Old Greek Isaiah 53: A Paraenetic Message Regarding a Collective Servant?

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The paper suggests that the Old Greek (OG) translator of Isaiah interprets the servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (Isaiah 53) collectively, and Isaiah 53 paraenetically, addressing his audience of diaspora Jews in Egypt.

This suggestion is based on two main observations. First, in Isaiah 53, the two occurrences of עַבְדִּי are translated by παῖς μου and δουλεύων. עֶבֶד occurs 40 times in the Masoretic tradition (MT) of Isaiah. The translator uses seven different words to translate it. The paper first studies these translations in the other chapters of Isaiah. The study shows that the translator clearly distinguishes the words he uses, and deliberately chooses his translations according to context. In Isaiah 42–52, the translator in addition consistently employs singular/plural and personal pronouns (none, μου, (ἑ)αὐτοῦ), often against MT, in order to differentiate the designated individuals or groups and to convey a specific interpretation. Consequently, the paper suggests that the two different translations in Isaiah 53 are relevant. They are chosen deliberately, in line with their use elsewhere in OG Isaiah, in order to convey a specific interpretation.

Second, compared with MT, OG creates and strengthens textual links between Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 1 and 6. Based on these, the translator interprets the sickness of God's servant in Isaiah 53 as the collective's sinfulness. Consequently, God punishes the servant by exile, but promises his blessings if the servant ceases to sin. This is followed up by an exhortation to the audience to offer sacrifices and to serve well as foreign slaves, for which in return God's blessings are promised.

The paper then suggests that this interpretation of Isaiah 53 is motivated by the historical context, the Jewish community's need for self-preservation in the Hellenistic diaspora. The servant is presented as a token of identification for the community, followed by an exhortation to identify with the community through the traditional ritual of sacrifice, and to preserve the community by retaining the Egyptian's favour through servicing them well.