

The Hebrew and Aramaic Verbs for “to lift up”

The Hebrew verb meaning “to lift up” (*naśa’*) appears in Isa 52:13 (“Behold my servant shall be prudent/prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up and very high”) and in 53:4, 12. In a very literal translation, I would consistently translate “lifted up” even in these two latter verses: 53:4: “(But) surely (it was) our illnesses (that) he lifted up” and 53:12: “Yet (it was) the sin of (the) many (that) he lifted up.”

In Isa 52:13, the use of this verb makes the Servant one who is “lifted up,” a *naśi’*, like the Davidic Messiah in Ezek 37:25, often translated “prince.” This refers to exalted status (but in the triple “exaltation” of the Servant in Isa 52:13, the verb I translated “exalted” above is from the root which makes Abram mean “the father is exalted;” it is also descriptive of Yahweh in Isa 6:1, “I saw the Lord seated on an exalted and lifted-up throne” (same verbs as two of those applied to the Servant in 52:13, repeated in 57:15, “Thus says the [one who is] exalted and lifted-up”).

In Isa 53:4, 12, on the other hand, this verb seems to have the meaning of “take away,” used often in a cultic or sacrificial sense (removing guilt and punishment), as in Lev 10:17. The NAB and the RSV use “bear” here, the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) “take away.” A good example is Lev 16:22 (the scapegoat). Here the RSV and the NJB use “bear,” while the NAB uses “carry off.” I would keep “lift up” in Isa 53 in a literal translation to indicate that we are dealing with the same Hebrew verb. Note that in Isa 53:4, what the Servant “lifts up” are our illnesses, while in Isa 53:12 it is our sin. Sin and illness are related (even as guilt is to its punishment).

Interestingly, in Aramaic, one verb can mean both “lift up” and “crucify” (*zqf*). It is used in Ezra 6:11, where the NAB correctly translates *ûzqyf yîtm^ehē’alôhî* “and he shall be lifted up and impaled on it;” the RSV and NJB simply have “impale.”

With this ambiguity or ambivalence in mind, scholars like Matthew Black have noted that Jesus, in John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34, is speaking of his crucifixion as being also an “exaltation,” a “being lifted up” in the sense of Isa 52:13. This of course is the equivalent of the Johannine use of “glorification” in regards to Jesus’ crucifixion. When Jesus is “lifted up” in John, he is both crucified and glorified (or exalted, like the Servant in Isa 52:13). This only works in Aramaic, so it points to an origin probably in Jesus himself. It is also not far removed from the “one lifted up,” or “prince” of Ezek. Thus the Servant is “kingly,” and he is this at the same time that he suffers and dies for us, “lifting up” our sins and removing our illnesses, Matt 8:17.