

IN RESPONSE – ACTS 13:47 AND ISAIAH 49:6, A STUDY, PART 1

by Dennis Prutow

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Christ takes note of the mission before Him in and through the church and exhorts His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Luke 10:2). Our Lord says this in the context of sending out the seventy (Luke 10:1). He adds these telling words, “Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3).

Christ is the Lord of the harvest. He commissions ambassadors to take the gospel over the earth. He knows the opposition that ensues. He uses the same for the furtherance of His mission. The apostles came to realize this, particularly with reference to the beginnings of the Gentile mission. The apostle Paul is an example, par excellence. Upon the invitation of the Synagogue officials, Paul vigorously proclaimed Christ in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14). God granted an audience. “As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath” (Acts 13:42).

Heated opposition arose because of the crowds that gathered to hear God’s word (Acts 13:44-45). “Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, “I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, that You may bring salvation to the end of the earth”’” (Acts 13:46-47).

With the attacks on the gospel by his Jewish listeners, Paul reaches back to Isaiah 49:6 as the Old Testament authority for the move from Jewish to Gentile missions. In doing so, Paul points out the Lord ordained this shift in ministry. At the same time, two questions concerning Paul’s use of the Old Testament emerge. First, who is the person to whom Paul refers as Lord? Is this person simply Jehovah of the Old Testament with Isaiah 49:6 a proof texting of Paul’s actions? Second, does Paul pull Isaiah 49:6 out of the Old Testament, out of its original context, to prove His point? Or is there a

deliberate use of Scripture that identifies the long awaited Messiah with Jesus Christ and speaks of both His mission on the earth and the mission of the church?

These are not idle questions. We may easily impute our own penchant for the use of proof texts to Paul. Wrongly understanding Paul’s use of the Old Testament, we strip New Testament texts of their vital contexts, place them on wall plaques, and use them as *we* see fit. Philippians 4:13 is a good example. The specific context is that of learning contentment. Removed from this context, we apply Philippians 4:13 in all manner of ways that avoid Paul’s primary point. Was this what the apostle was doing in his use of Isaiah 49:6? We return then to the two areas of consideration before us.

Paul announces the intent of the missionary party to turn to the Gentiles, “for so the Lord has commanded us” (Acts 13:47). Consider two important aspects of Paul’s thinking. First, Paul insists the great Christian confession is that Jesus is Lord. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

This confession includes the fact that Jesus is the deity. Paul tells us this specifically. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED” (Romans 10:12-13). Paul quotes Joel 2:32, a specific reference to *calling on Jehovah*. By calling on Jesus as Deity incarnate, you call on the LORD Jehovah. You confess Jesus is indeed God and you call on Him. When Jesus speaks, God speaks. Paul was emphatic on this point.

Second, Jesus Christ commissioned Paul to take the gospel to the gentiles. Here is part of Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa.

And I said, “Who are You, Lord?”

And the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to

the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the *Gentiles, to whom I am sending you*, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:15-18, Italics Added).

What does this mean for our understanding of Acts 13:47? “*The Lord*, according to New Testament usage, might be understood to mean the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ Jesus Christ the Lord commissioned Paul apostle to the Gentiles. This was his confession. “I am an apostle of Gentiles” (Romans 11:13). Christ sent him. This too was his confession. Therefore, with regard to turning to the Gentiles, when Paul says, “For so the Lord has commanded us,” Christ’s commission must loom large in his own thinking.

The foundation for Christ’s commission of Paul runs deep. There is the Great Commission. “The Lord Jesus gave us directions to witness to him in Jerusalem and Judea first, and after that *to the utmost part of the earth*, to preach the gospel to *every creature*, to *disciple the all nations*.”² Paul knew this commission.

The Old Testament provides the underlying foundation. Isaiah 49:6, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” But these are words addressed to God’s Servant, Jesus Christ.

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¹ J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1980), 2:42.

² *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 6:174.

IN RESPONSE – ACTS 13:47 AND ISAIAH 49:6, A STUDY, PART 2

by Dennis Prutow

Isaiah 49:1-6 presents the words of God's Servant relating His call to be a light to the Gentiles. Verse 1, "Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me." There is clear indication these words are the words of Messiah.¹ "The expression *from the womb* supports the fact that the servant is an individual.... The phrase is used also of Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1:5). In itself the phrase merely indicates a divine call to a particular work."²

Servant-Messiah does not assume His position or office on His own. "Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'; just as He says also in another passage 'You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek'" (Hebrews 5:5-6). "In short, the meaning is, that Christ was clothed with our flesh by the appointment of the Father, in order that he might fulfill the office of Redeemer, to which he had been appointed."³

Verse 2, "He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver."

Christ hath therefore been appointed by the Father, not to rule, after the manner of princes, by the force of arms, and by surrounding himself with other external defenses, to make himself an object of terror to his people; but his whole authority consists in doctrine, in the preaching of which he wishes to be sought and acknowledged; for nowhere else will he be found.⁴

Messiah is for a time hidden. He is like an arrow. Psalm 45:5 gives a comparable picture. "Your arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under You; Your arrows are in the

heart of the King's enemies." Gospel arrows penetrate and subdue hostile hearts. Yet, for a time, these arrows are hidden in the quiver. "The Lord causes His servant to be hidden until he appears upon earth ready to exercise his ministry."⁵

Verse 3, "He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory.'" Here the Servant is equivalent to Israel. Calvin makes several comments on this identity from a federalist perspective.

We must indeed begin with the Head, but we must next come down to the members; and to all the ministers of the Word must be applied what is here affirmed concerning Christ; for to them is given such efficacy of the Word, that they may not idly beat the air with their voices, but may reach the hearts and touch them to the quick.... This passage must not be limited to the person of Christ, and ought not to be referred to Israel alone; but on the present occasion we should attend to the customary language of Scripture. When the whole body of the Church is spoken of, Christ is brought forward conspicuously so as to include all the children of God.... In like manner, under the name *Israel*, by which he means Christ, Isaiah includes the whole body of the people, as members under the Head.⁶

Alexander follows suit indicating "the ideal speaker is Messiah considered as the head of his people and as forming with them one complex person...."⁷ And later, "The only supposition which adheres to the natural and obvious meaning of the sentence, and yet agrees with the context, is the first above mentioned, viz. that of complex subject including the Messiah and his people, or the body with its head."⁸ Young agrees.

Israel then is a designation of the true people of God, the whole body of the redeemed as members under the head, the Messiah. After mentioning the human body Paul says, "So also is

Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Israel, therefore, is the Messiah conceived as the Head of His body, the true church, although the emphasis at this point falls upon the members of the body. Calvin says, "In a word, the Lord honors by this name the church, which is the spouse of Christ, just as the wife is honored by bearing the name and title of her husband."⁹

In addition, it is God's plan to manifest His own glory in and through His Son. Jesus Prayed to His Father, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:4-5).

Verse 4, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely the justice due to Me is with the Lord, and My reward with My God.'" After the Father says to the Son, "You are My Servant." The Son responds, "I have toiled in vain." There is a twofold interpretation.

On one hand we have Christ. "The servant, as it were, has poured out his strength to accomplish the work God had given him, but the result is to no purpose; it is desolation and vapor."¹⁰ How can this be? "It is, we believe, Jesus Christ in His humiliation of whom the prophet speaks."¹¹ Then Young makes this observation. "This position may of course be held only if the Bible is a special revelation of the one triune God."¹² Christ is God's Servant. As such, He is *the* Mediator. He toils in this world as the God-man. His toil includes both blood sweating and blood letting.

On the other hand, we have His body, the church. We must make use the federal understanding Calvin introduces.

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¹ J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 2:225.

² E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 3:267.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 4:9.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Young, 269.

⁶ Calvin, 10-11.

⁷ Alexander, 224.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁹ Young, 270-271.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, note 6.

IN RESPONSE – ACTS 13:47 AND ISAIAH 49:6, A STUDY, PART 3

by Dennis Prutow

The position that Isaiah 49:4 speaks of Christ is indeed Trinitarian. The Second Person of the Trinity creates and then enters this temporal realm with His eternal being and truth. We are confronted with Jehovah in and through Him. “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus put it this way, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). Consider these various areas of the revelation of Christ.

Jesus Christ was and is God, the Creator (John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16). Jesus Christ is Jehovah speaking through the prophets and speaking to us in Scripture (1 Peter 1:10-11). Jesus Christ is God in human form affecting redemption (John 1:14, 2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus Christ is the covenant of Jehovah (Isaiah 42:6). He is the light of Jehovah (Isaiah 49:6, Acts 13:46-47, John 8:12). Conformity to the image of Christ in sanctification, means tasking on the moral likeness of Jehovah (Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15 and 3:10). The judgment of God is the judgment of Christ (Romans 14:10, 2 Corinthians 5:10). When we enter glory and meet our Maker and Creator, we come face to face with Christ (1 John 3:2). Jesus is Jehovah, the creator, redeemer, sanctifier, and judge.¹

What of the words of Isaiah 49:4? “But I said, ‘I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely the justice due to Me is with the Lord, and My reward with My God.’” “The prophet’s language points forward to the humiliation of our Lord: true man yet sinless; true man yet very God. Before the sublime mystery of the Person of our Lord we can but bow in reverent wonder.”² Christ speaks of the real toil of His work as the Mediator in obedience to the plan of His Father. He relates the same in Psalm 40:7-8. “Then I said, ‘Behold, I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart.’” See also Hebrews 10:7. “Here it seems to point to the obstinacy of the

Jews, among whom Christ went in person preaching the gospel of the kingdom, labored and spent his strength, and yet the rulers and the body of the nation rejected him and his doctrine....”³

On the other hand, keeping in mind the federalist approach of Calvin, Isaiah also appears to have the church in view along with God’s Servant.

The Prophet here brings forward a grievous complaint in the name of the Church, yet in such a manner that, as we have formerly remarked, we must begin with the Head. Christ therefore complains along with his members, that it appears as if his labor were thrown away; for, having formerly pronounced a high and striking commendation on the power and efficacy of the word which proceedeth out of his mouth, while yet it scarcely does any good, and the glory which God demands from the ministration of it does not shine forth, he therefore introduces the Church as complaining that she spends her labor fruitlessly, because men do not repent at the preaching of heavenly doctrine.⁴

There is consolation. God will insure justice is done. His Servant rests in this certain hope as does Christ’s church.

Verse 5-6,

And now says the Lord, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and My God is My strength), He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

“A twofold task is ascribed to the servant.”⁵ First, God’s servant is to restore the people of Israel. “The reference is not to a return from Babylon, but a spiritual return to God.”⁶ As a result, Christ, and

the word of salvation by him, are sent to them first; nay, Christ comes in person to them only, *to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*⁷

After a parenthesis in which Christ once again expresses “his assurance that he will be vindicated,”⁸ we see Messiah’s second great task. “To restore Jacob is a great task, but it is not great enough for *my servant* (emphasis falls upon *my*). He has a greater task.”⁹ God makes Him a light to the Gentiles. “When the preaching of the Gospel produced hardly any good effect on the Jews, and when Christ was obstinately rejected by them, the Gentiles were substituted in their room.”¹⁰

“Light is intimately connected with salvation. The Gentiles are conceived as being in spiritual darkness, and when light comes to them they are delivered from their darkness. This light is the servant, just as Jesus in the days of his flesh declared, ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 8:12).”¹¹ The light of Christ brings salvation. “The servant is both light and salvation.”¹²

Isaiah 49:6 therefore presents God’s Servant, Jesus Christ, the church, and their respective missions. Young: “Paul’s use of this verse (Acts 13:47) supports the identification of the servant as the Messiah and His people. When His people labor in His Name as Paul and Barnabus were doing, He works through them.”¹³ Alexander: “The application of this verse by Paul and Barnabus, in their address to the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts xiii. 47) is very important, as a confirmation of the hypothesis assumed above, that the person here described is not Messiah exclusively, but that his people are included in the subject of the description.”¹⁴

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⁷ Henry.

⁸ Young, 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰ Calvin, 17.

¹¹ Young, 276.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Young.

¹⁴ Alexander, 228

¹ Dennis Prutow, “A Framework for Preaching,” *In Response*, Vol. VIII, No. 12, December 1999

² Young, 272.

³ Henry, 4: 275.

⁴ Calvin, 12.

⁵ Young, 273.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 273-274

IN RESPONSE – ACTS 13:47 AND ISAIAH 49:6, A STUDY, PART 4

by Dennis Prutow

Isaiah 49:6 teaches us several things. God the Father speaks to God the Son. The Father speaks to the Son concerning His mission in the world. In addition, the Father speaks through the Son to the church regarding her gospel mission. This is a solidly Trinitarian approach where God's Servant is *the* Mediator. As both A. J. Alexander and E. J. Young indicate, Paul's use of this text in Acts 13:47 *confirms* this interpretation. The interpretation comes out of the text and its context.

We may draw three important conclusions. First, the apostle did not quote the Old Testament willy-nilly, pulling words out of their proper context, and using them for his own purposes. When rebuffed by the Jewish leaders in Antioch, Pisidia, leaning on His well-studied understanding of the Old Testament, Paul announces a shift in mission to the Gentiles. He quotes Isaiah 49:6 to verify, to the Jews, the propriety of this shift in ministry. The text is carefully selected from a portion of Isaiah that bolsters Paul's position before his fellow Jews. Understanding this is the case has an important implication. We may study the use of Old Testament texts in the New Testament to better understand both the New Testament and the Old Testament. We may learn hermeneutics from the apostles.

An excellent tool by Gleason Archer and Gregory Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*, hopes the user to be "assisted quite measurably in his textual and hermeneutical endeavors."¹ The authors add a caution.

The New Testament authors were guided into interpretive techniques that Bible scholars today could hardly find justification for in their own treatment of Scripture. At the same time we should understand that authorized apostolic authors enjoyed a latitude in this regard that would be nothing short of presumptuous for us to arrogate to ourselves. In other words, there is a certain sense in which Christ's chosen spokesman

were like Him guided to expound the Old Testament Scriptures "with authority, and not as the scribes." In the exercise of that prerogative, they did not hesitate to bring out the implications of the Hebrew text rather than limiting themselves to the exact wording as they translated it.²

Beyond doubt, we must be cautious in handling the Word of Truth. However, it would seem to be the duty of the modern pastor to *properly* draw out the implications of a text. Our own Confession says, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*...."³ Perhaps the apostles, in their use of the Old Testament, are able to teach us to *properly* deduce implications from Scripture by good and necessary consequence.

Second, we have the matter of interpreting *Lord* in Acts 13:47 as a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 49:6, the prophet portrays Christ, the Servant, rehearsing the words of the Father directed to Him. The words of Jehovah are in the mouth of Jesus. Strictly speaking, it would therefore seem the *Lord* in Acts 13:47 is Jehovah. God the Father directs His Son in the mission to the Gentiles.

But since He acts through His ministers transferring His own functions to them, He also shares His descriptions with them. The preaching of the gospel is in this class. He alone, indeed, has been appointed our Teacher by the Father, but He has put pastors and ministers in His place to speak as if out of His mouth. Thus the authority remains entirely with Him, and He is heard nevertheless in His ministers. Therefore Paul skillfully adapts the testimony of Isaiah to himself, when it is a question of the preaching of the gospel.⁴

There are two sides to the interpretation. The work given to Christ is in turn

delegated to His apostles and ministers. Paul therefore applies the words of Isaiah 49:6 to himself. "I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

In addition, it is Jesus Christ, the recipient of the commission from His Father, who delegates responsibility to His ministers. It is a proper view, therefore, to see the Lord Jesus Christ commanding Paul to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. This "is not an arbitrary transfer or accommodation of the passage, but a faithful reproduction of its original and proper import, as relating both to the Head and to the Body, the Messiah and the Church in their joint capacity, as heralds of salvation to the world."⁵

Paul looks back through the revelation of Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road, through the words of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission, to God's promised Servant in Isaiah 49:6. The line is clear. God the Father commissioned Christ. Christ, in turn, commissioned Paul. The words recorded in Acts 13:46-47 easily come to Paul. "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, that You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.'"

Third, we must preach Christ from Isaiah 49:6 and Acts 13:47. We must preach Christ as *the* Servant of the Lord. We must preach Christ as the Servant of the Lord commissioned by the Father to be *the* light of the Gentiles. We must preach Christ, the Lord who commissioned Paul and Barnabus as His ambassadors to take the light of the gospel to the Gentiles. We must also preach Christ the Servant *and* Lord who commissions us *today* and delegates to us *today* the task of taking the light of the gospel to all the nations. These are clear teachings and implications from these two texts.

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¹ Gleason L. Archer and Gregory Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), xii.

² *Ibid.*

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:390.

⁵ Alexander, *Acts*, 42.