

# The Prophet Muḥammad and Isaiah 42

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## INTRODUCTION

The Qur'ān references Biblical prophecies that supposedly predict the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad. One such reference is found in Sūra al-a'rāf v.157, where the coming of an 'ummī prophet is said to have been prophesied in the Jewish Bible. The Qur'ān states that this prophet, who is Prophet Muḥammad, is found "written with them" (that is, with the Jews) in *al-Taurāt*. That the Qur'ān is appealing to a contemporary biblical text is obvious- the question is, what is it?

This essay argues in favor of the hypothesis that Q7:157-158 is a probable allusion to the text of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah. The book of Isaiah has traditionally been ascribed wholly to the prophetic figure of Isaiah, the 8th Century BC prophet active during the Assyrian crisis, during which Judah was reduced to a vassal state under the Assyrian empire. Modern biblical scholarship, however, has uncovered at-least three separate authors on the basis of linguistic, thematic and historical distinctions therein. By scholarly consensus, most of chapters 1-39 can be reasonably attributed to the historical Isaiah of the 8th Century BC, while chapters 40-55 belong to an anonymous prophet active amidst one of the Jewish communities forcefully settled in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonians in 587BC.

Second Isaiah predicts the restoration of Israel and the return of the Israelites back to Jerusalem following the conquests of Cyrus the Persian<sup>1</sup>. The prophecy is intermingled with strong polemic against the worship of idols<sup>2</sup> and oracles predicting the fall of Babylon<sup>3</sup>. The prophet looks to a future where Israel has an "everlasting" covenant with Yahveh<sup>4</sup>.

## ISIAH IN EARLY MUSLIM TRADITION

There seems to have been an early Muslim effort to identify the Prophet Muḥammad as the coming servant of Isaiah 42. Al-Bukhārī in his *Saḥiḥ* records the following tradition<sup>5</sup>:

أَنَّ هَذِهِ، الْآيَةَ الَّتِي فِي الْقُرْآنِ قَالَ فِي التَّوْرَةِ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا وَجَزَاءً لِلْأُمِّيِّينَ، أَنْتَ عَبْدِي وَرَسُولِي سَمَّيْتُكَ الْمُتَوَكِّلَ لَيْسَ بِفَطْرٍ وَلَا غَلِيظٍ وَلَا سَخَابٍ بِالْأَسْوَاقِ وَلَا يَدْفَعُ السَّيِّئَةَ بِالسَّيِّئَةِ وَلَكِنْ يَغْفُو وَيَصْفَحُ وَلَنْ يَفْضَحَهُ اللَّهُ حَتَّى يُقِيمَ بِهِ الْمِلَّةَ الْعُجُوزَاءُ بَأَنْ يَقُولُوا لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ فَيَفْتَحَ بِهَا أَعْيُنًا عُمَمًا وَأَذَانًا صُمًّا وَقُلُوبًا غُلْفًا

This biblical identification of the Prophet present in this ḥadīth is an opinion attributed to the companion 'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin Al-'Ās. Some of the descriptions spoken of by 'Abdullah bin 'Amr are taken almost verbatim from Isaiah 42: The Prophet is "not a noise-maker in the markets", just like the servant in Isaiah 42:2 "will not cry or lift

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 44:26-28, 45:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Eg. Isa 44:9-18

<sup>3</sup> Isa 43:14

<sup>4</sup> Isa 55:3

<sup>5</sup> *Saḥiḥ al Bukhari, Kitab al-Tafsir.*

up his voice, or make it heard in the street.” The Prophet is addressed as ‘abdi wa rasūli (my slave and messenger), and this could easily be the ‘avdi (my slave) of Isaiah 42:1, and perhaps even the ‘avdi and mal’achi<sup>6</sup> (my slave and my messenger) spoken of in 42:19, albeit this latter identification is only possible if one disregards the context in which these two terms occur,- this very same figure is said to be a blind ‘avd and a deaf mal’ach in the same verse<sup>7</sup>.

Other descriptions provided by ‘Abdullah bin ‘Amr are not verbatim but can reasonably be understood to be his own interpretations of the text of Isaiah. The Prophet is the “guardian of the gentiles,” perhaps echoing the role of the servant to the gentiles in Isaiah 42:6. This servant’s mission, according to ‘Abdullah, will be successful- “Allah will not let him die until he makes straight the crooked...” seems to be in the spirit of the promise of “[the servant who] will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.” The monotheistic mission of this servant is strongly implied in Isaiah’s vision: the author believes that Yahveh will guide nations through this servant (Isa 42:6) and elsewhere asserts that those who worship idols fail to comprehend the futility of their beliefs (Isa 44:18). ‘Abdullah may have reasonably concluded that the coming servant who Isaiah refers to must be one that corrects these beliefs, thus his own exegesis of the prophecy to be that the Prophet will not fail until “[the people] say that there is no God but Allah.” Consequently, ‘Abdullah continues, “he opens the eyes of the blind,” echoing Isaiah 42:7 “[I have called you] to open the eyes that are blind.”

Some of ‘Abdullah’s identifications are puzzling, if authentic. His quotation, { يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ } إنا أرسلناك شاهداً ومبشراً is suspect. The ḥadīth suggests that this is intended to be a verbatim quotation of the bible, as it is framed as an actual statement said by God in previous scripture in address to the Prophet. No such address occurs in Isaiah<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the language employed here is distinctly Qur’ānic in origin, identical to Q48:8 and 33:45. This could reflect a later development in the transmission of this ḥadīth. The clear Qur’ānic provenance of this quotation naturally discounts the view that this was found in the Isaiah text available to the 7th Century Arabs and was somehow subsequently erased. Certainly, such a thing is not impossible<sup>9</sup>, but if one were to assert this to be the case, they would have to explain why this line is not found anywhere in the Isaiah scrolls before the 7th century, such as the dead sea scrolls<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The hebrew term mal’ach (מלאך) corresponds to the Arabic word ملك. Both terms usually refer to angels, although mal’ach in the bible can also refer to human messengers, including those sent by Yahveh (see: Malachi). Thus, in Isaiah 42:19, where an individual figure is spoken of (in metaphor for all of Israel), the definition is identical to the arabic rasūl.

<sup>7</sup> We cannot assume that ‘Abdullah read the text with complete consideration for its integrity or with full access to it. His reference could still be an interpretation of 42:19 rather than 42:1, especially as this same servant is called “mushollam” here, analogous to Muslim. Such a mention may have inspired his identification.

<sup>8</sup> Does it occur elsewhere in the bible? Nothing verbatim comes to mind.

<sup>9</sup> This stance has been held by some Muslim scholars, such as Yasir Qadhi, on biblical oracles containing the prophet Muḥammad. Presently, we hold that this stance is both unnecessary and difficult to substantiate with proof.

<sup>10</sup> See entry for the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa) in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.

The rest of the ḥadīth does not match the text of bible, and is not Qur'ānic in origin. 'Abdullah could be quoting unique biblical variants present only with the Medinan Jews, although the difficulties with this stance have already been discussed. Concluding that the prophecies quoted in this ḥadīth are the result of uncertain transmission history of the ḥadīth is too hasty of a conclusion, as 'Abdullah could be making references to Jewish oral tradition, apocrypha or Rabbinic sources.

One other non- Qur'ānic text containing echoes of Isaiah is found in the Sīra of 'ibn Ishāq. In scene the monumental revelation to the Prophet in the cave of Hira, Gabriel addresses the Prophet, ordering him to recite<sup>11</sup>:

قلت ما اقرأ ؟ [قال] فقال اقرأ

So he said, "recite!" [and the Prophet said] I replied, "what should I recite?"

***faqāla iqra' qultu mā aqra'***<sup>12</sup>

Isaiah 40 contains this same dialogue, albeit in a completely different context:

אמר קרא ואמר מה אקרא

[A voice] says, "cry out!", and I said, "what should I cry out?"

***'ōmēr qērā w'āmar māh eqrā'***

It must be admitted that this could be a coincidence. Nevertheless, both texts use the semitic root q-r-' which exhibits the same range of meaning in both languages, with the interrogative particle mā/māh. The Hebrew verb 'āmar (to say) derived from the root '-m-r is identical in meaning to the Arabic qāla. This correlation between the text of Ibn Ishāq and Isaiah was noted by Sean Anthony<sup>13</sup>. Isaiah 40 is not a prophecy of a coming gentile prophet, nor does Ibn Ishāq claim it to be, but that is hardly relevant. What is evident here is conscious posturing of the Prophet in accordance with Isaian dialogue by early Muslims<sup>14</sup>, perhaps with the intention to invoke the themes of Isaiah in the eyes of the biblically literate audience.

What should be made of these early allusions to Isaiah present in Ḥadīth and Sīra? We may conclude that some early Muslims were appealing to this text with the goal of proving Qur'ānic claims about biblical prophecy as exemplified in Q7:157. By the 7th Century, the servant songs of Isaiah had been subject to a long tradition of

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<sup>11</sup> From 'ibn Hishām's compilation of the sīra of 'ibn 'ishāq. Accessed from URL:<<http://library.islamweb.net>>

<sup>12</sup> Qāla omitted from transliteration for the sake of comparison with Hebrew. This word is a feature of the narrative recount, not the original conversation between Gabriel and the Prophet.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony, Sean. "Muḥammad, Menaḥem, and the Paraclete: New Light on Ibn Ishāq's (d. 150/767) Arabic Version of John 15:23-16:1, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 79.2 (2016)."

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this dialogue is actually original to the Prophet. Ibn Ishāq's version differs from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, where the Prophet says "what shall I read/recite?" rather than, "I cannot read!" Both cannot be authentic.

individual interpretation<sup>15</sup> by both Jews and Christians<sup>16</sup>. This, and the fact that such a habit was picked up by some individuals among the early Muslims, warrants a further investigation on possible links between Qur'ānic references to the Torah as a predictor of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the text of 2nd Isaiah.

## SECOND ISAIAH AND THE QUR'ĀN

The Qur'ān alleges that the appellation 'ummī is associated with the Prophet Muḥammad in the Jewish bible. In Sūra al-a'rāf v. 156-157:

*"I shall ordain My mercy for those who are conscious of God and pay the prescribed alms; who believe in Our Revelations; who follow the Messenger— the unlettered prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel— who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong, who makes good things lawful to them and bad things unlawful, and relieves them of their burdens, and the iron collars that were on them. So it is those who believe him, honour and help him, and who follow the light which has been sent down with him, who will succeed."*

The Qur'ān does not elaborate which biblical book it is referring to other than "the Torah", and "the Gospel." As this essay is only concerned with mentions of the Prophet Muḥammad in Isaiah 42, New Testament prophecies shall not be discussed here.

In Jewish tradition, the term tōrah (תורה) is usually synonymous with the Pentateuch<sup>17</sup> traditionally ascribed to Moses, but can refer to the entirety of the Jewish Bible (the Tanakh). Previous attempts to take 7:157 as a cross-reference to Isaiah 42 have been made by Muslims. Abu Zakariya, author of the 'Many Prophets One Message' website<sup>18</sup> interprets this verse as such:

"It's true that in its most limited sense, the Torah refers to the five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). However in a broader sense, Torah actually includes all Jewish law and tradition. The Hebrew word "torah" just means instruction or law, and so in Judaism it is also used in a general sense to refer to the entire Old Testament which includes Isaiah. It's interesting to note that Jesus does exactly this in the New Testament:

*Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? [John 10.34]*

Here Jesus has quoted Psalm 82:6 from the Old Testament:

*I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.*

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<sup>15</sup> An interpretation of the servant songs of Isaiah which posits that the Servant of God in Isaiah an actual individual, as opposed to being a metaphor for all of Israel, which scholars aptly call the "collective interpretation."

<sup>16</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph. "Chapters from History of Interpretation" in The Anchor Bible: Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Vol 19A. New York: Doubleday . 2000.

<sup>17</sup> The "five books of Moses"- these are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Zakariya also noted the strong correlation between the ḥadīth of Abdullah and Isaiah 42, although his attempts to find parallels differ slightly from what was argued in the present essay.

*“Clearly, Jesus refers to the Psalms of David as Torah (‘law’) even though technically it is not part of Torah. In the same way, when the Qur’ān refers to the Torah in verses such as 7:157 it could just be a reference to the complete collection of scriptures that the Jews had at the time of Muḥammad, which included the Book of Isaiah. So for the sake of convenience it is referred to as Torah collectively. Even if we accept the technical, narrow definition of Torah, then this does not refute that the Qur’ān could be referring to Isaiah, because the Qur’ān doesn’t state that he can only be found in the Torah.”*

Abu Zakariya’s argument requires further elaboration. John 10:34 does not actually use the word “Torah”, which is a Hebrew word, but rather *nomos*, as John was written in Greek. *Nomos* simply means “law” or “custom”. A possible objection would thus be that Jesus is not really applying the term “Torah” to the Psalms, and that the intended meaning of *nomos* is other than the Hebrew term Torah. However, such an objection fails to account for the Greek usage of *nomos* in the same Gospel<sup>19</sup>. John 1:17 makes unambiguous reference to the Torah of Moses:

“The law (*ho nomos*) indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

Clearly, the intended meaning here is nothing other than the Mosaic Torah.

*Nomos* was typically used in translation from the Hebrew term Torah in Greco-Jewish texts outside the New Testament. The Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Jewish bible written in the 2nd Century BC, usually translates “Torah” as “*nomos*”. One example from the LXX is Nehemiah 8:1-

ΚΑΙ ἔφθασεν ὁ μὴν ὁ ἕβδομος -καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ ἐν πόλεσιν αὐτῶν- καὶ συνήχθησαν πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ὡς ἀνὴρ εἷς εἰς τὸ πλάτος τὸ ἔμπροσθεν πύλης τοῦ ὕδατος. καὶ εἶπαν τῷ Ἐσδρα τῷ γραμματεῖ ἐνέγκαι τὸ βιβλίον νόμου Μωυσῆ, ὃν ἐνετείλατο Κύριος τῷ Ἰσραὴλ.

The LXX translator has chosen to render the original Hebrew, “*sefer Torah Moshe*” (The book of law of Moses) as “*to biblion nomou Mōusē*.” *Nomos* is present here in the genitive case, declined according to appropriate syntax. The translator believed that *nomos* is an appropriate translation of Torah. This does not, however, mean that every instance of *nomos* must mean Torah: Only that references to the Torah made in Greek use the word *nomos*. Having said that, however, it is difficult to imagine that anything other than Torah could be meant in John 10:34. This very term is not just restricted to Mosaic law in the Jewish bible: often times, the intended usage is as a collective reference to Judaic teaching. Examples of this sort are found in Deuteronomy 17:11 and Isaiah 1:10. The latter reference is particularly significant because the prophet Isaiah himself is calling divine proclamation in general the “Torah of the Lord”.

Revelation other than of the Mosaic sort can thus be called the word Torah. It is expected that the Qur’ānic usage of Torah would encompass such a definition,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ho nomos* often refers to Mosaic law elsewhere in the New Testament (see Thayer’s Greek lexicon entry for νόμος).

although further study of the word in the Qur'ān must be done before coming to any firm conclusions.

The word al-Taurāt (التوراة) occurs 18 times in the Qur'ān<sup>20</sup>. Remarkably, there is no mention of al-Taurāt being revealed to Moses. Certainly, Moses was given a scripture, yet when recounting its revelation to Moses, the Qur'ān always uses the generic al-kitāb (see. Q25:35, Q2:87, Q11:110 for examples). Nevertheless, al-Taurāt is synonymous with the revelation of Moses in other contexts: it is equated with al-kitāb in Q3:48 and Q5:110 by way of linguistic parallelism<sup>21</sup>.

There is one place in the Qur'ān where the term “al-taurāt” is applied to an allusion to a biblical non-Pentateuchal text: Q7:157. The Taurāt which the Qur'ān is alluding to in this verse may be the Old Testament, a part of which is the book of Isaiah itself. A reading of this verse in light of Isaiah 42 bears some interesting results.

The verses Q7:157-158 assert that the Prophet Muḥammad is the 'ummī (gentile) messenger who is spoken of in the Bible. This theme is present in Isaiah 42- the servant of God is brought forward to be a “covenant to the people, a light to the nations”. His calling is universal: the goyim (Isaiah 42:6), meaning nations, are the objects of his mission, thus clearly encompassing all the people, and not just Israel. This universality is stressed in Q7:158- “Say, ‘Oh Mankind, I am truly the Messenger of God to you all.” The Prophet brings light to the people by God’s own doing (al-nūr aladhī 'unzila ma'ahu), and so does the servant in Isaiah 42- “I [Yahveh] have given you... [as] a light to the nations.” The Prophet is an ethical teacher “who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong,” an idea embedded in the servant’s establishment of “mishpāṭ”, which refers to ethical justice as argued in the exegetical section of this essay, while the Prophet’s role as a liberator, “he relieves them of their burdens, and the iron collars” finds parallels in Isaiah 42:7, where the servant is explicitly tasked “to bring out prisoners from the dungeon.” The Isaian prophet pauses between his description of the coming servant to declare the praise of Yahveh, and even this praise does the Qur'ān in 7:157-158 echo. The Qur'ān praises “Him who owns the heavens and the earth.” - compare to Isaiah 42:5, Yahveh “created the heavens... spread out the earth.” Life-giving power is associated with God in Q7:158; “There is no God but Him; He gives life and death,” and in Isaiah 42, Yahveh “gives breath to the people who walk upon [the earth].” Finally, monotheism is expressed both in Isaiah 42- “I am Yahveh, that is my name... I give glory to no other, nor my praise to idols”- and the call of the Prophet in Q7:158, “There is no God but Him.” There is certainly good reason to believe that the Qur'ān in 7:157-158 is actually referring to this chapter of Isaiah, as every theme in these two verses is found in Isaiah 42. This cannot be a mere coincidence.

Contrarily, these verses do not fit any prophecy from the Pentateuch. We previously saw that that in other sections of the Qur'ān, the term is equated to what was given to Moses, and that the Pentateuch is also sometimes intended by this appellation<sup>22</sup>. Here in Q7:157 al-taurāt cannot mean either of these. Due to the strong similarities

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<sup>20</sup> According to corpus.quran.com word concordance

<sup>21</sup> This was argued by 19th century exegete Hamiduddin Farahi

<sup>22</sup> The lex talionis is alluded to in Q5:45. The lex talionis is the well-known “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” formula found in but not limited to the legal books of the Pentateuch (eg. Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21).

between these verses and Isaiah, the Qur'ān is probably alluding it under the ambiguous epithet al-taurāt. This is not entirely a surprise- we already know that for the Jewish audience, al-taurāt may include divine instruction in general, and thus it would not be inaccurate to call Isaiah by this name.

## EXEGESIS

### PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Searching for the Prophet Muḥammad in the writings of Isaiah is not an endeavor new to Muslims. From the insights of ʿAbdullah ibn ʿamr, companion of the Prophet, to reflections of medieval scholars such as Ibn Rabban and Ibn Qutayba<sup>23</sup>, Isaiah is often thought to be a predictor of the Prophet Muḥammad. This trend continues even in contemporary times, and a closer reading of Isaiah 42 will reveal exactly why this is the case. This essay will, at points, quote modern apologetic interpretations of this chapter of Isaiah wherever they share interesting insights (see bibliography for exact references).

This essay shall take an approach that accounts for contemporary biblical scholarship on Isaiah 42. Current scholarly exegeses oppose the identification of the Prophet Muḥammad in Isaiah and must be accounted for if any serious case is to be made.

### VERSE 1

#### a. Here is my servant, whom I uphold,

The first servant song (v.1-4) of Second Isaiah declares the coming of a servant of Yahveh chosen by Him. He is called ʿavdi, my servant, precisely analogous to the arabic عبيدي. In Second Isaiah this term is used both for Israel as a nation (see 42:19 for example) and for individuals (54:17)<sup>24</sup>.

Exegetes have proposed both identifications- the servant was commonly interpreted as the nation of Israel, although there is a recent trend towards a personal designation. John McKenzie in his commentary on Second Isaiah writes:

“The oldest form of this interpretation saw in the Servant a personification of the people of Israel. In modern scholarship since the early nineteenth century this was the prevailing opinion. Most of the works written since 1920 have abandoned the collective interpretation or have modified it...”

It is tempting to resort to a personal identification to the servant, but I am personally not convinced, and reading Isaiah 42:19 will explain why.

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<sup>23</sup> Adang, Camilla. Muslim writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm. Leiden: Brill (1996). For examples see P146-149

<sup>24</sup> Here the plural is employed, thus “servants of God”. The usage here is unlike 42:19 where the word is employed in singular to refer to a collective – here plural is used for a collection of individuals. Therefore, one of these servants would be called ʿeved.

*Isa 42:19 Who is blind but my servant (‘avdi),*

*or deaf like my messenger whom I send?*

*Who is blind like my dedicated one,*

*or blind like the servant of the Lord (k‘eved Yahveh)?*

Israel is explicitly described as the servant and messenger of Yahveh in Isaiah 42:18-25. One may say that this is not the same ‘abd of Isaiah 42:1, because the servant there is a guide to others and opens blind eyes, while the servant here in Isaiah 42:19 is himself blind. This argument assumes that a (metaphorically) blind and deaf servant cannot be a guide to others. This assumption does not account for the possibility that Isaiah is speaking about an ideal Israel, one that has reformed so as to become the servant of Yahveh spoken of in this servant song.

In the light of the previous chapter, Isaiah 41, the Israelite identification of the servant becomes all the more possible, as the same language in this servant song is applied to Israel. It is also worth noting that Isaiah 41 has already made possible the restoration of Israel (and thus the possibility of them being the guiding servant of Isaiah 42).

Compare:

**Isaiah 41 – to Israel**

41:9 You are my servant (‘avdi), I chose you (bēḥartika), and I have not rejected you.

41:13 I clasp you by your right hand

**Isaiah 42 – to the servant**

42:1 Here is my servant (‘avdi), whom I uphold, my chosen (bēḥirî)

42:6 I have taken you by the hand

What legitimate arguments can be made against the collective identification of the servant? Arguments do exist for a possible individual identification, but many of these rely on taking the oracle out of context, sometimes with support of subjective textual criticism, the usage of which “is ultimately a critical judgment based on subjective taste,” writes McKenzie, “and it cannot be made into anything stronger<sup>25</sup>”. McKenzie’s own abandonment of the collective interpretation is partly contingent upon the authorship of the servant songs being different to that of the responses that follow<sup>26</sup> in the book of Isaiah, which he admits cannot be decisively proven. Goldingay and Payne, both authors of the International Critical Commentary on 2nd Isaiah, have maintained that the servant is Israel, due to the literary context<sup>27</sup> of the song, employing arguments similar to those made here.

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<sup>25</sup> McKenzie, John. Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes. The Anchor Bible Commentaries. New York: Doubleday, 1973.p. XL

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Isaiah 42, verses 5-20.

<sup>27</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 212



The collective interpretation finds good cause to be accepted. How, then, is it possible that the servant is the Prophet Muḥammad? A novel interpretation is to be argued for here<sup>28</sup>. The key to this question lies in the appreciation of the conditional nature of the prophetic office of Israel. The prophecy will certainly actualize - "before [this prophecy] springs forth, I (Yahveh) tell you of them."<sup>29</sup>, and Israel is to be that servant mentioned. This is almost indisputable in the literary context. What is also clear from an honest reading of the text is that Yahveh himself declares that Israel is unfit for this task, in the verses following the oracle:

*18 Listen, you that are deaf;  
and you that are blind, look up and see!  
19 Who is blind but my servant,  
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?  
Who is blind like my dedicated one,  
or blind like the servant of the Lord?  
20 He sees many things, but does[c] not observe them;  
his ears are open, but he does not hear.  
21 The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness,  
to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.  
22 But this is a people<sup>30</sup> robbed and plundered,  
all of them are trapped in holes  
and hidden in prisons;*

Yahveh had wanted the prophecy to go ahead: "The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious." Yahveh has already sent this messenger – Israel – and he has failed: Israel is "blind" and "deaf." We cannot conclude anything other than that this prophetic office is contingent upon Israel's obedience to Yahveh. Blenkinsopp, although does not accept that the servant is Israel<sup>31</sup> suggests that if it were, Israel would have to reform to realize their vocation: " [these verses] could be said of Israel in either projecting an ideal Israel or an Israel in the guise of one of the great figures from its past."<sup>32</sup>

Does that then mean that the prophecy shall not ever be fulfilled? If Israel is given as a 'light to the nations,' a 'covenant to the people,' through whom all the people (with special mention for the Arabs in Isa 42:11) would forsake idolatry and have a special relationship with Yahveh himself, but cannot perform their function, what then? Presumably, the people shall be kept waiting indefinitely for Israel to reform for their own calling. The only other option is that Yahveh shall realize His prophesy through other means. There is no third option.

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<sup>28</sup> At this point the essay becomes considerably more theological in nature. If we are to assume that prophecy is even possible, we must not operate under a naturalistic framework.

<sup>29</sup> Isa 42:9

<sup>30</sup> This must be Israel, see v.24.

<sup>31</sup> He believes it to be Cyrus, but there are far too many problems with this identification for it to be correct, the most significant being that Isaiah speaks about Cyrus in Isaiah 45, but describes him that are different to the role of the teacher and prophetic figure that shall guide people in Isaiah 42. From the context, it is clear that the servant is not Cyrus (see p.228 of the International Critical Commentary, Isaiah 40-55 Vol 1).

<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph. The Anchor Bible: Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, Vol 19A. New York: Doubleday ( 2000). P. 211

Which of these two possible options find historical support? It is clearly the latter. The Kedarites (Isa 42:11) certainly did leave idolatry, indicating that Yahveh did indeed fulfill the prophecy, but it was not Israel that guided them out of it. It was the Prophet Muḥammad, who, as we shall see in the remainder of the exegesis section, fits the rest of the prophecy so well that we are forced to accept that Yahveh has “re-elected” the servant of Isaiah 42:1-17. This is exactly why the Qur’ān appeals to Isaiah 42 in support of the Prophet Muḥammad’s authenticity.

We discover from this brief tangent that this, then, is how an individual interpretation of the prophecy is possible. If we can agree that the 2nd Isaiah is a genuine prophet, receiving revelation from Yahveh<sup>33</sup>, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that the prophecy was fulfilled, yet not by the original agent (Israel) due to their disobedience, but by another singular individual who matches the description of the prophecy eerily well.

The appellation ‘abd quite easily applies to a prophet in the bible, as evidenced in Jeremiah<sup>34</sup>, Ezekiel<sup>35</sup> and even the narrative history of 2 Kings<sup>36</sup> among others instances. The quoted verses use the formula “‘avāday ha-n’vī’īm,” (in arabic ‘ibadī al-nabiyyīn) meaning, “my servants, the Prophets...” The Qur’ān applies both terms to the Prophet Muḥammad and prophets in general. One of many such verses that exemplify this dual role of the Prophet as ‘abd and nabī in Q18:1- Praise be to God, who sent down the Scripture to His servant (‘abdihi) and made it unerringly straight. As the servant song continues it becomes clear that the vocation of this ‘abd is as a prophet.

**b My chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
c I have put my spirit upon him;**

The noun bēḥīr, translated as “My chosen”, comes from the b-ḥ-r root, which is to choose the best of several choices<sup>37</sup>. The Qur’ān seems to use the verb iṣṭafā and its participle form similarly to describe prophets, such as in Q7:144. By nature, God has chosen Prophets (Q22:75 yaṣṭafī... rusul min al-nās), and also the Prophet Muḥammad specifically as the seal of the Prophets and a Messenger of God (Q33:40). At the surface, all Isaiah is saying is that this prophetic figure is chosen for a special mission. Yahveh Himself finds him pleasing, the verb used here is analogous to the Arabic root رضي<sup>38</sup>. Not too much shall be read into these descriptions, it would only be expected that a genuine prophet would be the object of such positive attributions.

“I have put my spirit(rūḥī) into him” requires further explanation. In the Islamic sense of the term, the “spirit of God” is the angel Gabriel, but there is no evidence in Isaiah

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<sup>33</sup> On that note, some of 2nd Isaiah’s prophecies are famously accurate. He predicts the fall of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus and the return of the exiles to Israel.

<sup>34</sup> See Jer 7:25, 26:5, 29:19, 35:15 and 44:4

<sup>35</sup> See Ezek 38:17

<sup>36</sup> See 2 Kings 17:23, 21:10, Kings 24:2;

<sup>37</sup> Gesenius’s Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon entry for בָּחַר

<sup>38</sup> Brown-Driver-Briggs entry for رَضِيَ

that the “spirit of God” refers to Gabriel. In this context the “rūah” of God seems to indicate divine help or inspiration<sup>39</sup>.

The way it is formulated here in line c is almost identical to Numbers 11:29, where contact with the rūah of Yahveh is strongly linked to prophecy<sup>40</sup>:

But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit (rūah) on them!”

Here, and in many other biblical verses, the spirit is the means through which humans receive divine inspiration. This does not necessarily entail prophet-hood, as warriors fighting for Yahveh can also receive the “spirit of Yahveh”<sup>41</sup>. Here however the correlation between the way the spirit of Yahveh is given to the servant of Yahveh and Moses’s exclamation in Numbers strongly indicates prophet-hood, especially in the wider context of the servant as a teacher.

In the Qur’ānic sense the equivalent term rūḥ can denote a heavenly messenger (Q19:17) but in some contexts it does not seem to be. God blows His rūḥ into ʿĀdam (Q15:29). In other places it is linked to divine command, such is the case in Q17:85, although mufassirūn have interpreted this verse as simply a negation of a question posed by the Jewish interlocutors of the Prophet. If the verse is taken literally, then the Spirit of God as related to the “command of God” is a concept also found in First Isaiah:

*Isa 34:16 Seek and read from the book of the Lord:  
Not one of these shall be missing;  
none shall be without its mate.  
For the mouth of the Lord has commanded,  
and his spirit has gathered them.*

Most significantly, and matching the meaning of Isaiah 42, the rūah brings divine revelation to prophets in general (Q16:2), and explicitly to the Prophet Muḥammad (Q26:193).

### **d He will bring forth justice to the nations.**

The key term in this verse is mishpāṭ, a word with a variety of meanings in the Bible. It can denote legislation (Exod 24:3, Exod 21:1) but also justice in the generic sense (Psa 33:5- God loves justice – mishpāṭ). What could it mean here? Commentators express a variety of opinions: Blenkinsopp tells us that “the term here has a broader reference and refers to a social order based on justice that originates in the will and character of the deity,” while Goldingay and Payne express that the formulation here suggests simply that “the passage declares that the servant has the commission to

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<sup>39</sup> Blenkinsopp suggests that the servant is “endowed with divine charism (“spirit”), as were so many judges, rulers and prophets before him.”

<sup>40</sup> This was pointed out by Goldingay and Payne in their commentary. They also mentioned Num 11:25, where contact with the rūḥ caused people to prophesy. John McKenzie agrees: he writes “the choice of the word here suggests the growth of spirit in man under the revelation of Yahweh” in p40 of his anchor bible commentary.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Samson in Judges 14.

make God's decision known to and for the nations," but in absence of what exactly this "decision" could be, and the allusion to Moses<sup>42</sup>, Blenkinsopp's interpretation seems most reasonable. Whatever the case, all these could easily encompass the Prophet Muḥammad. It is tempting to interpret mishpāṭ in the sense of the Islamic shari'ah but there is nothing to suggest an exclusively legalistic meaning from the context.

If the term here broadly means a just social order based on divine will, then the Prophet's mission in the Qur'ān declares the same thing-

Q6:151 Say, 'Come! I will tell you what your Lord has really forbidden you. Do not ascribe anything as a partner to Him; be good to your parents; do not kill your children in fear of poverty'— We will provide for you and for them—' stay well away from committing obscenities, whether openly or in secret; do not take the life God has made sacred, except by right. This is what He commands you to do: perhaps you will use your reason. 152 Stay well away from the property of orphans, except with the best [intentions], until they come of age; give full measure and weight, according to justice'

Ethical justice and monotheism are dominant themes in the Qur'ān. Isaiah himself declares the oneness of Yahveh in this very same chapter, and if mishpāṭ here means justice but not in a strict legal sense, it can only mean ethical justice<sup>43</sup>, a very Qur'ānic concern, and thus exactly what the Prophet Muḥammad is to deliver to the people.

## VERSE 2

**a He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
b and make it heard in the street;**

The companions of the Prophet seem to have interpreted this verse quite literally. Revisiting the Isaian quotation present in the Ḥadith of 'Abdullah we read that he readily applies this to the Prophet Muḥammad, presumably due to his quiet composure. This quietness would be contrary to obnoxiousness, a quality that is warned against in the Qur'ān (Q31:19). There is not a whole lot of evidence to reject the literal meaning<sup>44</sup>, although one may argue that such frankness is hardly Isaian style<sup>45</sup>.

Presently, a figurative meaning is accepted. The verb yiṣ'aq - "to cry out" - in the basic sense means to call out loudly. In the bible the word is used for crying out in

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<sup>42</sup> This shall be demonstrated later in the essay.

<sup>43</sup> Abu Zakariya on his part shares some interesting insight on the term mishpāṭ, quoting exegete North: "Most commentators remark that mishpat is here used absolutely, without the definite article, and that it has the comprehensive sense of the Islamic din ("judgement"), which embraces both faith and practice." If North's identification is correct, then it matches the Prophet Muḥammad's teaching just as well as what was discussed here, and how this is the case does not really require elaboration.

<sup>44</sup> Its simplicity is also attractive.

<sup>45</sup> "the line can scarcely mean that the servant will not speak except in quiet personal conversation." McKenzie, John. Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes. The Anchor Bible Commentaries. New York: Doubleday, 1973.p.37

distress<sup>46</sup>. Thus, as Goldingay and Payne interpret the verse<sup>47</sup> as such- the servant will not shout and cry out of grief. This implies a stoic personality, or one that possesses confidence of deliverance. The Qur'ān consoles the Prophet, promising him that victory will certainly come-

Q61:8 they wish to put His light out with their mouths. But He will perfect His light, even though the disbelievers hate it;

Q93:3 your Lord has not forsaken you [Prophet], nor does He hate you, 4 and the future will be better for you than the past; 5 your Lord is sure to give you so much that you will be well satisfied.

There is also strong imperative in the Qur'ān for the Prophet to rely on God, for example in Q9:129-

If they turn away, [Prophet], say , 'God is enough for me: there is no god but Him; I put my trust in Him; He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne.'

A different interpretation of the verse was offered by McKenzie. He postulates that "the servant will not impose his words on his listeners." If the verse is read carefully then this can only be true in the sense that the servant would not make people hear if they are not willing to listen. Such a reading would ignore how *yiṣ'āq* is used here, that is, of crying out for help- whether or not the servant announces his teachings forcefully is irrelevant to this word<sup>48</sup>. Goldingay and Payne's commentary is simply more convincing, and incidentally fits the figure of Biblical prophets as well as the Prophet Muḥammad better. A prophet that is confrontational in his teaching is typical of the Bible and the Qur'ān.

### VERSE 3

**a A bruised reed he will not break,  
b and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;**

Line 3a is tricky to interpret. The "bruised reed" is somewhat of a biblical idiom. Egypt is described as a flimsy reed that breaks when leaned upon in Ezekiel 29:6-7. The employment of the term is primarily political.

It is also elaborated in Isaiah 36, as pointed out by Mushafiq Sultan<sup>49</sup>:

*Isa 36:4 The Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you base this confidence of yours? 5 Do you think*

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<sup>46</sup> Genesis entry for the root *ḡḡḡ*. For examples see: Deut. 22:24. In Isaiah itself it usually denotes a cry of grief, see. Isa 19:20, 33:7 and 46:7.

<sup>47</sup> The International Critical Commentary on Second Isaiah P216-217. Sometimes the word is used to cry out in celebration. Goldingay and Payne argue that this cannot be the case here- why would the servant repress a joyful cry?

<sup>48</sup> It is possible that 2b. is disconnected from 2a, but taking line b out of the context of *yiṣ'āq* is not advised. Later on we see that the servant shall probably meet some resistance in his mission. Even if McKenzie is correct, then this description find some parallel with the statements of religious choice in the Qur'ān. Islam is not to be imposed but chosen (Q2:256).

<sup>49</sup> "Isaiah 42: Verses 1-4" in "Muḥammad in the Bible: An exposition on Isaiah".

*that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me? 6 See, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. 7 But if you say to me, 'We rely on the Lord our God,' is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, 'You shall worship before this altar'?*

The meaning conveyed by it here and in Ezekiel is that of unreliability, as Sultan has alluded to in good sense<sup>50</sup>. The king of Israel is censured for choosing to ally with Egypt in Isaiah 30 rather than relying on Yahveh. The unreliability of the “bruised reed” is therefore understood to be a political flimsiness.

Sultan however matches this reference to the Prophet’s engagements with the so-called “hypocrites”, writing that “this expression refers to the hypocrites who apparently believed in the Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), but in reality were collaborating with his opponents to harm him and the believers.” Therefore, the Prophet Muḥammad does not “break” the “bruised reed” by having an “affectionate regard for them<sup>51</sup>,” and because he is not “harsh towards them.” While Sultan is correct in referencing Isaiah 36 to understand the idiom, we disagree that this could be a reference to the hypocrites. A flimsy reed-staff would only break if it is leaned upon for support. This is exactly how the idiom is used in Isaiah 36: Israel is to avoid allying itself with Egypt because the Pharaoh shall fail them, not that Israel is to be affectionate towards Egypt despite their flimsiness: this does not make any sense and is certainly not relevant to Isaiah 36.

Thus, the servant here does not rely upon flimsy political support. He is to rely on God instead of allies who could fail him, exactly as the king of Israel is advised in first Isaiah. How does this compare to the Prophet Muḥammad’s own experience? This very same message is present in the Qur’ān. The believers (and the Prophet by extension) are to not take the disbelievers as protectors in preference to each other and to rely on God:

*Q5:51 You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them— God does not guide such wrongdoers—*

*Q5:55 Your true allies are God, His Messenger, and the believers— those who keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms, and bow down in worship.*

Certainly, kindness and mutual encouragement to goodness is ordered, such as in Q3:64, yet ultimately God is the walī of the believers (Q4:45). For the Prophet himself, unflinching and exclusive dedication and reliance (tawakkul) is demanded:

*Q 8:61 But if [the disbelievers] incline towards peace, you [Prophet] must also incline towards it, and put your trust in God: He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing. 62 If*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, “Thus, ‘a bruised reed’ is something which is not reliable and which would hurt the hand of one who leans on it.”

<sup>51</sup> Abu Zakariya also understands the verse similarly: “this description is very characteristic of the Prophet Muḥammad’s gentle nature which the Qur’ān bears testament to...”

*they intend to deceive you, God is enough for you: it was He who strengthened you with His help,*

Such sentiments can be found in many Qur'ānic verses, usually those which comment upon the relationship between the disbelievers and the Prophet.

The “dimly burning wick” is a metaphor for the weak. McKenzie believes that it “signi[fies] the poor and the helpless, so often mentioned in prophetic literature as the victims of oppression by the wealthy and the powerful<sup>52</sup>.” Goldingay and Payne find the meaning analogous to the flimsiness of the bruised reed in 3a, although McKenzie’s interpretation seems truer to the metaphor. While a weakened reed breaks only if leaned upon, a weakly burning wick is prone to be extinguished whether or not someone is relying upon its light. If the servant does not cause a barely-alight candle to be extinguished, it implies that he actively goes through measures to keep it alight, or at the very least does not do anything that may put it out.

The Prophet Muḥammad is essentially a philanthropist, his message as expounded in the Qur’ān is deeply concerned with the weaker members of society. The Qur’ān censures those that do not make considerations for the needy-

*Q107:1 [Prophet], have you considered the person who denies the Judgement? 2 It is he who pushes aside the orphan 3 and does not urge others to feed the needy.*

The Prophet himself is ordered to show compassion to the weak:

*93:9 So [Prophet], do not be harsh with the orphan 10 and do not chide the one who asks for help; 11 talk about the blessings of your Lord.*

And supporting the weak is essential to faith itself, mentioned alongside with belief in God:

*4:36 Worship God; join nothing with Him. Be good to your parents, to relatives, to orphans, to the needy, to neighbors near and far, to travelers in need, and to your slaves. God does not like arrogant, boastful people,*

The Qur’ān would not repeatedly command kindness to the poor and weak unless the Prophet Muḥammad himself embodied this very commandment in an exemplary fashion – it would only be expected of him.

### **c He will faithfully bring forth justice.**

Once more, justice– mishpāṭ – is invoked. There is no evidence here that this mishpāṭ is any different to the one in 42:1d, ie. a general sense of ethical justice, so further discussion on it is redundant. How this verse does differ from 1d is the

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<sup>52</sup> McKenzie, John. Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes. The Anchor Bible Commentaries. New York: Doubleday, 1973.p 38

mention that he will carry out his mission 'faithfully', or literally for faith, le- 'ēmet<sup>53</sup>. The servant does not change his message, but delivers it effectively<sup>54</sup> so that people may have faith in it.

Such is commanded to the Prophet-

*Q10:15 When Our clear revelations are recited to them, those who do not expect to meet with Us say, 'Bring [us] a different Qur'ān, or change it.' [Prophet], say, 'It is not for me to change it of my own accord; I only follow what is revealed to me, for I fear the torment of an awesome Day, if I were to disobey my Lord.'*

#### VERSE 4

**a He will not grow faint or be crushed  
b until he has established justice in the earth;  
c and the coast-lands wait for his teaching.**

Here we encounter an interesting play on words. In 3a, we saw that the servant will not break a reed that is bruised (rāṣūṣ), and here he himself shall not be crushed (yārūṣ) – the same root is present. Similarly, the servant in 3b will not extinguish a dimly burning (kēhāh) wick, while here he himself shall not grow faint (yik-heh). It is reasonable to assume that this chiasm has implications on the interpretation, which means that the servant is the direct opposite of a bruised reed and a dimly burning wick- thus, he can be trusted for the mission he is sent to achieve, and is strong enough to bear it. The Prophet Muḥammad continues to be a good fit- in mere decades the Prophet Muḥammad was able to unite Arabia under the distinctly religious movement of Islam. Once more, mishpāṭ is what the servant shall establish on the earth, and the Qur'ān as the primary text of this nascent religious movement embodies the divinely revealed ethical laws which are implied in the term mishpāṭ here.

The coast-lands wait for the servant's tōrah (teaching). There is strong reason to believe that the servant in Isaiah 42 is being postured as Moses-like. McKenzie suggests this idea:

*"If the mission of the Servant in this poem is to be summed up in one word, the word would be prophecy. But the word is not used; and in fact the words "judgment" [mishpāṭ] and "law" [tōrah] are associated with priestly revelation rather than prophetic revelation. But it is never suggested that the Servant is a priest. It seems that we encounter the idea of covenant law, a tradition that went back to the pre-monarchic period of Israel. Just as Yahweh by the revelation of covenant law established the people of Israel and the Israelite way of life, so the Servant will make*

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<sup>53</sup> 'Ēmet is the contracted form of 'ēmenet (Brown-Driver-Briggs), from the semitic root ' -m-n, from which the arabic 'Imān arises.

<sup>54</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p220.



*Yahweh known beyond Israel. In the poem the Servant, it is suggested, is rather another Moses than another prophet<sup>55</sup>.*” (p. 38 Anchor Bible Commentary)

McKenzie’s passing references to covenant law bear the need of further elaboration. One of the climactic moments of the Pentateuch is Yahveh’s formation of the covenant to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. It is here that Yahveh finally brings about the covenantal promises to the patriarchs, and it is here where Moses is given a ‘priestly revelation’: tōrah (Exod 24:12) and mishpāt (Exod 21:1- Moses is told to set “ha-mishpāṭim” for Israel). Moses is the messenger through which the covenant between God and Israel is exacted:

*Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant (b’rīt), you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.*

Isaiah invokes a Mosaic figure in his oracle: The servant of Isaiah 42 is a *covenant* (Isa 42:6) to the people. This is why the interpretation that the servant is “moses-like”, as McKenzie suggests, finds good cause to be accepted. Goldingay and Payne disagree with this, on the basis that individuals are able to bring tōrah and mishpāt as well<sup>56</sup>, but the strength of McKenzie’s argument rests on the fact that the servant is a covenant to the people, just as Moses brought a covenant to Israel.

A close reading of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad finds many parallels with Moses, but in keeping with the theme of this essay we shall only glean similarities between the two personalities through the Qur’ān.

The Qur’ān consistently typesets the Prophet Muḥammad as another Moses. In the Qur’ān, Moses is given al-kitāb (eg. Q2:53, Q17:2, Q25:35): the appellation al-Taurāt is avoided in the context of what God “sent down” to Moses, even though one would expect that it applies to his revelation. God also sends down al-kitāb to the Prophet Muḥammad(Q18:1, Q7:196). Clearly, both revelations are subsumed under al-kitāb to draw parallels between the two prophets<sup>57</sup>. Moses prays to God for help and confidence so that he may deliver his message to Pharaoh<sup>58</sup>:

*Moses said, ‘Lord, lift up my heart and ease my task for me. Untie my tongue, so that they may understand my words, (Q20:25-28).*

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<sup>55</sup> The Muslim reader must keep in mind that McKenzie is speaking in biblical terminology. The Jewish prophets never brought their own laws, while Moses did: He is a biblical prophet in the sense that he received divine revelation, but he is not just a biblical prophet, because of the unprecedented legal nature of his revelation.

<sup>56</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. *Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary.* London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 222

<sup>57</sup> This insight was shared to me by my friend Sharif Randhawa.

<sup>58</sup> Robinson, Neal. *Discovering the Qur’an: A contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text.* 2nd Ed. London: SCM Press (2003). p. 158

This is similar to Sūra 94:1-5 which addresses the Prophet Muḥammad:

*Did We not relieve your heart for you, and remove the burden that weighed so heavily on your back, and raise your reputation high? So truly where there is hardship there is also ease;*

The Qur'ān orders the Prophet to recite clearly (Q75:16), a possible link to Moses's own prayer for a clear speech. The audience of the Qur'ān are asked whether they intend to question the calling of the Prophet as Moses was questioned before (2:108). Such parallels are countless: Brill's Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān provides a cogent summary:

*"The Qur'ān has its own point of view and its own interpretation of the older narrative material. The essential feature of the allusions to the past is a typological interpretation of the earlier narratives, by which the biography of Moses is seen in the light of the biography of Muḥammad. The Qur'ān reminds its audience of Moses' deeds and the events connected with him, associating these deeds and events with the circumstances in Muḥammad's life. There are two major themes that emerge in the story of Moses: God as creator and lord, and a typological pattern that draws parallels to Muḥammad. As in all of the qur'ānic stories of the prophets, emphasis is placed upon Moses' monotheism and his role as a divine messenger: he has to endure accusations of lying, as well as oppression and hostility at the hands of the unbelievers and evildoers to whom he is sent until he and his followers are rescued and his enemies destroyed by God. In the Qur'ānic purview, such details of the story of Moses prefigure Muḥammad's biography." Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān, entry for "Moses".*

Is this prefiguring of the Prophet in light of Moses justified when we read the biblical account? The answer is in the affirmative. The Prophet's own revelation, similar to Moses, and unlike any other biblical prophet, contains legal and ritual instruction, for example in Sūra an-Nisā and Sūra al-Baqara. This by itself is rather significant, as a prophet who brings law is not the norm in the history of biblical prophecy, the only such prophet to do this is Moses. A law-bearing prophet would be unusual indeed, and certainly one that is "Moses-like." Both prophets also deliver their message to tyrants who are stubborn and their "hearts are hardened"<sup>59</sup>, then subsequently escape oppression with their followers to another place (Q 16:41, Q59:8, compare to the Exodus narrative). They encounter military resistance- physical fighting is evidenced in several places in the Qur'ān, see for example Q:9 and Q4:9, and in the Exodus narrative, eg. Exod 17:11.

The most significant of these parallels is that both Moses and Muḥammad are covenant-bearers. The original covenant to the Israelites were a list of ordinances which they were to live by in order to have a relationship with God. Now, in Isaiah,

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<sup>59</sup> There is no singular verse in the Qur'ān that encapsulates this fact but a holistic reading shall reveal that the Prophet's opponents were guilty of cruelty to the believers. To mention a few examples- see Q85:1-10: Here stories of earlier believers going through persecution are mentioned because they are obviously relevant to the Prophet's contemporary situation. The Muslims are forced out of their homes (Q59:8), and that can rarely be because the Prophet's opponents are warm and welcoming individuals. "Hardness of the heart" is elsewhere a common idiom for stubbornness towards the Prophet's message (eg. Q2:74), cf. Exod 9:12.

the new prophet is literally a covenant to nations (Isa 42:6), which we could understand to mean that he is the path through which God establishes a special relationship with the people at large, just as Yahveh did with the Israelites through Moses's ordinances. This is essentially the very message of the Qur'ān – all the people (Q7:158), not just the Israelites, are ordered to follow the Prophet to maintain this relationship with God – Q3:31- Say, 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins; God is most forgiving, most merciful,' just as Yahveh declares in Exod 20:6 that He shows "steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love [him] and keep [his] commandments." The Qur'ān, as the Prophet Muḥammad's message, is the guidance through which people live by God's laws and therefore grow close to Him.

## **VERSE 5**

**Thus says God, the Lord,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:**

The first servant song of Isaiah has concluded, and the prophet pauses here to tell us that it is Yahveh Himself who has declared it. Goldingay and Payne call this the "messenger formula" - that is, the Isaian prophet has received the song from Yahveh and is simply repeating it<sup>60</sup>. Yahveh's creative power is praised, for His creation of the "heavens and the earth"<sup>61</sup> and of people. The "spirit" that Yahveh gives to the inhabitants of the world is not in the sense of prophecy<sup>62</sup> but instead seems to be in the generic sense of the breath of life<sup>63</sup>, given the object of this "spirit" is unqualified and parallels the previous line, "who gives breath to the people upon it."

## **VERSE 6**

**a I am Yahveh, I have called you in righteousness,  
b I have taken you by the hand and kept you;**

Yahveh now turns back to the servant in address to him. The description of the servant continues after an interim in praise of Yahveh. He declares that He has "called" the servant "in righteousness" - b'sedeq. The International Critical Commentary notes that term exhibits a range of meanings, among these are 'truth', 'power,' and even 'grace,'<sup>64</sup> but that hardly clarifies the meaning. It will be useful to compare to Isaiah 41:10, where the same word is used and closely paralleled here:

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<sup>60</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p.223

<sup>61</sup> ḥa-shmāyim wa ḥā'areẓ- A common duality in the bible, see Gen 1:1, Deut 32:1, Psa 116:3, also in the Qur'ān formulated as as-samāwāt wal-'arḍ (Q57:4, Q2:255)

<sup>62</sup> McKenzie, John. Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes. The Anchor Bible Commentaries. New York: Doubleday, 1973. p.40

<sup>63</sup> Rūḥ is used this way in the bible, see for example Gen 6:17.

<sup>64</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 226

**Isaiah 41:10**

I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my right hand of  
my ṣīdīq.

**Isaiah 42:6**

I am the Lord, I have called you in  
*ṣedeq*,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept  
you;

The context of Isaiah 41 is as a comfort to a very anxious Israel in exile, and a promise of deliverance through Cyrus the Persian king. It would make a lot of sense if “ṣīdīq” in Isaiah 41:10 is used in the sense that the promise of deliverance shall truly happen: Yahveh has vouched for His promises, saying that the “right hand” of his ṣīdīq – truthfulness<sup>65</sup>.

Thus, if the meaning is imported to Isaiah 42:6, Yahveh has truly called the servant: It will certainly happen, and Yahveh has furthermore promised that the servant will surely persevere: “I have taken you by the hand and kept you.”

If the servant is Prophet Muḥammad, there are still no interpretive issues present that could be an obstacle to that identification. Yahveh shall safeguard his servant here, holding him by the hand and ‘keeping him.’ The Prophet Muḥammad is promised exactly that in Q5:67 -“God will protect you from people,” a promise that was fulfilled, and its realization is recorded in one of the last Sūras to be revealed: al-Faḥ-

*1 When God’s help comes and He opens up a your way [Prophet], 2 when you see people embracing God’s faith in crowds, 3 celebrate the praise of your Lord and ask His forgiveness: He is always ready to accept repentance.*

It is possible that this could be an early Sūra and is in fact a promise of the Prophet Muḥammad’s victory, but that would not explain why God would ask for the Prophet to wait until victory actually comes to him to “ask His forgiveness” and “celebrate the praise” of God. Even if it is a promise, then it is in the same vein of Isa 42:6 “I have taken you by the hand and have kept you.”

Extra-Qur’ānic sources for the eventual success of the Prophetic mission are readily available, and the spread of Islam is well attested in the 7<sup>th</sup> century both in Muslim oral tradition (later recorded in maghazī literature) and non-Muslim documentary sources<sup>66</sup>.

**c I have given you as a covenant (b’rīt) to the people,  
d a light to the nations,**

As we had seen earlier, the servant of Yahveh is the means through which “all the people” - ‘ām- will be able to have a special relationship with Yahveh. The significance of this has already been discussed; the Isaian prophet is appealing to memories of Moses in description of this coming servant. The basic function of the

<sup>65</sup> The exact meaning is mostly inconsequential for the purposes of this essay, as all possibly expressed meanings would not take away from the identification of Prophet Muḥammad here in any way. Nonetheless, thoroughness cannot hurt.

<sup>66</sup> See Hoyland’s “Seeing Islam as Others Saw it.”

biblical covenant to the Israelites is that they were to fulfil Yahveh's commandments and would receive favor in return. A covenant must be kept by both parties. If the servant is sent to teach "mishpāt and tōrah", as foretold by Isaiah 42, a natural conclusion would be that the nations must take to these teachings and obey them to keep their part of the covenant (b'rīt), just as the Israelites had to obey the mishpāt (21:1) and tōrah (Exod 24:12) of Yahveh in keeping with their covenant (b'rīt) as exemplified in Exod 19:5. This, too is the message of the Qur'ān: "Q3:31- Say, 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins; God is most forgiving, most merciful.'"

Thus, Yahveh gives the servant as "a light to the nations," but they must choose to follow this light to receive the benefit of its relationship. This "light" used here is indeed a light of guidance, this is obvious once more in the context of a servant that teaches. Goldingay and Payne write that "a light of nations suggests both blessings and guidance for them."

Such is also the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad:

*Q5:15 People of the Book, Our Messenger has come to make clear to you much of what you have kept hidden of the Scripture, and to overlook much [you have done]. A light has now come to you from God, and a Scripture making things clear, 16 with which God guides to the ways of peace those who follow what pleases Him, bringing them from darkness out into light, by His will, and guiding them to a straight path.*

Puzzlingly, Goldingay and Payne write that "the addressee of the prophecy does not need to become some sort of missionary." We have seen previously that the language in Isaiah 42 describes one of a prophetic vocation. A biblical prophet has always delivered warning and oracles to the Israelites, whether they are willing to obey or not. This is the definition of a missionary. That is how this servant shall be to the people at large. Furthermore, Yahveh enacts a b'rīt through the servant to all the nations. They are thus required to follow him or suffer the consequences of a damaged relationship with Yahveh. There is no question of choice in this matter: Surely, people may turn away, but this shall lead to punishment by Yahveh, as was the case in the original covenant. It is not as if all people will actively come to him to learn- indeed, some shall reject his message (Isa 42:17). Coupled with ideas of "teaching" in this chapter, there is strong reason to believe that the servant shall be a preacher that announces this new covenant.

## **VERSE 7**

**a to open the eyes that are blind,  
b to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
c from the prison those who sit in darkness.**

Later in the chapter Israel is described as imprisoned (Isa 42:22) and blind (Isa 42:18). This cannot be taken to mean that here that the servant is actually a savior to Israel, simply because the author's community was a people in exile. Goldingay and

Payne<sup>67</sup> write that “Verses 6-7 hardly address an Israelite servant ministering to an Israelite people,” this is because even the gentiles are said to be in darkness in Isa 47:5 as well. The context also makes clear that vocation of the servant is a guide to not just the Israelites (Isa 42:6), and that he shall interact with the idol worshipers (Isa 42:17).

If the imprisonment is therefore not literal (ie. Israel in exile), then it must be metaphorical. This incarceration is a spiritual one, for if the servant is a “light” of guidance to the nations then the “darkness” of imprisonment shall logically be a removal from Yahveh’s ordinances and guiding teachings. McKenzie writes that “the blindness and captivity, in view of the general context, must be taken as figurative rather than literal; it is the blindness and captivity of ignorance of Yahveh and service to false gods.”<sup>68</sup>

Such metaphors of darkness and blindness are found in the Qur’ān too:

*Q14:1 This is a Scripture which We have sent down to you [Prophet] so that, with their Lord’s permission, you may bring people from the depths of darkness into light, to the path of the Almighty, the Praiseworthy One,*

*Q18:100 We shall show Hell to the disbelievers, 101 those whose eyes were blind to My signs, those who were unable to hear.*

Even the idea of imprisonment is present in the Qur’ān, but is far scarcer: it is found in 36:7-8 and Q7:157, although this last reference is probably due to a deliberate allusion to Isaiah 42.

## **VERSES 8-9**

**I am the Lord, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.**

**See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.**

It is now we see something new in the oracle. Yahveh has declared His singularity, denigrating idolatry. In light of the previous oracle there is good reason to believe that the instructions of the servant is a declaration of this oneness: McKenzie noted previously that the darkness that the people shall be led out of must be the misguidance of idolatry. Yahveh has “called” his servant... to lead people out of

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<sup>67</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 230 ICC

<sup>68</sup> McKenzie, John. Second Isaiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes. The Anchor Bible Commentaries. New York: Doubleday, 1973. p40

darknesses... and does not give His praise to idols: The servant is the agent through which this shall be actualized.

Monotheism is the central message of the Qur'ān, the term *lā 'ilāha illa hū* is one of the most oft-repeated formulations in it and the very core of its message. Idolaters were present and a significant portion of the Qur'ān's immediate audience, as evidenced by the constant polemic against polytheistic belief and worship throughout the text.

Verse 9 is an affirmation of the prophesying intent of the author. There are multiple such declarations present in second Isaiah, usually when a prophecy is made, stressing that Yahveh is the one who has said these things, and he shall prove his potency through bringing them about. For example, in the prediction of Cyrus's freeing of Israel from their exile and the destruction of Babylon, Yahveh in affirmation of His promise in Isa 43:19 says, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" This prediction actually did come true- Blenkinsopp writes that the author "is affirming that Cyrus has a historic mission to conquer Babylon (stated more directly in 45:1-3 and 48:14)," and that this act is "truly historic," and that "earlier victories of Cyrus" were "successfully predicted by the author."<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Yahveh definitely intends to bring about his promises in Isaiah 42.

## **VERSES 10-12**

**10 Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands and their inhabitants.  
11 Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,  
the villages that Kedar inhabits;  
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,  
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.  
12 Let them give glory to the Lord,  
and declare his praise in the coastlands.**

A new section begins. In the immediate context of the prophecy this can only be understood to be praise to Yahveh for the prophecy he is to bring about. It is the nations as a whole, not just the Israelites, who are the sing in praise of Yahveh: This is indicated by the fact that the objects of the exhortations of praise are "the coastlands and their inhabitants," "the desert and its towns," and the "villages of Kedar." These are not descriptions of Israel, especially when gentile people – the Kedarites – are mentioned. These peoples are to "sing to the Lord a new song," suggesting "different, unexpected, wonderful"<sup>70</sup>.

Verse 11 is perhaps the most significant part of the oracle when discussing Prophet Muhammad in the bible, primarily because of the mention of the Arabs. Both Mushafiq Sultan and Abu Zakariya have discussed this aptly, but as we had

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<sup>69</sup> Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *The Anchor Bible: Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Vol 19A. New York: Doubleday ( 2000). p. 227.

<sup>70</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. *Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary*. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 236

previously shown that the servant was originally supposed to be Israel, it may be useful to discuss why the Arabs are mentioned here as recipients to the teachings of Israel.

The bible traces the genealogy of the Arabs back to Ishmael in Genesis, listing his descendants in Genesis 25:12-18, among whom Kedar is mentioned. The term "Ishmaelite" is attested in Assyrian sources around the 8th-6th century BC, all referring to groups in Arabia<sup>71</sup>, and more specifically even Kedar is found in these texts as a dominant tribe among them around the 7th century<sup>72</sup>. In the 6th century BC, when Second Isaiah was written, such was their political sphere:

*"The Qedarites remained in power between the Euphrates and the Gulf of Aqaba well into the 5th century B.C. In 599/598 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar campaigned against them in the Syrian desert. In the middle of the 5th century, a shaykh of Qedar, Gušam bin Sahr (the biblical Geshem) ruled over S Palestine, the Sinai to the borders of Egypt, Transjordan and NW Arabia, all areas under Persian control."*<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps if Israel is the original servant of the song, then the author would be implying that Israel was expected to guide these Kedarites after being freed, who were at this point immediate neighbors to Palestine where Israel would have been expected to return to after the exile. This did not happen<sup>74</sup>.

Kedar is also, however, a generic term for the people of Arabia in Isaiah 21:13-17<sup>75</sup>, where it is associated with the ancient town "taymā" (Arabic تيماء), approximately where the modern city now stands<sup>76</sup>. The site is roughly 350km from Yathrib, the city of the Prophet Muḥammad (also named Medina). The Kedarites would have been active in this whole region.

The next line, in continuation with the declarations of praise, say that "let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains." Traditionally the place "Sela" has been identified as the Nabataean city of Petra in Jordan. This identification cannot be correct, as there is no evidence of any inhabitants there until the 4th century BC<sup>77</sup> while the second Isaiah was written in the 6th century BC. Ehud Ben Zvi notes that "The traditional identification of Sela with Petra has been generally abandoned<sup>78</sup>."

Without any further specification we cannot be certain which Sela Isaiah is speaking of. Exegetes simply assume an Edomite Sela, due to its mention elsewhere in the bible. However, there is also a Sela in Judah (Judges 1:36) and Moab (Isaiah 16:1). The Sela here could be Edomite, or any of these other places, and it could even be

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<sup>71</sup> See "Ishmaelite" In Anchor Bible Dictionary for discussion.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> See "prophetic re-election" discussion earlier.

<sup>75</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 238

<sup>76</sup> See <http://saudi-archaeology.com/sites/tayma/> "The modern town is built on top of about one-third of the ancient settlement of Tayma, which has an estimated area of some 950 hectares.

<sup>77</sup> New Pauly entry for "Petra".

<sup>78</sup> A historical-critical study of the book of Obadiah, p. 60



Kedarite. Sela' as a place-name in the Near East is not uncommon<sup>79</sup>. Given these things, one would expect that the prophet specify which Sela' he is speaking of. This could be why there is a mention of Kedar. This Sela' is an Arabian one.

The prophecy continues to fit the Prophet Muḥammad, and in this case precisely so. Sela' is a mountain in Medina. Abu Zakariya writes:

“Whilst it’s true that Saudi Arabia represents a wide geographic region, the use of the word ‘Sela’ pinpoints an exact location. The place being spoken of is actually the city of Madinah because ‘Sela’ is the name of a famous mountain in Madinah. Madinah was the city of Prophet Muḥammad. The following ḥadīth narrations are a few examples that mention this mountain:

...while I was sitting in the condition which Allah described (in the Quran) i.e. my very soul seemed straitened to me and even the earth seemed narrow to me for all its spaciousness, there I heard the voice of one who had ascended the mountain of Sala' calling with his loudest voice, ‘O Ka'b bin Malik! Be happy (by receiving good tidings).’ I fell down in prostration before Allah, realizing that relief has come...<sup>80</sup>

...by Allah, we did not see any cloud or any patch of it, and there was neither any house or building standing between us and Sala'...<sup>81</sup>”

The famous Arab geographer and historian Al-Hamdani, who lived 150 years after Prophet Muḥammad, mentioned in his book “Geography of Arabian Peninsula” that the mountain Sela was part of Madinah city.”

One possible objection is that Medina and its vicinity is simply outside the biblical geography: The audience of 2nd Isaiah would not have been thinking of it when this Sela' is mentioned. This is factually incorrect: we already mentioned that the biblical authors were aware of Taymā' which was very close to Medina. Furthermore, as the audience were the Israelites in Babylonian exile, and the author was prophesying about the military defeat of Babylon, it is not unexpected that his audience would be seeking news on the battles of the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (ruling 556-539BC). This same king invaded Medina around the time the prophet Isaiah was writing- news of his conquest of “Yathrib” would have reached him- the conquest of Yathrib is mentioned in a cuneiform inscription from Haran<sup>82</sup>- this same inscription notes that Nabonidus stayed in the vicinity for ten years. The audience of Isaiah, from listening to the prophecy of Cyrus’s victory over Babylon, may have been anxiously waiting for Nabonidus’s defeat, and thus it is certainly likely that they sought information on his campaign in the Yathrib region where he spent a whole

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<sup>79</sup> Rex Maxon writes that “there must have existed in the Early Iron Age in Eastern Palestine numerous sites built on more or less isolated prominences and known by the name Sela'. We add that this is a common name even outside Palestine evidenced by the existence of the Medinan sela', spelt sin-lam-'ayn, exactly as the biblical one is.

<sup>80</sup> This is referring to Bukhari Kitab al-Maghazi (Book of Expeditions led by the Prophet) Chapter 80, ḥadīth 702.

<sup>81</sup> The reference is Muslim, Book 4, Chapter 169 (Supplication in prayer for rain), ḥadīth 1955.

<sup>82</sup> See “The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus”, p59 of Anatolian Studies, Vol 8. 1958.

decade in – it is certainly plausible that the Israelite audience of second Isaiah were aware of the Yathribite Sela’.

Verse 13 further continues the exhortation to praise Yahveh, the peoples previously spoken of are ordered to praise Him, and now the coast-lands too are invited, following the general theme of the servant as a light to all the nations. They are told to give glory (“kavōd”) and to declare his praise (“tehillāt”), like the Qur’ānic phrases *subhān* and *ḥamd* respectively.

## VERSE 13

**The Lord goes forth like a soldier  
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;  
he cries out, he shouts aloud,  
he shows himself mighty against his foes.**

The image of a warrior-deity is invoked here in Verse 13- Yahveh “goes forth like a soldier.” Isaiah 42 “does not turn its back on the theme of Yhwh’s involvement in war<sup>83</sup>”, the theme invoked here is clearly of battles: Yahveh is “a soldier, a man of war”- *ka-gibbōr, k-’īsh milḥāmōt*. A very natural reading of this in its literary context is that there shall be war involved in the bringing about of this prophecy. It seems the phrase is a literal one, as in chapter 3:2, where the “warrior and man of war- *gibbōr wa-’īsh milḥāmōt*” are among the list of peoples who shall be withdrawn from the country of Israel. Yahveh is also named *gibbōr* in Exodus 15, in praise for his literal destruction of the army of Pharaoh.

The Prophet Muḥammad was involved in several battles in his lifetime, a historical fact attested to several times in the Qur’ān<sup>84</sup>, and his victories are credited to God in the Qur’ān, in confirmation of the image of Yahveh the warrior of Isaiah 42:

*Q8:17 It was not you who killed them but God, and when you threw it was not your throw [that defeated them] but God’s, to do the believers a favour: God is all seeing and all knowing–*

War was certainly a reality in the Prophet Muḥammad’s mission, and ultimately necessary due to the violent resistance put up by the Prophet’s opposition. Q2:217 is one verse that alludes to this:

*Q:217 They ask you [Prophet] about fighting in the prohibited month. Say, ‘Fighting in that month is a great offence, but to bar others from God’s path, to disbelieve in Him, prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and expel its people, are still greater offences in God’s eyes: persecution is worse than killing.’ They will not stop fighting you [believers] until they make you revoke your faith, if they can...*

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<sup>83</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p.242

<sup>84</sup> Some references discussed earlier.

The domination of Yahveh over his enemies is predicted- "he shows himself mighty against his foes." The military success of the Prophet Muhammad actualized this prediction.

#### **VERSE 14-15**

**14 For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor,  
I will gasp and pant.**

**15 I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their herbage;  
I will turn the rivers into islands,  
and dry up the pools.**

This metaphorical self-description of Yahveh proclaims that He is soon to act in history, now the metaphor transfer from warrior to a "woman in labor". It seems this simile is confined only to the second half of v.14, the first half of v. 14 is a continuation of the warrior theme in v.13. As for v.15, "the imagery is traditional and in itself points to no specific temporal or political context." Not too much shall be read into this for now, although perhaps the "turning of rivers into islands" (lit. "into shores") could be a passing reference to the end of the exile of the Israelites and their return to Judah<sup>85</sup> but cannot be anything more than a passing reference- in the context, it is shown that the prophecy is a universal salvation, not just an Israelite one. The theme of universality returns in the following verses.

#### **VERSE 16**

**a I will lead the blind  
b by a road they do not know,  
c by paths they have not known  
d I will guide them.  
e I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
f the rough places into level ground.  
g These are the things I will do,  
h and I will not forsake them.**

Yahveh is to "lead the blind" by "paths they have not known." Who are these unnamed blind people? Of course, the context of the earlier verses shows that they are not just Israelites but include the gentiles. The proclamation insists that the recipients are previously unaware of the paths by which they are to be guided, and this makes sense: Earlier we saw that the mission is to the gentiles, and to the Israelites this is unprecedented- idolatry is all around them, and Israel has traditionally been Yahveh's chosen nation.

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<sup>85</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 246-247

This theme is also found in the Qur'ān- the book mentions the novelty of prophesy to Arabs contemporary to the Prophet Muḥammad:

*Q32:2 Yet they say, 'He has made it up.' No indeed! It is the Truth from your Lord for you [Prophet], to warn a people who have had no one to warn them before, so that they may be guided.*

This mission is not only for the Arabs, but include the whole of humanity (Q74:36, Q7:158, Q6:19).

The “light” in 16e must be the result of the teachings of the servant, that is, awareness of Yahveh as the one God and the instructions present in the tōrah and mishpāṭ that the servant brings with him: Therefore, darkness must be the lack of these things. Such a duality is present in the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, too. Q2:257 exemplifies the metaphor of the light of revelation as opposed to the darkness of idolatry: “God is the ally of those who believe: He brings them out of the depths of darkness and into the light. As for the disbelievers, their allies are false gods who take them from the light into the depths of darkness, they are the inhabitants of the Fire, and there they will remain.”

The Qur'ān guides “to the straight path”, *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, an oft-present metaphor in the Qur'ān for the way to righteousness, as in Isaiah 42, “by paths they have not known... I shall guide them.” Yahveh turns the “rough places” into level ground so that they may take the path to the light.

Finally, Yahveh once more insists that He shall not forsake them. He will certainly bring about His promise, and will not leave the gentile nations without any guidance<sup>86</sup>.

## **VERSE 17**

**17 They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—  
those who trust in carved images,  
who say to cast images,  
“You are our gods.”**

Structurally, there is strong reason to believe that verse 17 is the final verse of the literary unit of the section beginning at v.10<sup>87</sup>, and provides even more clarity on the office of the coming servant. Earlier we saw that the oracle paints the reaction to the servant as overwhelmingly positive - “the coastlands wait for his teaching”. Now, however, Second Isaiah also paints a picture of abject humiliation and “turn[ing] back”- the verb here typically used for an army breaking morale and taking flight. It is the idolaters, who presumably resist the message of the servant, that are “utterly put to shame.” From here we understand that the reaction to the message of the servant is therefore not completely positive- why would the gentiles that follow the servant

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<sup>86</sup> This reinforces my point about “re-election” of the prophetic role. If Israel is not capable of guiding the gentiles, then Yahveh will still keep His promise.

<sup>87</sup> Goldingay, John and Payne, David. *Isaiah 40-55: Volume I. The International Critical Commentary*. London: T&T Clark International, 2006. p. 249

and his “light” be humiliated? Why is there a picture of a warrior-God also present in the oracle? Just as Moses was met with both obedience (by the righteous Israelites) and rejection (by Pharaoh), so too shall the servant find ambivalent reception. Those who “trust in carved images” will find no fruitful recourse to their gods but are humiliated by Yahveh.

The Prophet Muḥammad’s prophetic career exemplifies this. Many had accepted his message, but some did not. The Qur’ān records the tensions between him and his opponents, at first starting at mockery in response to the message:

*Q74:10 They will have no ease. 11 [Prophet], leave Me to deal with the one I created helpless, 12 then gave vast wealth, 13 and sons by his side, 14 making everything easy for him—15 yet he still hopes I will give him more. 16 No! He has been stubbornly hostile to Our revelation: 17 I will inflict a spiralling torment on him. 18 He planned and plotted—19 devilishly he plotted! 20 ferociously he plotted!—21 and looked 22 and frowned and scowled 23 and turned away and behaved arrogantly 24 and said, ‘This is just old sorcery, 25 just the talk of a mortal!’*

This escalated to even oppression of the Muslims, and then fighting in retaliation, but eventually the idol-worshipping people that the Prophet Muḥammad belonged to either converted to Islam, or were defeated, just as some of the idol-worshipping gentiles followed the “light to the nations,” and others were “turned back” and “put to shame.” The oracle terminates at v.17 and the following verses, v.18-25, are a lamentation on the poor state of Israel.

## **CONCLUSION**

The mission of the Prophet Muḥammad, as we have seen, fulfills the promises of Isaiah 42 very closely. He is the means through which the non-Israelite gentiles gain guidance, starting with the Arabs – the Kedarites of Sela<sup>6</sup>, and he comes with instruction on ethical justice and law – mishpāṭ and tōrah. He is a covenant to the people, a means through which the gentiles may have a relationship with Yahveh. This Moses-like figure, certainly a description of the Prophet Muḥammad, is both one that defends the rights of the disenfranchised, and relies wholly on God, as he is commanded to in the Qur’ān. The people receive his teaching well – the whole of the near east submitted to this new way of life by his death – but not without some military campaigning: Yahveh promised that He would “go forth like a warrior.” “Those who entrust in idols” and turn away from the light of his teaching, are “utterly put to shame.” All these promises were actualized through the Prophet Muḥammad: The Qur’ān itself references Isaiah 42 in support of Prophet Muḥammad, and is justified in doing so. There is no other figure in history that could possibly claim to be the servant of Yahveh in Isaiah 42, other than the Arab prophet of Yathrib. It is thus no wonder that the Qur’ān appeals to Isaiah 42.

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