Putting One’s Life on the Line: The Meaning of heʿerah lamavet nafsho and Similar Expressions

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Introduction

In a book on Jewish and Christian conceptions and practices of sacrifice, the death of Jesus cannot be passed over in silence. For most Christians, this death is the outstanding example of magnanimous self-sacrifice: Jesus poured out his life unto death in order to save humanity. This idea is to a great extent derived from the Fourth Servant Song in the book of Isaiah (Isa 52:13–53:12), especially verses 11b–12. In Christian theology, this song is considered one of the most important prophecies concerning the life and death of Jesus, because of the similarity to the description of the Jesus we know from the New Testament (Graf Reventlow 1998, 223–38). But is this similarity as striking as some Christian theologians claim? Is not the interpretation of this song fraught with problems due to the numerous textual difficulties and apparent internal contradictions? When I studied some years ago the Hebrew text of this verse and its Aramaic rephrasing as found in Targum Jonathan (Houtman 2005), I realized that the Hebrew text was very ambiguous and therefore open to diverse interpretations. This also becomes clear from the different Jewish interpretations that have been given through the ages (e.g. Neubauer and Driver 1969; Alobaidi 1998; Schreiber 2009). In Targum Jonathan for instance, the passages on the suffering servant within this song are identified with the people of Israel, whereas the triumphal passages are applied to the Messiah who would come and redeem his people from foreign oppression (e.g. Houtman 2005).

One of the important questions that arise concerning the identification of the suffering servant as Jesus is whether the servant in the song actually died a violent and sacrificial death. The curious point to note here is that in the whole song no phrase is used which indubitably implies such a death. All the phrases that might suggest a violent death of the servant can also be explained otherwise (Driver 1968, 104). In this article, we will closely investigate one of the phrases that are mostly interpreted by Christian theologians as pointing to the voluntary sacrificial death of Jesus, i.e. הֶעֵרָה לְמָוֶת נַפְשָׁה in Isa 53:12. We will
try to discover the original meaning of the expression, or at least what the early interpreters thought it meant.

We will proceed as follows. First, we will discuss the linguistic and grammatical problems of the Hebrew phrase, followed by (2) an investigation of the early versions. Thirdly, we will look for related expressions in the Hebrew Bible and the Targum. Next (4), we will investigate how the expression is used in rabbinic literature and to whom it is applied. Then (5) we turn to the New Testament to see how the New Testament writers referred to this text and incorporated it in their theological framework. Finally, we will summarize and evaluate our findings.

1. *He'erah lamavet nafsho*

Let us first look at the Hebrew text. The expression is found in Isa 53:12, which reads:

लबं शाहकलो बरबि्म
एवा शाहणमि शालक शे्ल
तहन ाशे हरेर लमोह फे्मश
एवा एकाफे्सेस नंकह
होआ त्वाकारबि् ने्शा
ल्फेशि् नतेिः

Short though it is, occurring only once in the Hebrew Bible, the expression poses quite a few translational problems. The verbal form is a perf 3rd sg hifil from √ערה. This conjugation of √ערה occurs in only two places in the Hebrew Bible, here and in Lev 20:18. In the latter case it doubtless means 'to expose, uncover', but opinions differ concerning the occurrence in Isa 53:12. Many exegetes prefer to explain the form according to the meaning of the piel, which has two meanings: 'to expose, uncover', like the hifil in Leviticus, and 'to pour out'. The latter meaning may moreover be differentiated into a literal sense (e.g. Gen 24:20, where Rebekah pours out her jar into the trough) and a metaphorical sense with נפש as object, meaning 'to hand over to death,

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1. I.e. the Masoretic text. The Qumran version of Isaiah has some deviations (see e.g. Van der Kooij 1981, 123) but these do not concern the expression we are interested in here.

2. Some dictionaries (e.g. Gesenius 1995) also give the meaning 'empty out, pour out' (ausgießen) for the hifil, as for the piel, but this seems to be based on exegetical rather than on linguistic grounds.