THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF DEUTERO-ISAIAH:
JEREMIAH REVISITED

Katharine J. Dell

There has been a long tradition of connecting Jeremiah with the “servant” in Deutero-Isaiah, both in Jewish and Christian tradition. C. R. North\(^1\) (1956) mentions that Saadyah Gaon (a Jewish writer who died in 942) favoured links with Jeremiah and that Ibn Ezra found Gaon’s interpretation attractive. Judah ben Balaam (c. 1080) stated that the description of the Servant is “quite consistent with such an interpretation”.\(^2\) In Christian tradition North cites E. W. Hengstenberg\(^3\) who mentions Seidel the Silesian as having promoted Jeremiah as the servant from a position of unbelief and Grotius,\(^4\) who saw reference to Jeremiah “as a figure of Christ” in relation to his life and circumstances. The English deist Anthony Collins\(^5\) thought that the words of Isaiah 53:12 could not possibly apply to Jeremiah. In slightly more recent times – the nineteenth century – Baron C. C. J. Bunsen\(^6\) supposed that since features of the passages in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 fitted into the life of Jeremiah it might have been written by the prophet’s amanuensis, Baruch.

Some early twentieth-century scholars also thought this way, including B. Duhm in his early work\(^7\) who thought of the four servant songs (which he had already isolated as not written by the prophet himself) as a prophetic description of the life and work of Jeremiah, written by one of Jeremiah’s younger contemporaries and taken over

---


\(^7\) B. Duhm, *Die Theologie der Propheten* (Bonn, 1875).
by Deutero-Isaiah to relate to his ideal picture of God’s servant. L. Itkonen believed that there were a number of historical personages behind individual songs, Isaiah 50:4–9 referring to Jeremiah and written by him. By the time North was writing in 1956, he was able to state that “Jeremiah has no advocate today” (p. 192), although in a footnote he qualified that statement when he said, “Beyond Sheldon H. Blank’s suggestion that the Servant is ‘Israel in the guise of a martyr prophet – of a prophet after the pattern of Jeremiah’ (‘Studies in DI’, HUCA 15 (1940), p. 29)” (p. 192). North also referred the reader to F. A. Farley’s article in the Expository Times who believed the Servant to be “idealized prophecy” based on the life of Jeremiah. North’s own comment on the Jeremiah suggestion was, “Although his claims are in some respects attractive, it cannot be said that he suffered uncomplainingly. The most that can be said is that he contributed something to the portrait (liii.7, cf. Jer. xi.19)” (p. 192).

In this article I wish to look afresh at the servant songs to seek to understand why this suggestion was made. However, I do not wish simply to reinvent the wheel of saying that the servant might have been Jeremiah, as clearly there are problems over the lack of evidence within the texts. If it had been obvious, then the problem of who the servant was would have been solved a long time ago! There has been a strong move away from finding one actual historical figure for this role during the twentieth century. Most scholars have seen the servant as either a historically composite figure or as an idealized figure or both. H. Gunkel, for example, wrote, “Many things have contributed to make up this figure: the experiences of Israel in exile, of great prophets like Jeremiah, and the experiences of the Prophet himself; not least the faith that at the end of things… a new Moses would arise to free Israel and found a new covenant”. S. A. Cook took the view that the servant idea was an ideal figure, “neither necessarily limited in its application (sc. to collective or individual), nor confined in its reference solely to past events or to ideals in the future” (p. 493). He stated that actual individuals were being thought of by those who

---

8 The three Isaiahs were isolated by Döderlein in 1775 and Eichhorn in 1780–3.
9 L. Itkonen, Deuterojesaja (Jes 40–55) metrisch untersucht (Helsinki, 1916).