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**Suffering and redemption –  
an exegetical approach of Isaiah 53**

Doctoral Thesis  
- Summary -

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## KEY WORDS:

**Ebed-Yahweh, Isaiah, mission, sacrifice, sin, suffering, redemption, resurrection, restoration, eschatology;**

Fundamental text of the Old Testament, the enigmatic 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah's Book received from the researchers a special attention, being either enclosed in the Fourth Poem's perspective (Isaiah 52, 13 – 53, 12), from the cycle of *Ebed-Yahweh's Poems*, or interpreted singular. The text can be considered, from many points of view, the most important<sup>1</sup> of all texts of the Old Testament and best adapted, more than any other, in defining a correct and overview understanding of all the prophecies expressed over time regarding Messiah.

The importance of the theme lies in the many interpretations that have been attributed to this prophetic text. For the Christian biblical theology, the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah's Book remains one of the most important texts of the Old Testament, which accurately presents, in a prophetic language, the suffering, death and glorification of our Savior Jesus Christ, anticipating the sacrifice for the redemption of the humanity, which was unable to redeem on its own. In the Book of Isaiah, the character Ebed-Yahweh aroused many debates about its identity. Starting with the terminology of the Hebrew word *Ebed* (Servant) and identifying the Old Testament's characters who have received, undoubtedly, the title of Servant of Yahweh (Moses, David, Job, Israel etc.) once reached Isaiah's Book, the reader, or the interpreter, finds himself in front of an apparent insuperable dilemma. Identifying the verses which refers to Ebed-Yahweh, he discovers at least two distinct characters, identified with the title of *Servant of Yahweh*: a character named Israel, to whom God uses, undoubtedly, the appellative *My Servant* and a second character, more enigmatic, which we are not given clear indications on its identity, whose identity will be discovered after analyzing his actions and attributes, as they are described

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of The Old Testament on The Predictions of The Messiah by The Prophets*, translated from the german, by Reuel Keith, vol. I., printed by Gould & Newman, Andover USA, 1836, pg. 484.

by the isaianic text. In this situation are the references of Isaiah 52, 13 and Isaiah 53, 11, both enclosed in the perspective of the *Fourth Poem*.

On a careful reading of 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter, it can be easily intuited some questions: *Who is the enigmatic character that the isaianic text refers to? Why has he endured so much suffering? Why only through His suffering we are all cured?* This paper's aim is to answer all these questions, starting with the two key concepts, the one of *suffering* and the one of *redemption/ salvation*, which are crossing this prophetic text from one end to another.

The hermetic prophetic language made it difficult to identify the Servant, even in the verses in which he is identified with the name of Israel, by contrasting the actions which are attributed to him to an objective reality, suggesting that the actions described by the prophetic text could not be realized by the nation of Israel. From here, it was only one step away from discussing the identity of the Ebed as being the nation of Israel, leading to the formulation of theories which can identify the person or the target group, by relating to the actions and attributes of the isaianic Ebed, who are unique in the Old Testament. Inevitably, the disputes between Judaism and Christianity will have their own large field in the exegetical studies of the Old Testament. Situated on the same major positions in the first centuries in terms of identifying the Servant, from the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter, with the Messiah, both the rabbinic and christian interpretation will be found, once with the Middle Ages, on different sides, when rabbis will try to impose as normative, the perception of the Servant as the people of Israel, especially in the Fourth Poem. The dispute between the Jewish and the Christian interpreters remains topical, especially because the text of *Isaiah 53* presented, almost as in a mirror, the events which were going to happen over hundreds of years, legitimizing the historical person of Jesus Christ, as our Savior and Accomplisher of the Old Testament messianic prophecies. Therefore, defending the Christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 has a major importance for the Christian biblical researcher, especially when both religions recognize the isaianic text as canonical.

Ebed-Yahweh's character, of the four isaianic Poems, is bringing to light the most revealing prophetic picture of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. Beyond the individual and collective interpretation of this *Servant* of Yahweh, according to various exegetical

schools, a major importance has the characteristic features which distinguish him from the whole historical context until then. He is not a conquering davidic prince willing to impress by power and glory, but a holy man, wise, who wins peoples heart by gentleness and kindness (Isaiah 42, 3), His strength relies on absolute confidence and obedience (Isaiah 50, 4), and His mission is to gather all dispersed Israel (Isaiah 49, 5-6), and to lead God's salvation to the ends of the Earth (Isaiah 49, 6). He is, finally, what God expects: *the ideal Servant in whom He can find contentment* (Isaiah 42, 1; 49, 3).

Even though the problem of identifying the Ebed remains difficult, with the New Testament this problem finds its way back to the light. Everything that refers to the Ebed, in an undefined way, in the Book of Isaiah, whether is Israel or any other person, the authors of the New Testament assign to Jesus Christ our Savior. He is *Israel, The New Israel, the synthesis of Israel*<sup>2</sup>; He will conclude the New Covenant (Mark 14, 24); about Him it was written that *he will suffer* (Mark 9, 12), that *he will be the light* of mankind (Luke 2, 32); He will be the One *counted with the sinful* (Mark 15, 28), *will redeem for all of us* (Mark 10, 45; 14, 24, Matthew 8, 17); will be *the Servant, the Slave* (Luke 22, 27; Philippians 2, 7), *will be the messenger* of the good news.

The exegesis of chapter 53, made in accordance with the text of the New Testament, reveals deeper meanings of the concepts of *suffering* and *redemption/salvation*. Therefore, throughout this paperwork, to complete the picture of meanings of these two isaianic key-words, the **chapter I** of this thesis will consider how these terms are reflected especially in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. The first chapter will highlight, in the first part, the way the concept of *suffering* is being used by the Old Testament prophets. Through the ways suffering is reflected in the Old Testament sheets of the prophetic Books, a special place is being occupied by the suffering of the people of Israel as a result of the sin and alienation from God, which has inevitably drawn the divine punishment.

All human fate is summarized and illustrated in the destiny of Israel, *God's chosen people*, that choice having only a primary importance. A people was chosen, separately from other nations, presented as a sacred oasis, given by the grace of God, in

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<sup>2</sup> Mitr. Antonie Plămădeală, *Ebed-Yahve în lumina Noului Testament*, în revista Mitropolia Banatului, Nr. 4-5, 1970, pg. 298.

the midst of human disorder, in the midst of a fallen world, sinful, lost and unredeemed. With this people, God established His promise, giving them His sacred law. Here it was created only one prophecy, although a temporary one. In this nation true prophets have spoken, speaking words inspired by the Holy Spirit. All these came from God being the heart of the biblical message, without any human merit or achievement. Violation of God's commandments, the failure of putting the justice as an essential requirement of life, Israel's infidelity, the hardness of his heart, the lies and murders were the reasons why Israel has reached this permanent suffering.

However, this suffering remains, in the same time, a way of recovering the people of Israel. The exile was the providential opportunity for Israel to acknowledge his sin and to change his beliefs sincerely. There are promises of recovery (Zechariah 10, 6); the remnant of Israel expects from God the renewal of its days, as in the old days (Lamentations 5, 21). The babylonian liberation it is announced as a renewal of the Exodus event; God becomes *the Redeemer* of His people, being identified with him in his *misfortunes* (Isaiah 63, 9).

In the subchapter *Redemption perspectives in the prophetic books* it will be highlighted the eschatological promises of the prophets, who have focused on the salvation idea, aiming encouragement for those who passed through the suffering of the present, and keeping a permanent belief in the appearance of a Savior. The promises of the prophets have always aimed that faithful remnant of Israel, which can be considered a growing germ of a holy people for which God's promises will come. In the middle of this suffering, the prophets of the Old Testament maintained alive the image of the Savior, who would come to save the world through His incarnation, His suffering, His death and Resurrection, opposing the disobedience of the first people and being The One who is unconditionally obedient to the will of God.

In the exegetical approach of chapter 53 (**chapter II**) we consider, according to Bernard Duhm's sections, the identification of the four poems of the Servant, and a brief overview of them, in order to shape a clearer picture of the Ebed's person and his actions. Analyzing the literary motif of the fourth Poem, its compositional elements, Poem's voices, as well as presenting all sorts of theories connected to the identity of the Ebed – in the subchapter *Who is Ebed-Yahweh?* – are all complementary elements of the exegesis



itself. For a complete picture, the exegesis will consider the two textual traditions of the isaianic text, of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, in a parallel, with a proposal of its own translation, to which there will be added remarks about the differences of meaning of the qumranian version (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>), especially related to the Masoretic Text. In an attempt to reveal a unit sense, a parallel analysis, in conjunction with the interpretations of the Church Fathers, of rabbis and exegetes, will allow us to come more closer to the primary interpretation assigned to the text. Along this thesis, a very special place will have the position towards the New Testament, which, as it can be seen, contains countless appreciations connected to the isaianic text, but having the same common point: *the subject of the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah's prophecy is Jesus Christ our Savior Himself*. That is why, the writers of the New Testament take over, especially when they talk about the sacrifice of our Savior, His suffering and death, images of the prophetic isaianic text, assigning them to Jesus Christ our Savior.

In the chapters 40-55 of Isaiah's Book, Ebed-Yahweh is called by *God to bring justice and to be the light of the nations* (Isaiah 42, 1.6), so he *can gather the dispersed Israel* (49, 5-6) to be *The Covenant of the nation* (Isaiah 42, 6; 49, 8), to *constitute a new nation out of redeemed Israel and the converted nations*.

A dramatic change of the events, from chapters 51 – 52 , 11, is the presence of Ebed-Yahweh in verse 13 (Isaiah 52), a figure which the Church Fathers and the majority of the exegetes have identified it as the figure of *Jesus Christ*. In this manner, the focus on the exiled jewish people, from chapters 51-52, being moved to the messianic character that will appear in 52, 13, imposes reflections on the literary role of the new section outgoing the previous one. In the opening of the Fourth Poem (Isaiah 52, 13), Ebed-Yahweh appears as a person already known to us, His *official assignment* being made by God in the text of Isaiah 42, 1: *Here is My Servant, Whom I support, My Chosen One*.

The exegesis will focus on the terms which raised problems of translation/interpretation. On this line, in the verse 15 (chapter 52) , the verb נָזַח (*nazah*) is so discussed by the exegetes, due to the possibility of being able to be translated in two very different ways. The first sense of the verb would be *to be surprised/to startle*, as a result of excessive emotionality (positive), meaning borrowed by the Septuagint: *many nations will marvel him*. The second meaning is *to splash/to sprinkle/ to scatter/ to fall in*

*drops/ to spray/to burst*, that appears in Exodus 29, 21, referring to the sprinkle of blood and oil, the blood – in Leviticus 4, 6. 17; 5, 9; 6, 27; 8, 30; 14, 7; 16, 14. 15. 19; Numbers 19, 4; 4 Kings 9, 33; Isaiah 63, 3; the chrism – in Leviticus 8, 11; oil – in Leviticus 14, 16. 27; to blood and water – in Leviticus 14, 51, referring to water – in Numbers 8, 7; 19, 18. 19. 21. From the given examples, for the second meaning, seems that the נָזַח (*nazah*) is a *technical* one according to the mosaic ritual, offering a purification ceremonial: either with *water* or *oil* or *blood*. With reference to Leviticus 16, 14. 15. 19, where the verb means *purification* by sprinkling with the blood of the goat and calf, using this term, by sparkling, takes a sacrificial purpose. An explanation for translating the term from v. 15, with the meaning of sparkling, could be justified by analogy with the text of the Revelation 5, 9, where the *blood* of the Lamb is being described as a ransom for all *men* of the *tribe/language and people and nation*, all of them becoming the people of God, through Christ's sacrifice. In this paper, the choice of how to translate the verb *nazah*, with the meaning of *surprise*, was taken thanks to the recommendations of the Gesenius Lexicon, as well as the naturalization of the translated term into romanian, in the Synodal Editions of the Holy Scripture. However, we have to admit that, giving the meaning *to sparkle* to the verb *nazah* (meaning *to purify*) finds well-founded arguments, as well as benefits in the relevant interpreting of fourth Poem's Servant attributes.

The exegesis will focus more on the terms from the isaianic text, reflecting *suffering* or pain – מַכָּאֵב *mak'ob* (vv. 3-4) / חֹלִי *choli* (vv. 3-4) with the root חָלָה *chalah* (v. 10) / אָנָּה *anah* (vv. 4 și 7) / אָמַל *amal* (v. 11) / נֶגַע *nega* (v. 8) – as well as the different meaning of their translation, and the corresponding terms of the Septuagint.

In some parts of the isaianic text, the analyses of the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint will reveal the fact that despite some major meaning differences the unity of sense of the revealed text remained unaffected. On this line, the 10<sup>th</sup> verse arises two important problems. First of all, it is obvious the difference of meaning between the Masoretic Text and Septuagint. If in the Masoretic Text the subject that *puts his soul* as an offering for the sin is the Ebed, the version of the Septuagint changes the whole meaning, by assigning this offer to the believers. The text of the Vulgate shows similarities with the Masoretic Text and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, but modifies a little bit the first part of the text construction: *si posuerit pro peccato animam suam videbit semen*

*longevum*, with the translation *If [He] will put His soul as an offering for His sin*. Like the good remarks of the professor Alexandru Mihăilă<sup>3</sup>, in this interpretation *the soul* is understood as a direct object and not as a subject. The Masoretic text clearly assigns to the suffering Ebed, in all readings, an *offering for sin*, linking it to His life (soul). However, despite this difference, apparently insuperable, the unity of purpose of the whole poem is not affected neither in Septuagint, which states, unequivocally, (verses 5, 8 and 12) that the life of the Ebed was taken so we can be healed, that He bore our sins, and died for them.

A second considerable problem of the 10<sup>th</sup> verse, according to the exegetical critics, it is linked to the noun אָשָׁם (*ašam*), with its root – the verb אָשָׁם (*ašam*) – reflecting *the guilt* before God, by ignoring Its laws (Leviticus 5, 19). The noun אָשָׁם (*ašam*) has a multitude of meanings: *offer/compensation for guilt /atonement for facing the guilt/sacrifice for the sin committed, or offense/crime/violation of rules/*. This offer seems to stop at the violations toward God, that could be estimated and covered by compensation. The offer to offset the guilt, represented by a ram without blemish, to which was added the fifth part of its price, is highlighted in the text of Leviticus 5, 15-16. In terms of *offering for guilt*, אָשָׁם appears in Leviticus 5, 6. 7. 15. 16. 18. 19; 6, 6. 17; 7, 1. 2. 5. 7. 37; 19, 21-22; Numbers 6, 12; 18, 9; 1 Kings 6, 3. 4. 8. 17; Ezekiel 40, 39; 42, 13; 44, 29; 46, 20. In Isaiah 53, 10, the term expresses *offering/sacrifice for mistake/sin*. The term אָשָׁם (*ašam*) which designates the *individual offer of atonement* and appears as a key-word for the whole understanding of the fourth *Poem*. As a word for *the individual atonement*, אָשָׁם (*ašam*) it implies two aspects: on one side, the recognition of being disobedient, or associated to disobedience, as many of Isaiah's 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter expressions highlight, or, on the other side, the awareness of meeting the necessary conditions for a valid offer. The Ebed of the Fourth Poem is a character that can not be identified, *ritually*, with the sinful, through the hands of the priest, as in Leviticus 4, 4. 15. 24. 29, but by His own decision. In His Offer, he identifies himself with those for which He suffers. *The atonement*, is, in fact, *the awareness of guilt and its voluntary confession*. Carrying the sins of humanity upon Himself, Ebed-Yahweh bears the guilt as well, so His conscience

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandru Mihăilă, (*Ne*)lămuriri din Vechiul Testament, Ed. Nemira, București, 2011, pg. 39.

was burdened with the guilt of the sins of others, *sacrificing Himself for their guilt to be canceled*. This sacrifice of the *stabbed Lamb*, it is related to Jesus Christ by the writers of the New Testament: in Acts 2, 23; Revelation 13, 8. The term אָשַׁם indicates the fulfilled sacrifice of Jesus Christ, Who *pays* or *returns* for all of us, *everything that He did not take* (Psalm 68, 6).

The term אָשַׁם (*ašam*, verse 10) and the verb נָשַׂא *nasa* (verses 53, 4. 12, with the meaning of *wearing/carrying further away*) helps us to understand the mission of the Ebed in the Fourth Poem. *The Ebed sacrificed His life for our sins/he bore the sin of many* (leading him away). The whole course of events is illuminated by this expression. The Ebed takes away *the guilt of the community* like a scapegoat, in the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16, 22).

The 11<sup>th</sup> verse, of the isaianic text, emphasizes, in terms of textual criticism, a special situation. If the text of the Septuagint, speaks about the *light* which will be shown to the Ebed, idea not reflected, under this metaphor, in the Masoretic Text and in the Text of the Vulgate, the discoveries of the Qumran texts come to support the Septuagint version, by the presence of the term *light*<sup>4</sup>, as well as in 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, as in 1QIsa<sup>b</sup>. This idea of *light*, that is to be seen by the Ebed, does not come as an adjustment to the Masoretic Textent in the unity of sense related to the worshipping of the Ebed, but as an enrichment of it, by foreshadowing *the light* of the Easter Sunday.

Along the last chapter (**chapter III**), the concept of suffering and the concept of salvation are reinterpreted, from the *Christological key* perspective of the fourth Poem. 16. Given the Christological understanding of 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter from the Book of Isaiah, researchers were able *to associate* the prophetic text to a specific historical character, interpreting the sufferings from the text soteriological way. From the Church Father's point of view, *Isaiah 53* was always the anticipation of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, Who *offers His life* (Matthew 20, 28), *His body, for the life of mankind* (John. 6, 32, 51; Luke 22, 19). In the New Testament it can be easily noticed both, the physical and the spiritual characteristics, of the *Ebed*, assigned to the Person of Jesus Christ, with the explicit intention of confirming the identity of these two persons.

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<sup>4</sup> [Scăpat] din chinul sufletului Său va vedea lumina..

Thus, in the eschatological dimension of suffering, the imitative sharing of Christ's suffering becomes paradigmatic for humanity. The Son of God triumphs in front of suffering, and through this, the suffering of the Cross is the one who leads to Christian perfection. This is how, the role of the Christian's suffering is the one of *involvement* to Christ's suffering, this state of spirit being continuously updated in the liturgical sacrifice. The Eucharistic Body and Blood are not only a symbolic memorial of a known deed, but the eschatological reality of the world itself in which Jesus Christ lives in.

Regarding Salvation, this chapter will highlight the fact that in orthodoxy, the restoration of the *image and the revival of the new individual in Christ* are its defining elements. *Willingly assuming* of the Incarnated Word of the *human condition*, subject to suffering and death, becomes the supreme act of God's loving. The obedience of Jesus Christ, emphasized by the image of the Ebed who did not open His mouth (Isaiah 53, 7), it is a contraposition to the disobedience of the first people and a prerequisite to the spiritual ascend. Not being static, but being *dynamic*, the spiritual salvation is not a sealed state, but an unceasing movement towards the state of deification (*theosis*), towards this idea of the Eastern theology .

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