

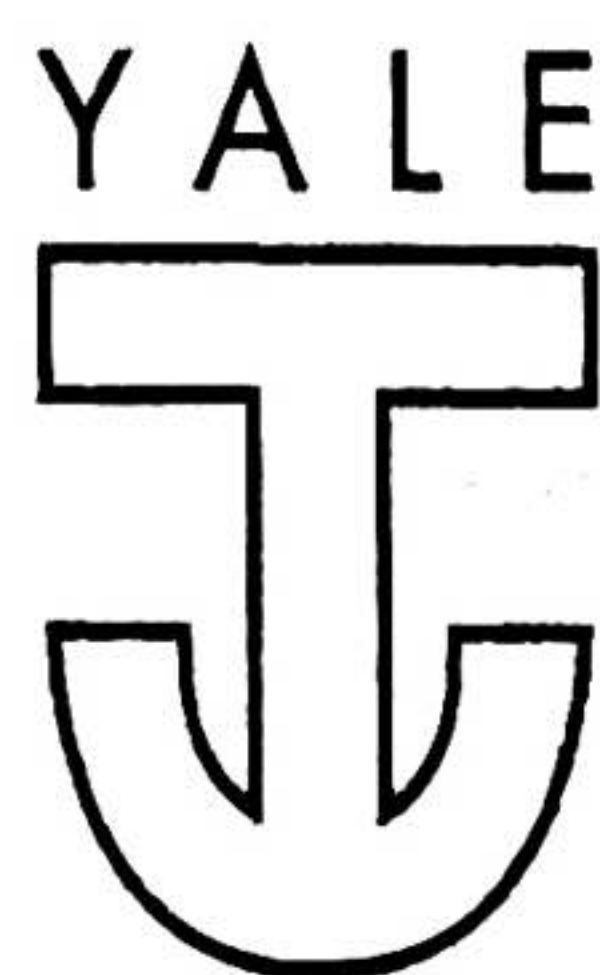
THE ANCHOR YALE BIBLE

ISAIAH 40-55



A New Translation
with Introduction and Commentary

JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP



THE ANCHOR YALE BIBLE

Yale University Press
New Haven & London

ISAIAH 40-55



PROLOGUE: THE REVIVAL OF PROPHECY (40:1-8)

(Barstad 1989, 8-13; Berlin 1979; Brooke 1994; Charlesworth 1997; Cross 1953; 1973, 186-90; Davidson 1997; G. Fischer 1984; Fokkelman 1981; Freedman 1987; Garofalo 1958; Geller 1984; Koole 1982; Kratz 1993; Krinetski 1972; Kuyper 1963; Limburg 1975; Loretz 1984a; Melugin 1976, 82-86; Merendino 1989; 1997; A. Phillips 1982; von Rad 1967; Robinson 1944; Seidl 1992; Seitz 1990; Snaith 1940-1941; Stoebe 1984; van Wieringen 1989)

TRANSLATION

i

40 ¹"Comfort, O comfort my people,"
says your God;
²"speak tender words to Jerusalem,
proclaim to her
that her servitude is over,^a
her debt has been paid;
she has received at Yahveh's hand
double for all her sins."

ii

³A voice proclaims:^b
"Clear in the wilderness
a way for Yahveh;
level in the desert
a highway for our God!
⁴Let every ravine^c be filled in,
every mountain and hill flattened out;
the crooked made straight,
the rough places leveled.
⁵Then the glory of Yahveh will be revealed;
All humanity as one^d shall see it."
For Yahveh himself has spoken.^e

iii

⁶A voice says,^f "Proclaim!"
I replied,^g "What shall I proclaim?"
"All humanity is grass,
and all its splendor^h like the wild flower."

⁷Grass withers, flowers fade
when Yahveh's breath blows on them;ⁱ
[surely the people is but grass!].ⁱ

⁸Grass withers, flowers fade,
but the word of our God stands firm forever.

NOTES

1QIsaiah^a leaves about eight spaces blank after 39:8; 4QIsa^b, containing part of 40:1-4, leaves about two-thirds of a line blank. ^a 1QIsaiah^a reads *ml*²; since *šābā'* is usually masc., it is unnecessary to emend to *millē'āh*, transitive; ^b LXX divides differently: *phōnē boōntos en tē erēmō* cf. Matt 3:3 and par.; 1QS 8:14 agrees with MT, which has the disjunctive accent Zaqeph Qaton attached to *qōrēh*, allowing for a clear parallelism in the remainder of v 3; ^c read *qay'* absolute for *gey'* construct; the word can refer to a narrow gorge, defile, or ravine rather than a broad valley; "filled in," literally, "raised up"; ^d 1QIsa^a *yḥdyv* for MT *yaḥdāv*; LXX fills out the sense theologically: *kai opsetai pasa sarx to sōtērion tou theou* ("all flesh will see the salvation of God"), perhaps influenced by 52:10; more recent attempts to provide *vērā'ū* with an object are unnecessary, since *r'h* occurs elsewhere without an object (41:5, 21; 49:7, 18); ^e literally, "for the mouth of Yahveh has spoken"; ^f or, possibly, "Listen! One is saying . . .," interjectional use of *qōl* (GKC 146b); ^g with 1QIsa^a, LXX (*kai eipa*), and Vulg. (*et dixi*) for MT *vě' āmar*, "and he said"; ^h MT *ḥasdō* (1QIsa^a *ḥsdyv/ḥasdayv*), "its loyalty," does not make good sense, and extending the range to mean "durability" (Snaith cf. Tg. *tvqghvn*, "its strength") or "grace," "graciousness" (Torrey 306) is not well supported; perhaps *ḥādārō* cf. LXX, which is followed by 1 Pet 1:24 *doxa* and Vulg.: *omnis gloria eius quasi flos agri*; ⁱ LXX omits v 7 by haplography; the 1QIsa^a scribe omitted vv 7b and 8a, later added in superscript and in the margin; Yahveh's breath is a metaphor for wind cf. Ps 147:18; ^j some commentators (e.g. Elliger 4) read this statement as part of the original text, but it looks like a typical gloss, perhaps referring *ḥāšîr*, "grass," in a sectarian sense, to the rest of the people, as the Targum suggests; cf. 2:9b, 22.

COMMENTS

In the context of literary conventions characteristic of prophetic writings, we are struck at once by the failure to identify the people addressed at the beginning of this major section of the book. The problem was noticed from early times on, since the Targum identified them as prophets and the LXX as priests. If we could follow Torrey's inclusion of chs. 34-35 in Second Isaiah's book, a simple explanation would be at hand: 40:1 is not where the book begins. Isaiah 34:1 is addressed to a specific audience, the nations and peoples, but the message that follows, far from offering comfort, is all about anger, slaughter, and

judgment. This makes it difficult to accept Freedman's argument that the same people are being addressed in 40:1, or even that chs. 34 and 40 belong together in the same book. Torrey himself noted the problem but simply remarked that, if the writer had been pressed to identify those addressed, he would have answered in the words of 66:10, "All those who love Zion" (Torrey 1928, 304). An alternative explanation, proposed in the Introduction, is that the compiler who attached 40-55 to 1-39 would have either omitted the superscription or reworded the introductory verses to fit their new context.

That this introductory passage is concerned with prophetic communication is clear from the identification of the first two statements (vv 1-2 and 3-5) as speech of Yahveh (i.e., prophetic speech) and from the final statement (8b) affirming the permanent validity of that speech, an affirmation repeated at the end of the section, no doubt deliberately (55:10-11). This is the view of the Targumist, who identified those addressed as prophets and substituted "prophesy" for "proclaim," but not of the Greek translator, who identified them as priests. That prophets are being addressed is also the view of most of the medieval commentators.

This introductory apostrophe amounts to an *apologia* for the message that is to follow in chs. 40-48 and therefore makes a fitting prologue to these chapters. The author, an anonymous seer (conventionally known as Deutero-Isaiah), reports a communication from Yahveh (vv 1-2) in which those addressed are given a commission involving three commands: comfort the people, speak consoling words to Jerusalem (meaning, again, the people), and proclaim good news. This theme of comfort is a leitmotif throughout these chapters (cf. 49:13 and 52:9 *nḥm* Piel with *'ammô*, "his people"), and it makes for good news indeed after all the dire threats and comminations of chs. 1-39. The good news message is also tripartite: the end of indentured service; the liquidation of debts incurred, understood metaphorically; and the bestowing of benefits that will outweigh the punishment inflicted for sins committed.

The hypothesis that this "hall of voices" (Watts 1987, 75) presupposes the scenario of the divine council and that therefore those addressed are members of Yahveh's heavenly court has achieved practically canonical status in recent English-language scholarship but is not well founded. According to Cross (1953; 1973, 187-88), it can be deduced from the imperatives characteristically addressed by YHVH to members of his entourage. But this overlooks the *deliberative* nature of the council, as described in the relevant biblical texts. Wherever such a scenario is clearly presented, Yahveh engages in discussion and solicits opinions but does not give orders (Isa 6:8; 1 Kgs 22:20-22; Job 1-2). Cross also assumes that *qôl qôrē'* (40:3) and *qôl 'ômēr* (40:6) refer to angelic heralds, presumably on the strength of similar expressions in the vision report of ch. 6 (6:4, 8). At first sight this appears to be a reasonable conjecture, but it ignores the contextually more natural reference of Isa 6:4 to the liturgical call of the seraphim in the previous verse. Since, in addition, Isa 6:8 explicitly identifies the voice as the voice of Yahveh and not the voice of one of his courtiers, the way the vision-call narrative is set up is significantly different from 40:1-8.

It also seems rather too literalistic to assume that only supernatural beings can level hills and raise valleys.

The case for a divine council scenario in dependence on Isa 6 is taken further by Melugin (1976, 82-84), Seitz (1990, 229-47), and Williamson (1994, 37-38). Melugin argues from the plural imperatives in 40:1-2, but it is difficult to see why injunctions in the plural must be addressed to divine beings rather than to a plurality of prophets. In fact, a prophetic plurality is referred to quite often in Isa 40-66 and in other texts from the post-destruction period (Isa 52:8 cf. Jer 6:17; Ezek 3:17; Isa 56:10-11; 59:21; 62:6-7; Jer 29:8). On the basis of Isa 40:6-8, both Melugin and Williamson assume that the prophet is responding to the commission with discouragement or despair, comparable therefore to the reaction of Isaiah in the vision (6:5). But in view of the metaphoric language of grass and flowers occurring elsewhere (Isa 28:1; 37:27; 51:12; Ps 37:2; 90:5; 103:15; 129:6; the last with reference to the enemies of Zion), it seems more natural to assume, either that 40:6b is the reply to the seer's question followed by a prophetic comment in vv 7-8, or that the entire passage, 6c-8b, is the proclamation.

In either case, the intent is to contrast the power and permanence of the prophetic word with the impermanence of political power and human pretensions in general, we would assume with specific reference to Babylon. All of this is quite apart from the fact that there is actually no mention of a heavenly setting in Isa 40:1-8 comparable to Isa 6:1-3, 1 Kgs 22:19-23, and Job 1-2, where that scenario is explicit.

Since the authorial voice is seldom heard in chs. 40-55, it is noteworthy that first-person prophetic speech is found at the beginning of the two main parts of this section of the book—namely, 40:6a and 49:1-6.

The prologue begins, then, with a summons to prophets in general, or to a specific prophetic group, to proclaim a message of comfort and hope to Yahveh's people ('*ammî* being the object of the transitive verb *nḥm* Piel cf. 49:13; 52:9; and not the vocative, as in Vulg. *popule meus*). The position taken here is that the shifting between plural and singular in vv 1-8 with respect to those addressing and those being addressed is best explained in terms of a prophetic plurality in association with a prophetic individual—namely, the anonymous author. Isaiah 52:7-8 provides an instructive parallel: a *human* herald of good news (*mēbaššēr*) is associated with a prophetic plurality (*šōpîm*, "sentinels," a synonym for prophets cf. Ezek 3:17; 33:2, 6-7; Jer 6:17; and perhaps Isa 56:10).

It is not stated, here at the beginning, that the message is an assurance of a proximate return to the homeland addressed to Judeo-Babylonians. Juxtaposition with the prediction of exile in Babylon immediately preceding (39:5-8) might suggest this, as also the summons to leave Babylon with which this section ends (48:20-22). But for the moment all we are told is that Jerusalem, representing the people, has served its time of indentured service (*šābā'*, understood in this sense rather than the military draft, or doing time in prison for nonpayment of debts). She has satisfied her obligations and paid off her debts.

If taken literally, the statement that Israel has paid double (*kiplayim*) for all its sins could raise serious questions about the evenhanded and equitable administration of justice by God. Commentators have therefore preferred to understand it as a technical legal or economic term, either in the sense that Jerusalem has paid the due amount together with interest accruing (cf. Exod 22:3[4] *šnayim*, “twofold”), or the equivalent amount, as in Deut 15:18 (von Rad) or, in a more general sense, superabundantly (cf. Job 11:6). Ibn Ezra took a more direct approach, understanding it to mean that Israel had been called on to suffer twice as much as the nations. Torrey (p. 305), on the other hand, finds support in the Qu’ran (e.g. Sura 7:36) for his view that “paying double” is simply a case of rhetorical hyperbole. To these proposals we may add one more, suggested by Isa 51:19: Jerusalem is here being addressed by a seer and told that two bad things have happened to her, the allusion being, in all probability, to famine and military defeat, but that her sufferings are now coming to an end.

If these metaphors sound too legalistic for our taste, we can balance them with the emotional weight attaching to the repetition right at the beginning of this “book of consolation” (*naḥāmû*, *naḥāmû*). Repetition of this kind is a recurring feature in these chapters (51:9, 17; 52:1, 11; 57:14; 62:10) and helps to set the upbeat mood. There is also the command: comfort my people, speak to the heart of Jerusalem, meaning, speak words of encouragement and reassurance (cf. Gen 34:3; 50:21; Judg 19:3; 2 Sam 19:8[7]; Hos 2:16[14]; Ruth 2:13), since she can look forward to a better future.

As the closing statement of the next stanza shows, vv 3–5 constitute a prophetic proclamation rather than the utterance of a disembodied voice or a summons from a heavenly herald. The purpose is to state what must be done before the comforting words can be translated into reality. There is no mention here of preparing a route for return from exile in Babylon. It is, rather, that a processional way is to be prepared for the return of Yahveh to his people. Given what we imagine to be the state of roads at that time, this would have been normal procedure in preparation for the visit, the *parousia*, of a dignitary.

As we proceed, we shall bear in mind the possibility, suggested by Rabbi Moses Hakkohen and reported by Ibn Ezra, that these early stanzas include an allusion to the eventual rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. Isaiah 62:10–12 makes the same point, using the same language and even quoting 40:3–5 verbatim: a highway (*mēsillâ*) is to be built up and cleared of stones to prepare for Yahveh’s *parousia* and the salvation that comes with it. A similar passage, Isa 35:8–10, closely associated with chs. 40–48 as we have seen, does speak of a return to Zion by those ransomed by Yahveh along a highway (*maslûl* hapax) known as the Holy Way but does so as part of a larger scenario. Subsequent chapters will speak of a return from other quarters by land and sea (43:2, 16; 49:11–12), even from as far away as the first cataract of the Nile (49:12).

Both 35:8–10 and 62:10–12 seem to be further removed from historical particularities than 40:1–8, to which they are closely related, and we will note as we work through these chapters how the way (*derek*) to be laid down through