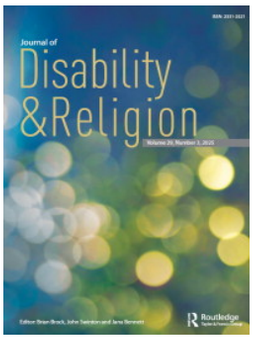

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Understanding Human Disability Through the Servant of Yahweh

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ABSTRACT

The Fourth Song of the "Servant of Yahweh" from the Book of the prophet Isaiah (Is 52:13–53:12) shed light that enlightens those who suffer from disability. The Servant of Yahweh serves as a prefiguration of those who endure innocent suffering, particularly those with disabilities. Through their suffering, God communicates a message, revealing them as bearers of a sign of God's presence and even of salvation for those who know how to welcome them. In this sense, inclusion becomes an opportunity to receive a divine gift. The poem of the Servant reveals a vulnerable God and offers light on the question of human disability through three points: 1) the silence of God, 2) disability and divine vulnerability, and 3) disability as an opportunity for victory over evil. This article recovers a theological reflection that is current and necessary to understand the mystery of the suffering particularly the suffering of the innocent, specifically, those with disabilities.

KEYWORDS

disability; inclusion; Isaiah; Servant of Yahweh; theology

Introduction

The Fourth Song of the "Servant of Yahweh" in the book of the prophet Isaiah (Is 52:13–53:12) offers a spirituality that illuminates the experience of human vulnerability, particularly in the context of disability. For Judaism, the prophet Isaiah - and especially the song of the Suffering Servant - serves as a key point of reference in its enduring experiences of exile and suffering (Hanson, 2009). This passage portrays a merciful God who imbues human pain with meaning (Feldmann, 2003). This spirituality is a profound revelation for all people (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001), with special significance for those who are disabled.

The Hebrew Bible contains multiple references to disability and there has been no shortage of studies highlighting this (Jones, 2021), including studies on disability within the texts of the Servant of Yahweh (Schipper, 2011). Viewed through the lens of the Servant of Yahweh, vulnerability and disability are presented not only as compatible with holiness, but also

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as conditions and pathways toward to it (Chai, 2008; Cooreman-Guittin, 2018; Corona & López, 2021; López González, 2023). A vulnerable person –who suffers from a disability– is inherently open to both harm and grace, embodying the potential for both suffering and transformative benefit (Gilson, 2011).

The sources utilized in this research encompass writings from various religious traditions, both ancient and contemporary. The Fourth Song of the Servant of Yahweh, attributed to Deutero-Isaiah, is a text from the Hebrew Bible, and as such, we have placed particular emphasis on biblical hermeneutics from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The hermeneutic of the text has been abundant throughout history; the study of its composition, wording and interpretation continues to offer numerous contributions today (Bellinger & Farmer, 2009; Hays, 2011; Varo, 2018). This paper is not intended to be a strict biblical exegesis to solve exegetical doubts, but a theoretical essay to shed light on the meaning of disability and vulnerability.

First, a preliminary explanation of the text of the Fourth Song of the Servant of Yahweh is offered. Secondly and thirdly, two interpretations of the text are offered: the Servant of Yahweh as a figure of the innocent righteous and as a figure of the Messiah who atones and saves. Fourth, the song is examined in relation to the question of human disability through three key themes: 1) the silence of God, 2) disability and divine vulnerability, and 3) disability as an opportunity for victory over evil. In light of the above, human dignity and the social inclusion of people with disabilities are illuminated. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and a list of references used.

Isaiah's Fourth Song of the "Servant of Yahweh"

The Book of Isaiah contains four passages of significant literary and thematic value, commonly referred to as the "Servant Songs" (42:1–7; 49:1–9a; 50:4–9a; 52:13–53:12). Exegesis indicates that, while these songs are dispersed throughout the text, they exhibit a certain thematic and stylistic unity (Varo, 1993). It is widely believed that these songs emerged from an oral tradition, possibly dating back to the post-exilic period, though their roots may extend even earlier (North, 1948). The Servant (*ebed* in Hebrew) is chosen by Yahweh; he is the object of his pleasure, his disciple and witness of his will, before his own people and before the nations, so that they may know him and believe in him (Barriocanal Gómez, 2008).

The songs portray a servant who is tasked with a challenging mission from God, encounters hostility while fulfilling it, acts justly, and ultimately suffers an ignominious death that paradoxically benefits those who

condemn him. God confirms His good pleasure in the servant's sacrifice and the resulting fruitfulness (Marconcini, 1999; North, 1948; Rowley, 1952).

In the First Song (Isaiah 42–48), the servant announces grace. The Second Song (Isaiah 49) presents the servant in the first person as a new Jeremiah. In the Third Song (Isaiah 50–51), he is revealed as a figure who suffers. In the Fourth Song, the focus of this study (Isaiah 52:13–53:12), the servant experiences ultimate humiliation despite his innocence, all the while anticipating future exaltation as a reward for his sacrifice (Rossano, Ravasi, & Girlanda, 1990).

The Fourth Song poses philological challenges and is sometimes considered an originally independent text that was later incorporated into the Book. On the other hand, because of the poetic language and the vivid imagery employed, the interpretation of its scenes remains fluid (Barriocanal Gómez, 2008; North, 1948). The text is composed in a biblical literary genre known as rîb or forensic debate between God and the nations. The motif of the rîb is the unfair death of the servant at the hands of the nations and which, paradoxically, will serve as a sacrifice for the sprinkling of sins (Marconcini, 1999).

To understand this text, it is important to consider the historical context in which it was written, around 500 BC, after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem and during the Babylonian domination. Following their exile in Babylon, the Hebrews underwent a transformative experience that led them to recognize that their strength lay in total fidelity to the Law of God. The Servant of Yahweh is an answer to the question of the meaning of the historical vicissitudes suffered by the people of Israel; unlike the answer given by Ezekiel, it offers a different understanding of the problem and the way forward (Hanson, 2009). The post-exilic sacred authors emphasize that God desires a pious, humble, just, and God-fearing people. This "remnant" of Israel, loyal to God, is often referred to as the *anawin*, or "poor of Yahweh". Their poverty is not defined by a lack of material wealth, but by their complete reliance on God.

The text of Isaiah, as previously noted, emphasizes the figure of one who suffers and offers his life in atonement and solidarity with others. The structure of the passage is tripartite. In the first part or prologue (52:13–15) and the third part or epilogue (53:11c–12), a narrator, speaking on behalf of Yahweh, reflects on the innocence of the Servant and the positive consequences of their suffering. The central section or "the body" (53:1–11a) serves as a funeral eulogy delivered by the assembly, which employs the first-person plural to recount the events, recognizing that the death of the servant -initially perceived as deserving punishment - becomes a source of salvation The Servant assumes the role of a wisdom figure; the teaching he transmits is not through words but through what God

does through him. (Barré, 2000). A notable aspect of the servant's suffering, in contrast to the psalms, is that it is not narrated by the one who suffers, but by those who inflicted the suffering, serving as late witnesses to his innocence and the redemptive value attributed to that suffering (Marconcini, 1999).

This servant reminds us of Job for his humility and patience, and of Jeremiah for his innocence and the way the hatred of men fell upon him, like a lamb led to the slaughter (cf. Jer 11:11; Lam 1:12, 21). He also evokes the psalms and the reflections in the wisdom books on the violent death of the righteous (cf. Ps 44; Wis 2:20), as well as the books of Maccabees, where the persecution and death of the righteous are interpreted as atonement for the sins of the people (cf. 2 Mac 7:18. 37) (Schelkle, 1977).

But there is something more - a mysterious and loving plan of God, who gazes tenderly upon the humiliation of the Servant, embodying a unique gentleness and solidarity with those who suffer. In contrast to the righteous figures in the Psalms, who sought to distinguish themselves from the wicked, this Servant bore the sins of "all of us," assuming the role of a scapegoat (cf. Lev 16:22). Furthermore, surpassing, figures such as Moses, Samuel, or Jeremiah, he prayed not only for the children of Israel but for all humanity, becoming a source of blessing. His suffering, or sacrifice (*assam*), proved effective and gave rise to what would later be termed "vicarious satisfaction" (Marconcini, 1999). The concept comes not so much from the cultic as from the legal sphere and represents a certain novelty with respect to the traditional mission of the prophet. The vicarious satisfaction is not sadism on the part of God but a manifestation of love, in communion with his Servant, whose intention is to eliminate the guilt of the transgressors (Janowski & Stuhlmacher, 2004).

The identity of this Servant is complex, particularly because the figure evolves throughout the different sections of the Book of Isaiah and within the songs themselves. This has been a controversial and contentious issue in biblical exegesis, especially between Christian and Jewish interpretations, but even among Hebrew exegetes and commentators (Bellinger & Farmer, 2009; North, 1948; Varo, 1993). In Isaiah 41:8, Israel is referred to as the servant -invited to repentance and called to bear witness to God's salvation among the nations (cf. Is 43:8–13). Within this community of servants, a small remnant is designated as the quintessential Servant of Yahweh, entrusted with restoring the unity of the tribes (cf. Is 49:3.6). Historical figures in Israel's narrative - such as Moses, Jeremiah, Job, and Zerubbabel - can be associated with this Servant, though they are not necessarily imbued with messianic significance. The intentional ambiguity of the text suggests that the author aims to highlight characteristics of the future

Messiah (García Cordero, 1961). This ambiguity appears deliberate, perhaps to prevent the identification of this Servant with a specific character, leaving the interpretation open for broader reflection (Spieckermann, 2004).

Notably, there is considerable overlap between the traits of the Suffering Servant and those of the Messiah depicted in Isaiah chapter 11; it is likely that the author had this image in mind while composing the song. Specifically, the Servant in this passage appears assume a priestly role, representing both the people and God. Thus, it is conceivable that this Fourth Song refers to a unique, messianic figure who would offer his life as atonement (cf. Is 53:10), a figure that, in Christian interpretation, is identified as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ. It is plausible that Jesus himself applied this passage form Isaiah to understand his own identity and mission as Servant of Yahweh (North, 1948). The early Christian community soon assumed this messianic interpretation. This interpretation does not do violence to the biblical text, although they are not Christ's prophecies (Hermison, 2004). In any case, the disputes between Judaism and Christianity over the identity and meaning of the Servant have resulted in a process of cross-fertilization of ideas. Through this process, an idea gleaned from the rival tradition has served to illuminate one's own tradition (Rembaum, 1982).

The Servant of Yahweh as a Figure of the Righteous According to Zohar

The uniqueness of this Fourth Song is that, for the first time in history, what embodies weakness and even defeat is revealed as authentic strength and victory. The Servant of Yahweh, as the archetype of the righteous (*tzaddik*), illuminates the vulnerability and suffering of the innocent. His experience encompasses the extreme injustice he must endure, his silence before his executioners, the blessings his sacrifice brings to his generation, and the final exaltation from God.

During the Middle Ages, this understanding continued to hold significant validity. Maimonides, a cornerstone of Jewish theological tradition, asserts that man is always rewarded by God, following the example of the just servant of Isaiah (Maimonides, 1987). In the thirteenth century, in contrast to the rationalist interpretation of Maimonides, an exegesis was developed that sought a hidden mysticism in the sacred text, the *kabbalah*, whose fundamental work is the *Sefer ha-Zohar* or "Book of Splendor" (Varo, 1993). Several times passages from the songs of the Servant are commented in *Zohar* but without a systematic treatment, identifying sometimes the Servant with the Messiah and other times with the people of Israel (Varo, 1993).

According to the unique hermeneutic followed by *Zohar*, the righteous atone for the sins of their generation (Zohar, vol. 3, 1978, p. 38).

A passage from the Talmud (1965, Baba Kama 93) underscores this idea by drawing attention to the turtledoves and pigeons, birds that, despite being the weakest and most persecuted, are the only ones deemed worthy of sacrifice on God's altar (cf. Lev 1:14). In this context, God chooses only persecuted animals - such as lambs, gazelles, and goats - for sacrifice, not persecutors. This is why only the righteous are qualified to serve as offerings of atonement (Zohar, vol. I, 1978, p. 186).

The issue of suffering among the innocent and the righteous has accompanied Israel throughout its history and remains a recurring theme in the Torah. If the world is governed by God's mercy, why are the righteous punished undeservedly? One explanation offered by *Zohar* is that such suffering arises from God's love for the righteous: He breaks their bodies to strengthen their souls, drawing them closer in love and enabling them to merit the World to Come. These sufferings are thus seen as a sign of divine affection. The teachings of the sages of Israel affirm that suffering can reflect God's desire to enhance the rewards of the righteous in the afterlife, drawing on references from the Psalms (cf. Ps 94:12), the Book of Proverbs (cf. Prov 3:12), and the Fourth Song of Isaiah. This interpretation emphasizes the necessity for individuals to voluntarily accept such suffering (Zohar, vol. II, 1978, p. 171).

However, the *Zohar* itself expresses dissatisfaction with this explanation, questioning the compatibility of a life filled with pain and noting that many righteous individuals do not suffer at all. It raises the possibility that children inherit punishments or rewards based on their parents' actions, or that such outcomes are influenced by stars or fate. *Zohar* acknowledges this as a profound mystery. Regardless of the origin of suffering, it asserts that God, in His justice, purifies the soul through these trials and finds delight in them despite their sorrows (Zohar, vol. II, 1978, pp. 172–173).

Finally, the *Zohar* raises a fundamental question: why do the righteous suffer on behalf of sinners, particularly when the latter are accountable for their own transgressions? The answer provided is interesting but questionable: It suggests that when all parts of a body suffer from an illness, it may be necessary to strike one limb to facilitate the healing of the whole. For instance, bleeding an arm can restore health to the body. Similarly, when God desires to heal the world, He may strike a righteous individual in place of others. This perspective is illustrated in the song of the suffering Servant: "He was broken for our sins (…) by his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:5). The righteous endure torment not for their own faults, but to bring healing to their generation and atone for it. Typically, one or two righteous individuals suffice, as God does not need to afflict everyone. However, in serious situations, all the righteous may experience

suffering throughout their lives to protect others (Zohar, vol. III, 1978, pp. 287–288).

These texts of *Zohar* can be used to justify a certain passivity or even a certain fatality as if in the face of suffering or disability the ethical response consists of a passive acceptance, even a negligence or injustice on the part of those who have the responsibility to deal with a situation (starting with the person who suffers). However, it is possible to interpret this conception of the suffering of the innocent by *Zohar* from the recognition of human dignity whose life has always value and whose rights must be respected. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) manifests not only human dignity and rights of people with disabilities to social inclusion but also their potential contribution to society. For example, paragraph m of the Preamble recognizes "the valued existing and potential contributions made by persons with disabilities to the overall well-being and diversity of their communities" (United Nations, 2006, Preamble, letter m).

In summary, the righteous person—who suffers despite their innocence - is portrayed as a bearer of salvation for others. His life conveys a divine message and serves a purpose that is not punitive but redemptive. This mission reveals God's love for both His people and for the righteous themselves, representing a salvific sign of divine care and compassion.

The Servant of Yahweh as the Figure of the Messiah

The sages of Israel engage deeply with the song of the suffering Servant and inquire about the identity of the Messiah and acknowledging that suffering will be a central defining trait. The Talmud poses the question of the Messiah's name (2003, Sanhedrin 98b) and answers that he is called "the sick one," in line with Isaiah's words in chapter 53: "He bears our sins and suffers for us".

Additionally, certain hymns found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, particularly the hymn of self-glorification, show the influence of Isaiah 53. While various interpretations of this text exist, it is clear that the Essene messianic hope of the first century embraced the concept of a suffering Servant of God as a messianic figure - a priest who would usher in an era of forgiveness. This hope was likely not exclusive to the Essenes (Bentué, 1986).

Among the rabbis, this messianic interpretation was not uncommon, though it was largely set aside - yet never entirely abandoned - to counter those who sought to identify the suffering Servant with Jesus, the meek Messiah (García Cordero, 1961). This led to instances of rabbinical censure regarding the references to suffering in Isaiah's text. More commonly, however, the official stance was to equate the Servant of Yahweh with Israel. A similar phenomenon occurred with other biblical passages that

had been utilized in Christian apologetics, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, which ceased to be interpreted in an atoning sense, or the verse from Zechariah 12:10 ("they shall look upon him whom they have pierced"), which had often been regarded as messianic.

Nevertheless, the messianic interpretation of the Servant of Yahweh has never fully disappeared. While Maimonides, did not engage in a formal exegesis of the fourth poem, refers to verse two of chapter fifty-three ("it grew like a shoot before him, like a root out of arid ground"), interpreting it as an indication that the Messiah will manifest without a known lineage. He also cites another verse (Isaiah 52:15) to suggest that during the time of the Messiah, kings will be troubled and conspire against him (Maimonides, 1987). This perspective seems to represent a widely accepted interpretation rather than an original one. However, Maimonides explicitly rejects the notion that Jesus is that Messiah, asserting that in him "about a thousand signs" of the Scriptures remain unfulfilled (Maimonides, 1987).

Yehudah Halevi, a Spanish-Jewish author attributed with the authorship of the book "The Cuzarí" (Halevi, 1959) written around the year 1130 or 1140, argues that the weakness of the Servant of Yahweh serves to compensate for and atone for many sins. Halevi employs the metaphor of the human body to illustrate this concept: The most afflicted part of the body, akin to the heart, bears all diseases (cf. Is. 53:4). When it suffers, it facilitates the healing of the rest of the body, to the extent that if it were to fail, all would perish with it. Through this unique design of God, the suffering of the innocent ultimately benefits others by bearing the sins of all humanity (Kholer, 1968).

Isaac Luria (1534–1572) and Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) address the concerns of Jews exiled from Spain. For Luria, exile symbolizes not only the plight of the people of Israel but also that of the entire universe, and even of God Himself. He develops a system incorporating three fundamental concepts: the self-limitation of God in creating the world (*tzimtzum*), the breaking of the vessels that contained divine light, and the restoration or harmonious correction of that prior destruction (*tikkun*) (Muñiz-Huberman, 1993). Luria posits that each person's mission is to restore unity and harmony, which have been lost through sin, by fulfilling the Torah and practicing love (Scholem, 1996).

Cordovero emphasizes that each individual is interconnected with others, asserting that whoever sins harms their neighbor, while those who love their neighbor also love themselves. Therefore, sin cannot be regarded as a purely "private" fault; rather, it disrupts the ontological unity shared by all descendants of Adam. It is this sin that has led Israel into exile, a condition that will end when harmony is restored, and justice is satisfied.

This restoration (*tikkun*) is achieved through the crucible of suffering. More than a task for the Messiah alone, it is a collective responsibility of all Israel (Scholem, 1996).

Moshé Jaim Luzzatto, an 18th-century philosopher and mystic (1707–1746), further develops much of the Kabbalistic tradition established by Halevi, Shem Tov (the author of *Zohar*), and Luria. In "The Way of God" (Dérej HaŠem, 1997), Luzzatto asserts that the conduct of Israel is crucial for the rectification and elevation of the entire world, influencing its enlightenment or darkness. He argues that the fate of other nations is determined by the Hebrew nation. In the world to come, there will be no nations other than Israel, and the righteous from other nations will join Israel, sharing in its blessings (Luzzatto, 1997). The righteous individual, particularly the suffering righteous, becomes the atoner for his generation. It is his duty to accept the sufferings that come his way with love, positioning him as a guide in the world to come. Luzzatto explains that if one's sins affect others, then the merits of one person can benefit many (Luzzatto, 1997).

In summary, these texts underscore the expiatory role of the suffering of the innocent, emphasizing its redemptive impact for others. A vulnerable person may lack the power to confront their attackers, yet, like a worm, they leave behind a seed from which new life can emerge. Even when broken, like clay or glass, they can be recast and made whole again. Therefore, there is no need for fear, as the promise of the Lord and His love serve as a guarantee (Zohar, vol. II, 1978, p. 161). These promises provide Israel with the consolation needed to endure suffering over time.

Applications of the Theological Reflection on the Servant of Yahweh

Biblical reflection acknowledges that every individual possesses equal, infinite, and inherent value, regardless of differences in abilities or personality. Disability should not be viewed as a punishment from God or as an imperfection. "Perfection of the world does not refer to human ideals of perfection, but to the ideal of humans who celebrate God's presence in all their lives. People with disabilities are needed, just as are the sick, the weak, the poor, or the vulnerable, for without their involvement in Judaism, we will never reach the goal of humanity" (Jones, 2021, p. 17). Disability is illuminated by the Fourth Song of the Servant of Yahweh that we have already commented on and that we will now try to concretize.

Silence as Revelation of God

A significant aspect of the Servant of Yahweh, according to the account in Isaiah (53:7), is his silence ("he kept silence"). This echoes the experience of many people with disabilities who struggle to communicate

effectively with others, making them vulnerable. The Servant is described as remaining silent in his humiliation, "he did not open his mouth"; like a lamb led to slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers, he did not open his mouth. This silence of the innocent who suffer, along with the silence of God, poses a profound challenge to us and raises the question of theodicy, especially in relation to disability (Saterlee, 2024). How can a benevolent God permit human suffering? In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it seems that discussing God is no longer possible, leading us instead to a form of anti-theodicy; all that remains is the void to be narrated (Westerduin, 2010). It is scandalous that the recognition of the Messiah, as prophesied by Isaiah and promised in the Fourth Song, has not been fulfilled: "Kings will shut their mouths before him […] and what they have never heard they will understand" (Isaiah 52:15).

Nevertheless, God's silence in the face of Yahweh's Servant is not unprecedented. God is often depicted as hidden (Isaiah 45:15). Yahweh saves in silence, in a gentle breeze, rather than in loud noise (cf. 1 Kings 19:3–15). Silence has accompanied the history of Israel's suffering, as well as the experiences of those who are sick, disabled, or abused. This silence can wound as deeply, if not more, than the pain itself. It reflects our struggle to understand suffering, but it also conceals a redemptive purpose illuminated by the text of Isaiah and other passages in the Bible. The Talmud, Hasidic literature, and contemporary authors converge on this understanding:

> In the Talmud we find sages who, in the hour of trial, did not hesitate to exclaim: "But why is God silent […] Isaac, the Rabbi of Worke will say, was never angry, for his anger could have destroyed the world. Isaac was all silence; and the world was saved (Wiesel, 1996, p. 181).

Silence should not be interpreted as a passive resignation to an evil that overwhelms one's strength, nor should it be interpreted as God 's deliberate infliction of suffering upon the innocent as a form of punishment. Rather, inherent within this suffering lies a profound mystery. In the face of this mystery, might it not be wiser to embrace silence? Like Job, we acknowledge our limitations and our inability to fully comprehend or respond (Job 40:4–5). Like Job, we must come to terms with the fact that a simplistic, childlike vision of God has been shattered.

> No more the God of mercy, the interventionist who miraculously breaks the laws of history to protect his protégés. The relationship with God is not a way of avoiding evil. On the contrary, whoever lives and acts like Jesus will have to face an additional evil, because the pious will sacrifice him in the belief that they are giving glory to God […] Here is the folly of faith and the rationality of atheism. Is it not foolish to continue to hope and believe in a God who does not appear? How long can faith in God be maintained, and what is necessary to falsify it? Is there not pure

> delusion, illusion and delirium, religious fanaticism rather than human reason? (Estrada, 1999, pp. 103–115).

Certainly, God's silence first serves as an invitation to human silence. This silence invites prayer, allowing the Servant of Yahweh to listen to his Lord. In prayer, both the will and the intellect align with the whisper of the gentle breeze of the Spirit (1 Kings 19:12). Like Job, we have the courage to ask God about the meaning of suffering. Like Habakkuk, we cry out to Yahweh, questioning His silence in the face of injustice: "Why do you keep silent when the wicked devour him who is more righteous than he?" (Habakkuk 1:13). Suffering asserts its own validity; we cannot minimize the doubt and uncertainty that arise when confronted with the suffering of the innocent and the seeming silence of God.

Moreover, silence does not diminish the power of the word; rather, the word emerges from that primordial silence. There are moments to speak and moments to listen: the word is born from listening in silence and transforms into revelation. However, this revelation does not clarify everything; beyond the spoken word lies an authentic divine communication that coexists with enduring divine silence. Yet, even at the risk of saying too much, we assert that the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh unveils not only the vulnerability of humanity but also that of God Himself. In the silence of people with disabilities, the voice of God can also be heard. God saves in silence.

Disability and Divine Vulnerability

The Fourth Song of Isaiah reveals, through both the figure of the Servant of Yahweh and the lived experiences of many disabled individuals, illuminates the meekness, humility, and patience of God Himself. These virtues, rather than mere moral counsels, embody a profound revelation of the divine through those whom society often rejects or dismisses - those who are despised, suffering, and unwell (Isaiah 53:2–3). The condition of these individuals mirrors the vulnerability of God, of whom the Servant is a faithful representation. Jurgen Moltmann (1972), among others, has elaborated on this notion, highlighting how divine kenosis represents a self-limitation (*tzimtzum*, in Lurianic terminology) that creates space for the world.

> If a finite world is to co-exist with the infinite Creator, then God has to limit himself in order to make space and time for his creation and to respect its freedom. This self-limitation of God, which is implied in creation, is called *tzimtzum* (contraction or self-withdrawal) (Moltmann, 2019, p. 163).

Love and vulnerability are intrinsically connected, as love implies the possibility of being rejected, or even abused (Corona & López, 2021; Swinton, 2004). Our intention is not to delve into the extensive literature

on this topic, but to assert that God is vulnerable, perhaps the most vulnerable of all beings. God's vulnerability is such that He cannot defend Himself against our actions, cannot prevent our rebellion, and cannot stop us from inflicting pain and wounds upon each other (López González, 2023). This presents a mystery: the mystery of a God who, in loving, becomes the most vulnerable being. The mystery transcends a mere problem to be solved, it is a reality whose luminosity dazzles us and in which we find ourselves immersed (Marcel, 1965).

The notion of a vulnerable God is not new to Jewish or Christian theology. Throughout Sacred Scripture, God is depicted as either comforted or wounded by human actions. God experiences anger, jealousy, joy, and also pain for His beloved creatures (Heschel, 1982; Sherman, 1974). God suffers alongside the innocent, "God claps His hands over His heart and weeps for the tragedies that have befallen Israel" (Seder Eliyahu Rabba, quoted by Wolpe, 1991, p. 147). God is portrayed as deeply affected and wounded by human suffering (Heschel, 2005). "On the other hand, if human suffering were not relevant to God, He would be, in practice, irrelevant to us" (López González, 2023, p. 405).

Vulnerability as a divine attribute is present in *The Cuzarí* (Halevi, 1959), where it is stated that weakness, rather than greatness or pride, is more fitting for the divine, as the divine resides in the souls of the broken and humble. Disability, in this context, becomes a revelation of human vulnerability, but more profoundly, it signifies divine vulnerability. If the disabled person is particularly vulnerable, he or she is also particularly lovable. In this sense, we need people with disabilities more than they need us, because they teach us how to love and remind us of the love we receive.

Divine vulnerability cannot be understood without recognizing God's solidarity with human beings. God suffers not only from what His children do to Him but also from what they do to one another. Similarly, we can affirm that God suffers in solidarity with the suffering disabled. The solidarity among parents and children reflects the particular solidarity that exists among God and humanity. The suffering of one person—whether through harm, neglect, or abandonment—affects all of humanity, as each individual is intrinsically connected to the whole. This interconnectedness allows every person to declare, "for my sake the world was created" (Barylko, 1998, p. 79). So those who suffer with those who suffer disability share the divine vulnerability and solidarity.

Disability as an Opportunity for Victory Over Evil

Even in silence, God is present wherever humanity suffers and seeks healing. The Fourth Song of Servant of Yahweh reveals that through the injuries of the disabled, we find our healing and salvation. In this way,

we can affirm that God does not intervenes from a distance, Yahweh does not save from distance; rather, He accompanies His children, becoming one with them in their suffering. Yahweh saves by taking our sins upon Himself, triumphing over evil with goodness. He has not abandoned His people; the *Shechinah* has journeyed alongside every individual in exile and persecution.

God's intervention may astonish us: He suffers in silence for our sins, atones, and redeems them. In the suffering of the innocent, the Messiah continues His passion. He bears the burden of Israel and our wrongs as atonement, thus defeating evil; by His wounds, we are healed. After suffering, He will see the light (Isaiah 53:5; 11–12). No one but Him could endure such trials.

Evil persists, challenging the Good and the Merciful. However, it does not overcome God. Instead, God overcomes evil with good (Romans 12:21), bringing forth goodness from even the darkest circumstances. Augustine of Hippo noted, "It is a sign of greater power and more perfection to bring good out of evils themselves than not to allow these evils to exist" (Augustine of Hippo, 1978, p. 844). While we may not fully perceive the entirety of God's goodness, we can identify traces of this victory, which, though definitive, is not yet complete. Indeed, we can witness in our own lives and throughout history how God saves and triumphs through (rather than merely 'in spite of') defeats.

In Jewish literature, Satan is granted certain rights as an informer before God - acting as a spy who watches for the sins of humanity in order to accuse them before the Lord. *Zohar* illustrates this concept: God requires a distraction for Azazel (i.e., Satan) to keep him from harassing us. To achieve this, God chooses a righteous man, referred to as *moruech*, to wrestle with Satan while the lambs are brought to safety. As Satan is occupied with this struggle, he leaves Israel alone, and consequently, the Israelites are not accused. Furthermore, when Israel acknowledges its transgressions before Satan - who bears a list of sins on the Day of Atonement - Satan praises them and becomes their defender before God, who then refrains from punishment since there is no one left to accuse them (Zohar, vol. III, 1978, p. 119). Ultimately, Satan's power is limited by God, and even those limits can be "circumvented" so that his intentions to harm the righteous result in their benefit.

This confidence in the "power" of good over evil does not imply passivity or a form of providentialism that relies on God to compensate for our negligence. On the contrary, God "can" overcome evil with good when humanity cooperates with His will. This is the essence of God's question to Cain: "Where is your brother?" God desires to save us through others.

Thus, in response to passive providentialism, we must embrace an active providentialism that trusts in God's power alongside human freedom, enabling collaboration in His divine designs.

The Servant of Yahweh, the righteous one, does not merely await divine justice against his adversaries; he seeks to ensure that his "service" benefits others, both friends and foes alike. Once again, the words of *Zohar* illuminate this truth

> When all the members are in pain and suffering from an illness, one member must be struck so that all may be healed. […] One or two are sufficient, as it is not necessary for God to harmed everyone; however, if the illness is serious, then it is essential for all the righteous to be struck. Sometimes they spend their entire lives under the burden of suffering to protect the people (Zohar, vol. IV, 1978, pp. 287–288).

The experience of disability can contribute to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the meaning of human life as life in communion, thus fostering the flourishing of people, with or without disabilities (Hauerwas, 1986). Disability can be a victory over evil if it is turned for good. It is an opportunity to grow in love with those who suffer from disability and for those who accompany them.

The inclusion of people with disabilities is not only a human right, but also an opportunity, a benefit for all. The theological reflection on the Servant of Yahweh invites us to consider a model of inclusion based on human dignity, a paradigm close to that of human rights and human dignity, improving the social model and the medical model of disability (Degener, 2016).

For inclusion to be truly effective, a significant educational change is required. Employers must reassess their biases and misconceptions to ensure that individuals with disabilities can actively participate in social life and be included in the workplace (Bachrach, 2015). Educational change must be linked to the use of innovative inclusion strategies from a new paradigm, using, for example vocational rehabilitation (Bezyak et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Many individuals with disabilities, like Job (7:17-20), experience God's presence in their suffering and limitations (Saterlee, 2024). The figure of the vulnerable righteous, present in the Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, illuminates the meaning of this suffering. The righteous carry the pains of others within themselves (Buber, 1988). We have mentioned that the silence of the righteous and their apparent uselessness hide the potential of the seed that dies to bear much fruit. In a similar vein, individuals with disabilities teach us through their silent example, offering us a deeper understanding of life, even when it appears otherwise. According to *Zohar*,

inspired by Isaiah 53, the righteous generate new life in the world; they collaborate with God to bring forth the fruits of life. The life of the Servant of God, in a sense, represents a new creation. The Servant of Yahweh, in *Zohar*, also presents himself as a new Adam, who "did not look like a man," becoming the representative of humanity and the beloved of God.

Through the Servant of Yahweh, God reveals a new humanity that does not place its hope in apparent strength or success. God stands with those whom people reject, with the defeated, and with those who do not defend themselves or cry out for vengeance. God is pleased with his Servant, revealing a new wisdom and an epistemological shift: violence is a lie while love and solidarity are the truth. In this paradigm, the victim becomes the victor, echoing Augustine's words: "*victor quia victima*" (Augustine of Hippo, 1978, p. 452).

However, he suffers not only for the innocent but also for the guilty. In Messianic times, the lion and the ox will graze together (cf. Is 11:7). The servant does not triumph by inflicting harm on those who harass him but by collaborating with his silence - filled with love - so that God may transform the rebel inwardly. This represents a profound revolution: one who innocently suffers a disability does so in solidarity, bringing salvation to this world. Disability helps us recognize our interdependence with others and be open to the differences that others bring; it is ultimately a condition for communion (Reynolds, 2008).

Thus, inclusion is an invitation to live in communion, without excluding anyone. We must attend to the illness or social injustice suffered by individuals with disabilities, but more importantly, we must understand that the disabled person is a brother we need in order to live. The biblical reflection we have made based on the figure of the Servant of Yahweh can illuminate human suffering and disability; it can serve as a path, even a theological place (Montes Flórez, 2016), to better understand God and human beings in their relationship with Him. Thus, biblical reflection can be bidirectional (Sloane, 2021), so that the reality of disability reveals something of God's very essence.

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