PICTURING "THE MAN OF SORROWS":
THE PASSION-FILLED AFTERLIVES
OF A BIBLICAL ICON

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Spurned and withdrawing from human society,
he was a man who suffered:
pain was his close acquaintance.
Like one who must hide his face from us
he was despised;
we held him in no account.1

Isaiah 53:3

Visualizing the servant in Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53,2 the poem celebrating a mysterious and unknown servant
from the Hebrew Bible who suffers on behalf of the sins of others, has
been the subject of much scholarly debate over many decades, debate
that has focussed on questions relating to his identity, the reasons for and
nature of his suffering and whether his eventual martyrdom is envisaged.3

The fact that the male servant became associated with Christ from ear-
liest New Testament times accounts for the enormous attention given to
Isaiah 53 (to the neglect, many would argue, of the female servant who
appears at the start of the following chapter)4 and has assured him iconic
status not only literally, in his depiction on scores of early Byzantine
icons, but also through the later incarnations of his chiselled, Herculean,
naked and frequently erotic body of the Italian Renaissance. That he was
a man would clearly appear to be as significant in his visual afterlives as
the sorrows the servant experienced.5 In this essay, I want to explore some
of these visual afterlives and show how they enrich our understanding of
the poem’s literary dynamic, even though the servant-figure from the
Hebrew Bible is most often mediated through Christian perspectives. I
would argue that in several instances we can suspend traditional icono-
graphical readings of the Man of Sorrows as Christ in order to let the
visual image interact more directly with the Hebrew poem itself and
so facilitate more creative and unexpected readings.6 Frustratingly, art
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historians invariably inform us that the image of the Man of Sorrows “relies on” or “refers to” Isaiah 53 but never quite explain how the underlying concerns of the poem surface in the painting; thus the need to let the literary qualities of the poem interact more creatively with, and account for, some of the quite striking aspects of the visual image.

1. Carlo Crivelli, the Dead Christ supported by Two Angels, c. 1494. London, The National Gallery.

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