

The Suffering Servant and the Substitute King
A Review of John H. Walton, "The Imagery of the Substitute King
Ritual in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song," in *JBL* 122 (2003): 734-743.

Thesis: The motifs of the substitute king ritual of Mesopotamia provide a background for the theological points of the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah 52:13-53:12. (However, the Servant Song does not represent "an actual substitute king ritual.")

Evidence from Parallels

1. While no king exists in the Isaiah passage itself, enough parallels may be made to suggest that "Isaiah adapted substitute king imagery to a different situation" (738).
2. The Song begins with the exaltation of the Servant (52:13), just as the *šar puhi* was elevated to kingship.
3. The Song immediately moves to a portrayal of the Servant's previous low station. In the *šar puhi* texts, the substitute king is usually someone of low status, someone "expendable." He cites three examples: the gardener in Isin, the criminal in Greece, and the prisoner of war in Hittite texts. "Here in Isaiah, the fact that the Servant is described as despised and perhaps physically impaired or abused suggests that he also is considered dispensable" (739).
4. The Servant operates as a substitute (53:4-6), just as the *šar puhi* does. Here Walton does note a difference: while the *šar puhi* does this in place of the king, the Servant does it in place of the people.
5. The Servant bears the people's punishment; the *šar puhi* does this for the king.
6. The Servant is buried with both the guilty and the wealthy; the *šar puhi* dies presumably because the king is implied as guilty by the omens; the *šar puhi* also is buried in "pomp and ceremony." [Addition: the omens were considered verdicts from the gods.]
7. It is Yahweh's will to crush the Servant; "it is inferred by the omens that it is Marduk's will to strike the substitute" (740). [Correction: It is Marduk's will to strike the original king.]
8. "The 𐎠𐎵𐎲 [guilt offering] serves as a reparation or compensation offering that appeased the deity for the acts of sacrilege. This would be well in line with the clearing of claims (*têbitu*) that was the intended effect of the substitute king ritual" (740).
9. In 53:10, the king shall see seed and prolong his days; likewise because of his substitution the real king has prolonged days and sees his seed. Walton notes the "conspicuous ambiguity with regard to whose seed and days are intended" (740).