

COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH 53, 1-3

Who will believe our report? and to whom is the arm of Jehovah¹ revealed? But he shall grow up before him as an offshoot (virgultum), and as a root from a barren ground. He has no form nor comeliness. We shall see him, and his appearance will not be what we desire. He is despised and rejected among men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with weakness: we hid as it were our faces from him, and esteemed him not.

1. *Who will believe our report?*² This division, or rather, dismemberment, of the chapter ought to be disregarded, for the chapter should really begin at 52, 13 and these words be connected with what went before. For here the Prophet is, as it were, pausing in the midst of his discourse. . . . He breaks off his discourse and cries out: "No-one will believe these things!" At the same time he expresses his sorrow that men should be so unbelieving as to reject their own salvation. This, therefore, is the godly complaining of one who wanted Christ to be known by all, and yet sees only a few who believe the Gospel. . . . So Isaiah shows that those who submit to the Gospel of Christ will be few. For when he exclaims: "Who shall believe our preaching?" he means that hardly one in a hundred of those who hear the Gospel will believe it. Nor is he speaking for himself alone, but as the representative of all teachers. Therefore, although many ministers be given by God, only a few people will follow their teaching. And what when there are no ministers at all? Is it surprising that the worst blindness will be there? . . . But it does not detract from the Gospel of Christ if few be the disciples to receive it. Nor does the fewness of believers lessen its authority or obscure its infinite glory. On the contrary, the very sublimity of its mystery is a reason why it hardly meets with faith in the world. For it is folly, because it transcends all human senses.³

¹ 1551 reads "Lord" for "Jehovah".

² Calvin: "O Lord, who has believed our report?" that is, the Word which we preach. For though in Hebrew the term שְׁמוּעָה means passively "a word", yet the Greeks have rendered it ἀκοήν, *hearing*, and the Latins *auditum*, *hearing*—incorrectly indeed, but with no ambiguity in the meaning. (Comm. on Rom. 10, 16; C.R., xlix, 206; C.T.S., p. 400).

³ 1551 omits from "But it does not detract" to "all human senses".

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In the second part of the sentence¹ he shows why there will be so few believers—because none can come to God save by the particular (*singulari*) revelation of the Spirit. And they are mistaken, in my judgment, who think that by the word “arm” Christ is meant.² For it is just saying again in fresh words why so few believe—because they cannot attain it by the perspicacity of their own minds. . . .

Isaiah does not refer only to the men of his own time, but to all who come after them, even to the end of the world. For this must be fulfilled so long as the kingdom of Christ shall endure. Wherefore the faithful ought to be armed against such a stumbling block with this testimony. Now, in these words is refuted the ignorance of those who think that faith is in the power of anybody because the preaching is common to all. For though it is clear enough that all are called to salvation, yet the Prophet expressly affirms that the outward voice which invites is of no avail unless the special gift of the Spirit accompanies it. And whence comes this dividing but from the secret election of God, in whom is hidden the reason for it?³

2. *But he shall grow up*: This verse refers to what was said before—that Christ would in the beginning have no outward magnificence or beauty among men; but yet before God He will be highly exalted and prized. Whence we see that we must not judge the glory of Christ according to His appearance as a man, but apprehend by faith what the Holy Scriptures teach about Him. Therefore the expression “before Him” stands in contrast to human senses, which cannot comprehend that sublimity. . . . But now are added the words *in a desert land*. By this he means that power will not spring up in Christ as in trees from the goodness of the soil (*ex terrae humore*) but in a supernatural way.⁴ Those who speculate in this passage about

¹ For “In the second part of the sentence”, 1551 reads: *The arm of the Lord*. He shows . . .

² All commentators of antiquity refer “arm” to Christ. But in the sixteenth century, interpretation varied. *Luther* (40, 687 and 700) and *Oecol.* (274) follow the older writers. *Brent.* and perhaps *Musculus* agree with Calvin—*Brent.*: From the preaching of the Gospel of Christ men receive the wonderful gifts of the Holy Spirit, which is the arm of the Lord revealed (p. 667). *Musc.*: the things which were foretold of Christ by the Prophets can only be believed by those in whom that power of God works which was revealed in the Son and by the Son (p. 719). Cf. *Calvin*, Comm. on John 12, 38: The word “arm”, as is well known, denotes power. The prophet declares that “the arm of God”, which is contained in the preaching of the Gospel, lies hidden until it is revealed (C.R., xlvii, 297; C.T.S., 2, p. 41).

³ 1551 omits from “Now, in these” to the end.

⁴ 1551 omits from “But now are added” to “supernatural way”.

the Virgin Mary and suppose that she is called a desert land because she conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by male seed, miss the mark.¹ For it is not the nativity of Christ that is spoken of here, but His whole reign. He says that He will be like a slip growing out of a dry soil, which seems as if it will never be able to attain a proper size. For if we take into account the whole method of establishing His kingdom, and whose labours He used, how feeble were the beginnings, and how many enemies resisted it, we shall easily understand how all these things came to pass as they were foretold. . . .

The uncomeliness² which he next mentions should be understood not only of the person of Christ, who was considered contemptible by the world and at last condemned to a degrading death, but of His whole kingdom, in which there was, in men's eyes, nothing beautiful or comely, or magnificent—in short, nothing that by its outward appearance could turn or entice men's eyes to itself. . . .

3. *He was despised*: This verse goes on with the same idea—Christ will be rejected by men because there is apparent in Him nothing but grief and weakness. And this needed to be drummed into the Jews, lest they should form a false opinion of Christ and His kingdom; for, to know His glory, we must proceed from His death to His resurrection. . . .

We hid our faces from him: Not without cause is the first person used, for it signifies that this will be a universal judgment. For no man will be able to understand otherwise by his own mind unless the Lord correct and change him for the better by His Spirit. Although he seems to censure the Jews chiefly, who should have been the last to reject so haughtily the Son of God promised and offered to them, and numbers himself among them, inasmuch as he was a member of that nation, yet all

¹ *Procopius*: He was born of a virgin; for besides the word "Behold, a virgin shall conceive," Isaiah also declares that she is unapproachable land (*terram inaccessam*, the Old Latin reading of "a dry ground") because she is a virgin (2519–20). So also *Eusebius* (455–6), *Walafrid* (p. 1296), *Hervaeus* (p. 491) and *Haymo* (pp. 404–5). But *Luther*: It (the Virgin Birth) is a thing true and certain, but it is not the subject of this verse (40, p. 709). And again: The dry land is his passion, since he rose from death (25, p. 328).

² Some early Fathers took this literally of the physical appearance of Jesus. Thus, when Celsus uses the verse as a proof that He "was little and ugly and undistinguished", Origen agrees, up to a point: Admittedly it is written that the body of Jesus was ugly, but not, as he asserted that it was also undistinguished (*Contra Celsum*, VI, 75, translated by Henry Chadwick, p. 389). Mr. Chadwick refers also to Clement (Alex.) in *Paed.* 3, 2. 1551 reads: *No beauty*. This should be understood . . .

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men are stigmatized and condemned of ingratitude for despising Christ, because they do not judge Him worth looking at, but turn away their eyes as from something loathesome.¹

¹ 1551, for "Although he seems" to "something loathesome", reads: "All shall abhor Him and not esteem Him worth even a glance."