

**FROM HUMBLE SERVANT TO INCARNATE LOGOS.  
CHRISTOLOGY, ETHICS, APOLOGETICS AND POLEMICS IN  
THE EARLY CHRISTIAN READINGS OF ISA 52–53**

**KORINNA ZAMFIR**

**Abstract.** Early Christian authors use Isaiah 52–53 for various purposes. Beside the Christological-soteriological interpretation of Jesus' ministry and/or suffering, the quotes serve ethical purposes. The apologetical-polemical function becomes dominant from the mid-second century onward, as part of the debates with real or fictitious Jewish and pagan opponents.

**Keywords:** reception of Isaiah 52–53, early Christian writings, Christology, paraenesis, apologetics, polemics

A look at the early Christian writings of the first four centuries suggests that Isaiah 52,13–53,12 (in the following Isa 53) belongs to the scriptural passages that have exerted a significant influence on early Christian thought, on defining Jesus' identity and interpreting his ministry, his suffering and death. Nonetheless, a careful examination of the manner in which early Christian authors use this passage should prevent sweeping generalisations. In extra-biblical Christian writings, as noted by Marksches based on the references in the *Biblia Patristica*, Isaiah 53 was an important, but not a central passage.<sup>1</sup>

Early Christian authors quote Isa 53 for a number of purposes. At an early stage, they focus on the healing character of Jesus' ministry and the example set by his meekness, to articulate paraenetical guidelines of behaviour in the community. The apologetical-polemical function becomes dominant as part of the debates with real or fictitious Jewish and pagan opponents. The text is increasingly used to defend major claims about Jesus: his messiahship or crystallizing doctrines like the virginal conception and the divinity of the incarnate Logos. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross are a major problem, as they seem to question his messianic identity. This challenge comes up constantly in polemics with Jewish and pagan adversaries. That is why Christian authors repeatedly strive to prove that Jesus' fate

<sup>1</sup> Christoph MARKSCHIES, "Der Mensch Jesus Christus im Angesicht Gottes. Zwei Modelle des Verständnisses von Jesaja 52,13-53,12 in der patristischen Literatur und deren Entwicklung", in Bernd JANOWSKI, Peter STUHLMACHER (eds.) *Der leidende Gottesknecht. Jesaja 53 und seine Wirkungsgeschichte* (FAT 14), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996, 187-236 (198, 200: "wichtige, aber keine zentrale Stelle"), based on the occurrences in five volumes of the *Biblia Patristica*, compared to those of the Johannine Prologue.