is answered when one takes into consideration the nature and extent of the servant’s obedient ministry in the poem. The servant’s “righteous” status is clearly anchored in his blamelessness as a “sin-offering” [םשנ]. However, the biographical nature of the poem prevents an overly limiting scope of his “innocence” but may extend to his whole life (םשנ, 53:10c, 11a, 12c). As the frame of 52:13, a contextual definition of “knowledge,” and the prevailing forensic/Sinaitic underpinnings of the仆 word-group in Isaiah collectively suggest, the servant’s obedience should not be limited to his sacrificial death. Instead, the reader is led to view the ministry of the servant in a comprehensive manner that encompasses his birth, life, death, and subsequent restoration. His is a ministry of faithful obedience to Yahweh and his laws. The righteousness of the many is therefore not viewed as their own but as the servant’s who has earned it on their behalf according to his obedience, even unto death.

C. Only Perfect Obedience Can Secure Righteousness in Zion

The Servant’s life and service to Yahweh is set against the backdrop of the corrupt nature of the current members of the house of David throughout the prophecy (Uzziah in Isa 6:1; Ahaz in Isa 7–8; Hezekiah in Isa 39; see also Isa 43:27–28). In this regard, the identification of Isaiah with transgressors in Isaiah 6 is no rhetorical bombast. Being confronted with the mediated presence of the exalted king and hearing the voice of the heavenly attendants is somehow enough for him to grasp his certain doom. His biographical insert thus fulfills a crucial function in the prophecy and provides an apt commentary on the phrase, “all have gone astray,” including Israel’s (small) group of Yahwistic loyalists to whom Isaiah undoubtedly

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75The blamelessness of the Servant clearly attests to a sacrifice (םשנ, 53:10b) without blemish: He did not open his mouth (דרור, אל), 2x in 53:7e; paralleled with “there was no deceit in his mouth” [לאריך בפיה] in 53:9d); and, “he did no violence” (טב, 53:9c).
belonged (see 51:1, 7). Isaiah’s own experience alerts the reader that nothing short of Yahweh’s own glory, righteousness, and holiness will stand in his presence. Likewise, the early chapters of the book also demonstrate the need for a perfect sacrifice. Isaiah 1 powerfully argues that the sacrificial system apart from obedience to Yahweh’s law (“justice”) is rendered null and ineffective to “cover” for their transgressions and the impending Deuteronomic curses (1:11, 13, 17). Hence, the need is two-fold: a perfect sacrifice, accompanied by perfect obedience. This applies to the kings of Israel, the prophets (including Isaiah), and the people. What the prophet Isaiah catalogues is a systemic failure.

The rest of the book outlines the solution to this profound breach in the relationship (note the primary imagery of sonship in Isa 1:2). For the suffering servant’s ministry to be effective, he has to provide both a sacrifice without blemish and a righteousness without fault. In his substitutionary role, he confers the benefits of his sacrifice upon the sinner and the benefits of his obedience/righteousness. This is why this king is successful and “high and lifted up”: he has met Yahweh’s standard and is able to secure his dynasty (Deut 17:18–20) and, therefore, saves Israel from Yahweh’s judgment of exile, and, ultimately, death—a fate not even David, Hezekiah, or Josiah could achieve.

D. The Contrast between God’s Righteousness and Our Own Is Maintained

The themes of righteousness continue in earnest following the fourth song and cannot be commented upon in detail. The link between Yahweh’s righteousness and one’s own conduct are integral to Isaiah’s argument as they were in the first half of Isaiah. Yahweh is righteous and expects his people to act righteously (1:16–17; 56:1; etc.). Such actions are viewed as acceptable worship to Yahweh (58:8). The call to return to Yahweh in order to receive mercy is reissued (55:7; 1:18). As the people “keep justice” and “perform righteousness” (56:1), Yahweh’s salvation will be revealed, the outcast will be gathered, along with the nations, to perform acceptable sacrifices on his “holy mountain” (56:1, 7–8; see also 2:1–5). Finally, the theme of present versus ideal Zion also reflects Isaiah’s emphasis in the second volume (62:1–12) with the accompanying notion of vindication (62:1–2). Predominant in the ideal Zion is the presence and activity of the Spirit. Yahweh’s glory will be “upon” the worshipers, the nations will come to Zion (60:1, 3,

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76Whereas the servant has no “deceit (cf. Gen 27:35) in his mouth” (Isa 53:9), Isaiah and the people have “unclean lips” (Isa 6:5).
77See Carson, “Vindication.”
78Even exceptional kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kgs 18:5; 2 Kgs 23:25) registered failures in their regnal accounts (implied in Isa 39:5–8; overt in 2 Chr 35:22).
79See the commentaries noted above.
PETTER: SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS

5, 19), with the promise that the “people shall all be righteous and they possess the land forever” (60:21; see also 2:1–5).

However, Isaiah’s theology of the universality and pervasive nature of sin described in the first half of Isaiah remains in effect as well: iniquities, perversion of justice, and feet quick to perform evil deeds, including the killing of the innocent (59:2–4). The summary is familiar: “Therefore justice is far from us and righteousness does not overtake us” (59:9). This stark contrast between God’s righteousness and human righteousness is explicitly stated through the famous garment metaphor: “robes of righteousness” from God (Isa 61:10) versus filthy rags for a righteousness emanating from “us” (Isa 64:6; see also 57:12). Consequentially, it appears that Israel’s ethical righteousness remains variable and qualitatively different from Yahweh’s, in the same way that Israel’s holiness and glory are always qualitatively different from Yahweh’s (Isa 6:3; 57:15; 63:15). What removes Yahweh’s wrath (and makes Zion secure forever) is anchored in what he has accomplished as a result of his priestly ministry in Zion (54:7–9, 14, 17). In the new Zion, Israel will finally behave righteously (60:21), but these righteous deeds do not seem to carry the propitiatory (salvific) role that the Servant’s righteousness does. The presence of righteousness in the new city will be on account of what the Servant has accomplished on behalf of his people; namely, his sacrifice and the righteousness he grants them through his own faithfulness as the new Davidic king.

E. Patrimonial Headship as Repository of Blessing

The concept of the righteous king who secures blessings on the basis of his own devotion to the gods on behalf of his subjects is a documented pattern in the ancient Near East.\(^\text{80}\) In anthropological discussions concerning ancient Israel’s social structure, the notion of patrimonialism has provided a useful model to understand Iron Age tribal social organization.\(^\text{81}\) In this model, the pyramidal patrimonial social structure includes at the apex the deity as the father, then

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\(^\text{80}\) In her comprehensive survey of the history of the ancient Near East, Amélie Kuhrt (The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC [2 vols.; New York: Routledge, 1995]) tracks the concept throughout the periods and regions of the ancient Near East. For instance, the Sumerian king, as protector of the city, had a privileged relationship with the city’s titulary deity, which in turn “ensured divine help, blessing, and plenty for the city in return for the ruler’s constant attention to his (or her) needs” (33). Kuhrt also cites an excerpt from the code of Hammurabi’s epilogue: “Hammurabi, the lord, who exists for the people like a real father, has cared at the command of his lord Marduk, reached the wish of Marduk above and below, pleased the heart of his lord Marduk and determined well-being for the people for ever and helped the land obtain justice—may he say this and before my lord Marduk and my lady Sarpantisum (Marduk’s consort) may he bless me with all his heart” (112).

followed by the king as father, the tribal chief as father, and then the different tribally-derived strata down to the “house of the father” as exemplified in Josh 7:16-18.82 As vividly portrayed in the Achan episode of Joshua 7, what the father does affects everyone in the household.83 Directly tied to the father/son relationship is the self-explanatory notion of inheritance (אָבּוֹ). Whatever the father is (his name) and what he has (his possessions) is granted to the son (Gen 48:5-6, etc.).

In the context of ancient Israel’s tribal kingship (hence the designation, “house of David”; cf. Ahaz as patrimonial head, Isa 7:13), the patrimonial model serves as a useful framework to track the dynamics of king as father/subject as son interaction.84 A telling example relates to the life of Solomon in relationship to his father David. The storyline is well known. Following Solomon’s disastrous end of term, the kingdom was divided, directly as a result of Yahweh’s judgment upon Solomon for his sins (2 Kgs 11:9-11). As the patrimonial head, his behavior had direct consequences upon his son and subjects (11:13). However, in spite of Solomon’s long list of covenantal violations (which according to law, carries a death sentence, e.g., Exod 22:20), because of the Davidic promise (2 Sam 7), the line of David would not be interrupted (1 Kgs 11:13, 36; unlike the northern kings who did not have such a promissory umbrella, see 1 Kgs 11:38). However, the text highlights another dimension to the reason why Solomon would serve out his term as king—David’s obedience to Yahweh’s laws: “For the sake of David my servant whom I chose [טוֹלְדֵה בְּנֵי יָשָׁר], who kept my commandments and my statutes” emphasis mine: 11:34; see also 11:38). Dynastic continuity is secured because of the promissory nature of the Davidic covenant: Solomon’s sin could not reverse the promise. However, looking forward to subsequent kings of the Davidic dynasty, their own sins would bring Deuteronomic curses upon themselves and the kingdom (e.g., Shishaq’s famed raid of the treasures from the house of Yahweh [925 B.C.] during the reign of Solomon’s son Rehoboam, 1 Kgs 14:25-28). In contrast, Solomon would not receive the legal punishment for his own disobedience. The parallel dependent clauses (signaled by the particle וְ) put David’s promise and his obedience to Yahweh’s code on equal footing and appear to intentionally provide an explanation as to why Solomon did not receive his due. David’s obedience before Yahweh removed the judgment against Solomon and the kingdom until after Solomon’s death. What is telling in this patrimonial transaction (see Cross’s concept of “reservoir of grace”)85 is what the text does not say: because Solomon had a good start, or because he built the

82 King and Stager, Life, 37.
83 See a variant of the same principle in the case of Rahab and her father’s household (אָבּוֹ, Josh 6:25).
84 See Cross, Epic to Canon, 12-14.
85 Ibid., 14; contra Hafemann, “Covenant,” 37.
PETTER: SUBSTITUTIONARY RIGHTEOUSNESS


temple, or because Solomon promoted righteousness for most of his life, then Yahweh would spare his life and give him a pardon (a very human form of justice, in fact). Instead, Scripture underscores David’s obedience to Yahweh’s laws (twice, 11:34, 38), so that part of David’s patrimonial and posthumous inheritance to his son was the sparing of his son’s life. 86

The legal backdrop to the patrimonial notion of substitutionary righteousness is reflected in the law of the king in Deut 17:14–20. The representative role of the king not only includes the king as promoter and dispenser of righteousness in the land (see 2 Sam 8:15) but also as a substitute—his own obedience affects his subjects and the land: “so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children” (Deut 17:20, emphasis mine). However, this repository of righteousness quickly runs dry as it is inherently limited by the king’s own imperfections (2 Sam 11). David’s faithfulness might have covered for his son Solomon’s unfaithfulness but he could not guarantee the line of the house of David (see the language of the death of the house of David in Isa 11:1). The ultimate preservation of the line of David (a new growth, see Isa 11:1) will rest solely on Yahweh’s own oath and promise (2 Sam 7), and, as Isaiah argues, upon the appearing of a truly righteous king who will fulfill Deuteronomic requirements and thereby secure the city of Zion forever.

If the data points to the bestowing of positive attributes from father/king to the son, the reverse appears to be the case as well. Manasseh’s reign explicitly provokes Judah’s final inexorable descent into exile: “Because Manasseh . . . has committed these abominations . . . I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance” (2 Kgs 21:11, 14). In Isaiah, the principle is spelled out with the notion that an individual king (or mediator) represents the group as a whole (e.g., Ahaz as “house of David” in Isa 7:13): “Your first father sinned and your mediators transgressed against me. Therefore, I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction [יִכְרְמוּ] and Israel to reviling” (Isa 43:27–28 ESV).

However, just as there are limits to the extent of patrimonial substitutionary righteousness, there are limits to patrimonial bequeathal of guilt. Ezekiel brought a famous and much needed Deuteronomic corrective to the exilic community: “The soul that sins shall die” (Ezek 18:1–4). It appears one cannot avoid personal responsibility within Yahweh’s socio-theological organization. Nevertheless, the king does function in a special role, as does the

86The deep grief of David at the loss of Absalom may illustrate the same principle, but with an obviously different outcome. David was powerless to bestow his blessing of protection upon his son Absalom and wished he had died instead: “O my son Absalom, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you (נַפְלִיתָנִי), O Absalom my son, my son!” (2 Sam 18:33 ESV [MT 19:1]).
father in Israel’s tribal social structure, which includes the concepts of both representation and substitution.

V. SUMMARY

The sacrifice of the perfect servant king is Isaiah’s primary thrust in the poem, but this study affirms that contained within the substitutionary sacrifice whereby the sinner has his or her sin removed by the servant’s perfect sacrifice, there also exists the transaction whereby the righteousness of the servant, which comes on the basis of his faithful obedience to God’s requirements and purposes, is bequeathed upon the sinner. As a result, the servant, on the basis of Yahweh’s authority, is able to declare the sinner righteous. Within the rhythm of the parallelism of the poem, the removal of sin is accompanied by the bestowing of righteousness. To divorce the two would result in an incomplete understanding of the servant’s substitutionary ministry to sinners.

Explicit in the transaction is the replacing of guilt with righteousness. This righteousness, on the basis of the universality of rebellion, including Isaiah’s own, cannot be understood as deriving from the sinner himself. The imagery of the poem and the overall literary context of the prophecy is that the sinner has accrued a permanent deficit that is equated in the encounter of Isaiah with Yahweh as a catastrophic shortfall of glory in Isaiah 6: “I am destroyed,” says Isaiah.

The concept of the bestowing of righteousness finds its background in the social structure of ancient Israelite kingship. As the patrimonial head, the blessing of the father is passed on to the son as inheritance. Likewise, the fruit of conquest (the spoils of war) earned by the conquering king is freely given to the subjects. In the case of the suffering servant, this encompasses his new life (after his death-ordeal) and righteousness. Thus, the gift imagery anchors the notion of imputation within the purview of the king as father. Whatever the recipient is and/or has, therefore, comes because of his identity as “son” and “subject,” not on the basis of what he has done.

In the ministry of the suffering servant king, the ancient Near Eastern ideal of kingship has been fulfilled. The true God-King reigns in the land in perfect righteousness and in perfect accord with the deity, thereby preventing any curses due to disobedience: “The city of the great king is finally secure: city-laments as a result of divine abandonment will no longer be uttered” (Isa 2:1-4; 59:21; Ezek 8-10). His subjects as sons and daughters (e.g., “daughters of Zion,” Isa 52:2) come under his protection: they are safe and will live in peace forever.

Therefore, it appears the concept of imputed righteousness, anchored in the sacrificial and atoning death of Christ, receives

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exegetical and contextual support from the perspective of the message of the book of Isaiah in general, and the fourth servant song in particular. Prospects for further inquiries in the OT include the role and function of other covenant mediators in Israelite history, including Moses (see Exod 33:17), Abraham (see Gen 26:4–5), and Adam (Gen 2–3, especially with respect to the concept of “knowledge of good and evil”); the relationship between declarative and ethical righteousness among other prophets (Jer 31; Ezek 18, 37); and the contours and limits of the concept of patrimonial headship in the ancient Near East.