

## Phonological Subtext: (A Short Note On Isa 42,1-9

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A great deal has been said on Isa 42,1-9 in the past, as every student of the so-called Servant Songs knows.<sup>1</sup> And yet, there are still aspects of the text that seem to have been overlooked. Some of these aspects, all of which are related to the discussion about whether the Servant's task has a "national" or a "universal" scope, will be sketched briefly in this article.<sup>2</sup>

The first observation is of a phonological nature. Whoever reads verse 2 aloud can detect a somewhat surprising phonological double entendre or subtext: the three verbs used in this colon are phonologically reminiscent of three names, all belonging to the stories of the patriarchs, **יָצַחַק**, **עָשָׂו**, and **יִשְׁמַעֵאל**. Of course, the spelling of all three names deviates slightly from the spelling of the verbs used in our verse (**יָצַחַק**, **יָשָׂא**, **יִשְׁמַעֵי**); but this does not change the fact that, phonologically, the three names and the three verbal forms are very similar.

It is certainly not possible to prove that this double entendre was part of the original intention of the author of the verse; but since it cannot be excluded, it must be taken into consideration when pondering the question as to whether the Servant's mission was or was not "universal". Our verse offers support for the "universal" position, since on its underlying level as outlined above it possibly says: "not **יָצַחַק**, not **עָשָׂו**, not **יִשְׁמַעֵאל**". The message would then be approximately the following: not for the sake of the descendants of the patriarchs listed here, **יָצַחַק** / the Israelites, **עָשָׂו** / the Edomites<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to mention the following recent commentaries and monographs: Elliger, Deuterocesaja; Goldingay, Isaiah; Grelot, poèmes; Grimm, Deuterocesaja; Hanson, Isaiah; Koole, Isaiah; Kraus, Evangelium; Motyer, Isaiah; Whybray, Isaiah.

The question whether Isa 42,1-9 has to be divided into smaller literary units is beyond the scope of this article. For the view that verses 1-9 can be read as belonging together see, e.g. Hanson, Isaiah; Koole, Isaiah; Motyer, Isaiah.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Dr. John and Gloria Ben-Daniel (Jerusalem) and Drs. Torsten Uhlig (Cheltenham) for helpful comments on a draft of this article. – For the discussion on the "national" / "universal" scope of the passage, see, e.g., Davies, Destiny; North, Servant; Stamm, BERĪT.

<sup>3</sup> It may well be that the Edomites are representative of the Transjordanian peoples in general.

and *ישמעאל* / the Arabs, has the Servant of the Lord been sent, at least not only or not specifically for them.<sup>4</sup>

If this – admittedly speculative – analysis is correct, two further questions arise: where is *אברהם*, and where is *יעקב* / *ישראל*?

The latter is obviously not mentioned in the text, neither on the surface nor hidden in another case of phonological double entendre. He is mentioned, however, in Isa 49,5-6, in both versions of the name, *יעקב* and *ישראל*. The text of Isa 49 says that it is actually part of the Servant's task to bring *יעקב* / *ישראל* back to his God, but it continues by claiming that the scope of the Servant's mission reaches beyond this "national" aim. This observation furthers the interpretation of Isa 42,1-9 in two respects. Firstly, it makes clear that the message of Isa 42,2a is "*not only יצחק, עשו, and ישמעאל*" rather than "*not יצחק, עשו, and ישמעאל*". And secondly, it makes clear that both texts, Isa 42,1-9 and Isa 49,1-5, have to be read in the light of each other.

What about *אברהם*? I suggest that he may be mentioned in a hidden way, like *יצחק*, *עשו*, and *ישמעאל*. Verse 6b $\beta$  contains the phrase *לברית עם*; here again, as in verse 2, one may speculate that the phonological similarity of this phrase and the name *אברהם* is more than a mere accident. If this supposition is correct, then the following message can be detected: "*not יצחק, not עשו, not ישמעאל, but אברהם*", meaning that the scope of the Servant's mission covers *all* the descendants of *אברהם*. This in turn has to be understood in a very broad sense if the following phrase *לְאוֹר גּוֹיִם* in Isa 49,6 (as in 42,6!) is taken into consideration: not only Israelites, Arabs, and Edomites as the natural offspring of *אברהם* shall be the addressees of the Servant's work, but all those who - in the sense of Gen 12,3 – align themselves spiritually with *אברהם*.

It is also possible to understand the hidden reference to *אברהם* in Isa 42,6b in the following way, implying a parallelism between this patriarch's and the Servant's calling and mission: "I, the Lord, will make you, as / 'an' *אברהם*, a light for the nations". This would mean that the Servant will now be fulfilling the role of Abraham as the channel through which God's blessing flows to the world of the nations. According to this reading, the "*not יצחק, not עשו, not ישמעאל*" of verse 2 could be understood as saying that the

<sup>4</sup> The surprising phonological congruence between the three verbal forms and the three patriarchal names may also convey the following message: not *יצחק*, not *עשו*, not *ישמעאל* is the person who is hinted at by the designations "my servant" and "my chosen one" in verse 1. The chosen one has rather to be identified with Jacob / Israel; see below.

scope of the Servant's mission is broader than the "mission" of the three respective patriarchs. One ought not, however, reckon with this line of interpretation at the expense of the one proposed first, since it is only with the first that the "nots" of Isa 42,2 receive the necessary positive complement.

There are some observations related to the literary context of the Servant Songs which corroborate the argument presented above.

In the literary context of the Servant Songs, **יְשָׁרְאֵל** / **יַעֲקֹב** is called himself the Lord's servant in several instances; see esp. Isa 41,8; 44,1-2.21; 48,20. In Isa 43,1 and 44,1-2 the author describes YHWH's relationship to his servant in terms that are highly reminiscent of similar descriptions in the Servant Songs, containing even direct lexical correspondences like the use of the roots **קרא**, **יצר**, **ברא**, and **בחר**. Therefore, the non-appearance of **יַעֲקֹב** / **יְשָׁרְאֵל** in the defining of the Servant's assignment can be explained by the partial identity of the Servant and **יַעֲקֹב** / **יְשָׁרְאֵל**.

**אַבְרָהָם**, like **יַעֲקֹב** / **יְשָׁרְאֵל**, also appears in the literary context of the Servant Songs, namely in Isa 51,2 as the father of the addressees. Most interestingly, in the continuation of the text (verses 4 and 5) the author introduces a number of motives that are fully congruent with important passages in the description of the Servant's mission: **תורה** will go forth (**תצא**) and **משפט** as a "light for the nations" (**לְאֹרֶת עַמִּים**); distant islands (**אֲיִים**) wait (**יַחֲלוּן**) for the Lord and his arm, who comes to judge (**יִשְׁפֹּט**) the peoples (**עַמִּים**). The closeness of this passage to Isa 42,1-9 is evident. In general terms, it lends additional support to the view that the concept of a worldwide mission embracing all the peoples and giving them a share in God's kingdom is connected with the name and the calling of **אַבְרָהָם**. More specifically, the qualification of those who listen to the message of the one who speaks in Isa 51,1-2 as children of **אַבְרָהָם** "their father" nicely squares with the suggestion that not only the natural offspring of **אַבְרָהָם**, the Israelites, the Edomites, and the Arabs, shall be the addressees of the Servant's work, but all those who align themselves spiritually with **אַבְרָהָם**.

An analogy to the phonologically sensitive interpretation proposed here can be seen in the understanding of both the name **אַבְרָהָם** and the first two words of the book of Genesis as hinting to the underlying theme of God's blessing, based on the parallel sequence of the consonants **ב** and **ר** in the root **ברך** on the one hand and the name **אַבְרָהָם** and the phrase **בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא** on the other hand<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> See Wenham, Story 21.

The second observation is fully congruent with the results deduced from the first one.

The juxtaposition of *מִשְׁפָּט* and *תּוֹרָה* as found in verse 4 of Isa 42 may be compared to similar formulations in Num 15,16 and Isa 51,4. There are a total of 38 cases in which *מִשְׁפָּט* and *תּוֹרָה* are used in the same context of one or two verses in the Hebrew Bible, but Num 15,16 and Isa 51,4 come closest to Isa 42,4.<sup>6</sup> The first of these two texts, Num 15,16, postulates that the rules concerning the sacrificial offerings apply equally to members of the people of Israel and to the *גוֹיִם*. The second text, Isa 51,4, is a little farther removed from Isa 42,4, in that the two nouns in question appear in the reversed order. On the other hand, as already mentioned, there are many lexical and topical contacts between Isa 51,4 and Isa 42,1-9 (especially verses 1.4.6), the most salient one being the parallelism of *לְאֹרֶן עֲמִים* (Isa 51,4) and *לְאֹרֶן גוֹיִם* (Isa 42,6). It is the phrase *לְאֹרֶן עֲמִים* which unequivocally endows the passage with a perspective that reaches beyond the people of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Both Num 15,16 and Isa 51,4, then, point to contexts in which both Israelites and non-Israelites are referred to; it is appropriate to suggest that the same is true for Isa 42,4. Since the *גֵרִים* in the priestly law codes integrate themselves to a greater or lesser degree into the religious community of Israel, one may suppose that only such non-Israelites who are willing to identify to a certain degree with the fundamental religious tenets of Israel will profit from the Servant's work.

The third and last observation points the same way. The construct chain *יְשֻׁבֵי הָאֶרֶץ* at the end of verse 7 must probably be understood as including not only Israelites, but also non-Israelites, since the metaphorical use of the noun *הָאֶרֶץ* very often has connotations which point beyond the sphere of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It has to be admitted that there are several instances in which the sequence *מִשְׁפָּט / תּוֹרָה* is not related to non-Israelites; but in these cases, in contradistinction to Isa 42,4, the two nouns are combined with other nouns denoting "rule", "law" etc., like *חֹק*, *מִצְוָה*, *פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה*, or *אִמְרַת יְהוָה* (see, e.g., Lev 26,46; Deut 33,10; 2Kgs 17,34, 37; Mal 3,22; Ezra 7,10; Ps 119, 43-45.51-54.61-63.84-86.91-93.108-110.149-151.163-166; Neh 9,13.29; 2Chr 19,10; 33,8; in Ps 37,30-31 the parallel noun is *חֻקֵּי*), or that the sequence appears in the reversed order (see, e.g., Deut 17,11; Hab 1,4; Pss 89,31; 119,20-30.51-52.136-137.163-164.174-175).

<sup>7</sup> If one has to read *עֲמִים* in the first line of the verse Isa 51,4 instead of *עַמִּי* this perspective appears even more prominently.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., 1Sam 2,9; Isa 5,20.30; 45,3; 47,5; 60,2; Nah 1,8; Pss 35,5; 88,13; 112,4; Job 5,14; 10,21; 12,22.25; 15,22.30; 17,12; 18,18; 20,26; 34,22; 37,19; Prov 2,13; Eccl 2,14; 6,4.

A glimpse at Ps 107 is specifically illuminating, since verse 10 provides the only other attestation of the construct chain **יְשָׁבֵי הַשָּׂדֶה** in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, both verse 10 and verse 14 of this psalm are connected with Isa 42,7 by the catchword **אֲסִיר** and the motif “liberation of the bound” respectively.<sup>9</sup> The context of Ps 107,10.14 makes it clear that the primary referents of the phrase must be Israelites, since verse 11 speaks of their transgression of God’s commandment and verse 13 of their crying to the specific God of Israel, YHWH, rather than to “God” in general; verses 2 and 3 finally leave no doubt that at least in the first part of his poem the Psalmist is thinking of the Israelites. On the other hand, verse 15 – like verses 8, 21, and 31 – mentions the wonders that God has performed for **בְּנֵי אָדָם** in general. Thus, even if the primary referents of the phrase **יְשָׁבֵי הַשָּׂדֶה** may be Israelites, the overall view of the text widens so as to include all mankind.

The conclusion emerging from the observations adduced above is clear: Isa 42,1-9 envisions the scope of the Servant’s task as “universal” rather than “national”; all those waiting for help and being willing to align themselves with the God of Israel will be the direct beneficiaries of the Servant’s work.

### Summary

It has been overlooked so far that the chain of Hebrew verbs used in Isa 42,2 possibly reminds the reader or – predominantly – the hearer of the patriarchal names Isaak, Esau, and Ishmael, whereas Abraham is hinted at in a similar hidden way in verse 6b. This does not in itself mean that the author(s) of Isa 42,1-9 chose the wording of verses 2 and 6 with the deliberate purpose to deliver a phonologically conditioned subtextual message, but the possibility of a double entendre cannot be ruled out with certainty.

According to this putative subtext, the Servant’s mission is not merely aimed at the descendants of Isaak, Esau, and Ishmael, but at all those who can be called the progeny of Abraham in the widest sense of the term. This “universal” outlook is supported by the juxtaposition of **מִשְׁפָּט** and **תּוֹרָה** on the one hand and the phrase **יְשָׁבֵי הַשָּׂדֶה** on the other, as an investigation of both features in the context of the Hebrew Bible shows.

### Zusammenfassung

Bisher wurde übersehen, dass die Abfolge von hebräischen Verben in Jes 42,2 den Leser – bzw. eher: den Hörer – möglicherweise an die Namen der Patriarchen Isaak, Esau und Ismael erinnert; ein ähnlich hintergründiger Hinweis auf Abraham

<sup>9</sup> Both elements are also found in Isa 61,1, which hints at the fact that this text is closely connected with the Servant Songs.

findet sich in V.6b. Dass heisst nicht, dass der / die Verfasser von Jes 42,1-9 die Verse 2 und 6 absichtlich mit dem Ziel verfasst haben, eine phonologisch begründete Zweitbotschaft zu vermitteln; aber die Möglichkeit des Vorliegens einer solchen Doppeldeutigkeit kann nicht mit Sicherheit ausgeschlossen werden.

Gemäss diesem zu vermutenden Subtext ist die Sendung des sogenannten Gottesknechts nicht nur auf die Nachkommen Isaaks, Esaus und Ismaels ausgerichtet, sondern auf alle, die im weitesten Sinn des Wortes als Nachkommen Abrahams bezeichnet werden können. Diese „universale“ Ausrichtung wird gestützt von der Nebeneinanderstellung von מִשְׁפַּחַת אֱבְרָהָם und אֱבְרָהָם einerseits und der Prase אֱבְרָהָם andererseits, wie eine Untersuchung der Verbindungen im weiteren Kontext der hebräischen Bibel zeigt.

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