

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Isaiah 40**

Name of Author: **Brueggemann, W.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Isaiah 40 66 Vol 2. Brueggemann, W.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **John Knox Press.**

Pages scanned: **15 - 28**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **The Book of Isaiah TRDL7050**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: *E.L. Hamb*

Date authorised: 17.05.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

seemingly all pervasive. But it was not easy when this gospel of life beyond rapacious ideology was uttered in that ancient sixth century.

Perhaps that is why (a) the announcement is provisionally disputatious and (b) the figure of a suffering servant is, in the end, necessary to the credibility of the gospel. So it was then. So it is now—still a quite unattractive suffering, but one still needed. Only such suffering confirms the gospel news. We keep refusing the claim that we are healed by someone willing to accept the bruises (see 53:5). But we see it was so for the ancient Jews. We see it was so in the life and death of Jesus. And we dare face the staggering chance that it may continue to be so even to our time and place. It is this ancient yet contemporary text that insists that needed bruising is a present, inescapable reality. The text gives “comfort” from the God of all comfort, but not easily and not obviously—perhaps only hiddenly (see 45:15).

THE INDOMITABLE VOICE OF COMFORT 40:1–11

In 39:5–7, the prophet sounded an oracle to King Hezekiah anticipating Judah’s exile into Babylon, which in due course occurred. As the book of Isaiah is arranged, there is a long silence after that oracle, a silence that lasts over 150 years. During that painful, God-muted time, a great deal happened to Judah. There was the theologically disastrous reign of Manasseh and the reformatory rule of Josiah (2 Kings 21:1–23:28). There was the emergence of Babylon as a superpower and the inexplicable death of the good king Josiah (2 Kings 23:29–30). Most of all, there was the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the city and the burning of the temple, the termination of the dynasty, and the deportation to Babylon (2 Kings 24:20–25:30). There was a long period of dislocation, during which the exiles voiced their grief and dismay:

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has *no one to comfort* her.

[H]er downfall was appalling,
with *none to comfort* her.

Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is *no one to comfort* her.

They heard how I was groaning,
with *no one to comfort me*.
(Lam. 1:2, 9, 17, 21)

Judah groaned and cried out, as if to an empty sky. There was “none to comfort,” no protector, no one to intervene, no one powerful enough to make a positive difference. For too long Judah in dislocation experienced its life forlorn and bereft of possibility. After 39:5–7, the book of Isaiah requires a long, hopeless wait—until the utterance of chapter 40.

In chapter 40, at long last when all seemed lost, now speaks the Holy One of Israel. This oracle is the voice of Yahweh, who breaks the silence of exile and by utterance transforms the fortunes of Judah. This speech breaks both the despair of Judah and the power of Babylon; it penetrates the emptiness of exile and fills the world of Judaism with possibilities heretofore unanticipated but now available in divine decree.

40:1 **Comfort, O comfort my people,**
says your God.
²**Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,**
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD’s hand
double for all her sins.

God speaks an imperative in the midst of the long silence of exile. As is recognized from the familiar words of Handel’s *Messiah*, God’s utterance is a plural imperative—“comfort ye,” that is, “you (plural) comfort.” God decrees *comfort* where there had been “none to comfort.” We may understand “comfort” as transformative solidarity; that is, not simply an offer of solace, but a powerful intervention that creates new possibilities. Here speaks the God of all comfort, later echoed in Paul’s lyrical doxology:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

It is widely accepted by scholars that the plural of address is spoken to members of the “divine council,” the government of Yahweh in heaven that is peopled by angels and messengers. In order to understand this po-

etic, lyrical vision, it is necessary to conjure a scene of governmental functionaries in attendance on Yahweh, who presides over the government. Whereas in some scenes, that government entourage may engage in probing, informal discussion (as in 1 Kings 22:19–22), here there is no uncertainty, nothing to discuss. Here a decision is made. The head of the government speaks. Policy is determined and needs only to be implemented. The policy is *comfort* for “my people.” This is the decisive utterance in the entire book of Isaiah whereby Yahweh’s propensity toward punished, exiled Jerusalem is now completely positive.

But we may be more precise about the vision of a heavenly government. It is frequently suggested that the vision of 40:1–11 is deliberately a counterpoint to 6:1–13 in the structure of the book of Isaiah. Chapter 6 is the pivotal authorization for a message of judgment that intends Judah to be obdurate and therefore hopeless. Conversely, this vision is a “second verdict” from God, wherein God now moves to reverse the fortunes of Israel. As 6:1–13 authorizes the *theme of judgment* in chapters 1–39, so 40:1–11 now authorizes the *theme of deliverance* for the remainder of the book.

The rhetorical strategy of the tradition of Isaiah is to ground the future possibility of Judaism in the government of heaven—what Paul Hanson calls “the nerve center of the universe” (*Isaiah* 40–66, 18). That decision then is beyond the despairing weariness of Judah and does not depend upon Judah’s resolve. Conversely, the decision is also beyond the arrogant self-aggrandizement of Babylon and does not depend upon imperial co-operation. It is a decision made solely by Yahweh. The depth of resolve that makes the future certain is not unlike the confidence of an earlier utterance in Isaiah concerning another superpower:

For the LORD of hosts has planned,
and who will annul it?
His hand is stretched out,
and who will turn it back?
(14:27)

Yahweh has planned *comfort* for the exiles, and none can prevent it.

In two verbs, “speak, cry,” the members of the government of Yahweh are here instructed to give comfort to Jerusalem. The substance of the world-changing policy is in a threefold statement in verse 2:

Surely its sentence is full;
surely its penalty is paid;
surely it has suffered double.

Jerusalem has suffered enough to satisfy its affront to Yahweh. In the retributive system predominant in Israel, exile is understood as punishment for defiance of Yahweh. That is what the earlier prophets long threatened. Now, says the new decree of the government of God: Enough! Enough sentence, enough penalty, enough payment, enough exile, enough displacement! This is an assertion of forgiveness, but it is not cheap or soft or easy forgiveness. There is, in any case, a limit to the sentence. It can be satisfied and served out. And now it is ended!

40:3 A voice cries out:

**"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

**⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.**

**⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
and the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

**⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"**

**All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.**

**⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.**

**⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.**

These verses appear to be a discussion among the members of Yahweh's heavenly government about how best to implement the new decree of *comfort*. First a voice speaks, authorizing a superhighway across the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem for an easy, triumphant, dazzling return home (vv. 3–5). We have already seen in 35:8–10 the image of a highway, a construction project to make the return home dramatic, easy, and speedy. Indeed, highways were built in that ancient world primarily for processional events, when ruler and gods could parade in victory. Now, it is Yahweh and Israel who will parade in victory. Thus the *forgiveness* (vv. 1–2) issues in *homecoming*, a persistent theme in chapters 40–55. Judah can now return home because Yahweh overrides the will of Babylon to keep exiles; Babylon's will for exiles is no match for Yahweh's resolve for homecom-

ing. That homecoming, moreover, will be quite public; onlookers will see the exiles go by and will be able to see that it is Yahweh who makes this joyous return possible. The *return of Judah* amounts to an *exaltation of Yahweh*, who exhibits power and fidelity through the act. Yahweh has "gotten glory" over Egypt in the past (Exod. 14:4, 17); now Yahweh will "get glory" over Babylon.

The image of a highway for return becomes a powerful metaphor for the Christian gospel. In all four Gospel accounts (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:2–3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23), John the Baptist reiterates this image from Isaiah, so that the ministry of Jesus is presented as good news for dislocated people in the ancient world. The ministry of Jesus is a glad and public homecoming for all those alienated and dislocated.

The theme of homecoming, decisive in Isaiah's gospel and prominent in the story of Jesus, is uncommonly pertinent in our current social setting where many sense themselves dislocated as our familiar world vanishes. Commenting on the theme, Frederick Buechner asserts: "No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a *vision* of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons us" (*The Longing for Home*, 110). Although Buechner moves well beyond the witness of our text, there is no doubt that the poetry of Isaiah is an enactment among exiles of a vision of wholeness. That wholeness for them meant freedom, peaceableness, and at-homeness in Jerusalem.

But then a second voice speaks, presumably another member of the heavenly government. It speaks an imperative, "Cry out." We do not know to whom the imperative is addressed, except that the "I" of verse 6 answers, "I said." Scholars believe the "I" is the prophet (Second Isaiah, Isaiah in exile, the one who speaks these chapters to the exiles) who is charged with making the new decision from the government of God available on the earth among the displaced Jews. If this identification of the "I" is accepted, then this text is not unlike chapter 6, wherein the prophet of the eighth century is authorized to speak for the government of God. What we have here, scholars suggest, is a "call narrative" paralleling Isaiah 6, a rhetorical strategy for *human utterance* of *divine decree*.

In Isaiah 6:5, the prophet protests the summons of the government of Yahweh by asserting his own ineligibility as "unclean." Here, in parallel, the prophet protests the call by asserting that the "people is grass," that is, transitory, ephemeral, unreliable (vv. 6–7). The rhetoric suggests that the gospel assurance of comfort will be wasted on such a subject; therefore, the utterance of the new decision is not worth performing.

The resistance of the prophet, however, is countered in verse 8 as it is

in 6:6–7. Although there is no signal that a new voice speaks in verse 8, it is most likely the case. The speaker in verse 8 is perhaps the one who issued the imperative of verse 6. This insistent speaker acknowledges the point: Yes, the people is grass. But then this speaker refutes the conclusion just drawn from the assessment of transitoriness: “But!” “But the word of our God stands forever.” The offer of comfort is not based on the suitability or qualification of the people but upon the resolve of God. The good news of life beginning again for the exiles is rooted solely in Yahweh’s decision already given in verses 1–2. The prophet no longer has any ground for refusing the message or its delivery.

- 40:9 Get you up to a high mountain,
 O Zion, herald of good tidings;
 lift up your voice with strength,
 O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
 lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 “Here is your God!”
- ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him,
 his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.
- ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead the mother sheep.

The same voice as in verse 6a and verse 8 speaks now a more extended message. There is a sequence of imperatives, so that the urgency of the Lord of the divine council is now reflected in the speech from a member of the council: “get up, lift, lift, do not fear, say.” These five imperatives echo the lead imperative of verse 6: “Cry out!” “Proclaim.” The one addressed, now presumably the prophet who was present in the governmental debate in heaven, is twice addressed as “herald of good tidings.” The substance of this address is so crucial because this is the first intentional, self-conscious use of the term *gospel* in the Old Testament. The prophet-herald is to announce “gospel” to the cities of Judah. The “good news” is summarized: “Behold your God.” Or we might say, “Look, here is your God.” The gospel makes the God of Israel visible and effective in a setting from which Yahweh had seemed to be expelled. Certainly the Babylonians, in their arrogance, construed a world without Yahweh. Equally certain, the exiles in their despair

construed a world without Yahweh. Now both imperial arrogance and exilic despair are countered. Yahweh is present, powerful, active; Yahweh’s presence changes everything. Calvin says of this gospel assertion:

This expression includes the sum of our happiness, which consists solely in the presence of God. It brings along with it an abundance of all blessings; and if we are destitute of it, we must be utterly miserable and wretched; and although blessings of every kind are richly enjoyed by us, yet if we are estranged from God, everything must tend to our destruction.

We are able to see why this gospel pronouncement is so prominent in the utterance of John the Baptist, for John wants to assert that God is decisively present and at work in Jesus, in order to counter both the arrogance and the despair that shapes a world without Yahweh.

The mandated message of verse 9—which we take to be a summation of the good news—is explicated in verses 10–11. Verse 10 asserts Yahweh as a massive, conquering warrior who is seen to be an enactment of resolved power. This is an exhibit of the majesty of Yahweh. But verse 11, by contrast, portrays Yahweh as a gentle shepherd who exercises maternal care for those who are vulnerable. This is an exhibition of the mercy of Yahweh. The two verses together, with the twin images of warrior and shepherd and the twin accents of majesty and mercy, bespeak all that is crucial about the good news. Yahweh is strong enough to emancipate, gentle enough to attend to wants and needs. The same juxtaposition of themes is already given in the first entry into the land:

The LORD your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as one carries a child (Deut. 1:30–31).

Now the exiles make a second entry into the land, again assured of the majesty of the warrior, the mercy of the shepherd.

The cruciality of this opening poem for the book of Isaiah cannot be overestimated. It is the decisive decree from Yahweh’s own mouth, implemented through Yahweh’s own government, uttered in Israel by Yahweh’s own prophet. By the decree, the life of Judah is decisively altered for good. But that of course is the way of Yahweh’s gospel. The good news asserts that the world is changed by God. It is no longer the way we have long taken it to be, ordered by an arrogance that required despair. The decree is, to be sure, only a word; but it is a word enormously durable. On this

word rests the future of the Jews. Writ larger, on this word rests the future of the world, for it is an exile-ending word.

IT IS YAHWEH—INCOMPARABLE! 40:12–31

The initial gospel announcement of 40:9–11 exhibits Yahweh as strong enough to counter Babylonian claims and able enough to override the submissive despair of Jews in Babylon. The core announcement is “See, your God!” (v. 9). In verses 12–31, this God so abruptly voiced is now shown to be stronger than Babylon and attentive to the exiles. On both counts of strength and attentiveness, it is asserted that Yahweh is incomparable. There is no one or no thing to which Yahweh can be compared. Yahweh is without rival or partner or associate or analogue. Yahweh defies all conventional interpretive categories precisely because Yahweh is the original creative agent in the life of the world; it is Yahweh who governs the affairs of the nations and guards the well-being of Israel.

Yahweh without Parallel (40:12–17)

- 40:12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?
13 Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,
or as his counselor has instructed him?
14 Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice?
Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?
15 Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
16 Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
17 All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

These verses, as doxology and as polemic, assert Yahweh to be the one

worthy of praise and trust. The first part of the unit consists of a series of rhetorical questions designed to enhance Yahweh in the eyes of Israel (vv. 12–14). The first of these questions concerns the capacity of a creator God to be (1) so massive as to hold the oceans of the earth in the palm of a hand and to measure the heavens as a seamstress might measure cloth from nose to outstretched hand, and (2) so sovereign as to weigh the mountains and hills in a scale as a pharmacist weighs herbs (v. 12). The appeal is to the largeness and wonder of creation, all of which is small when seen in relation to Yahweh. The answer to the rhetorical question is, *Only Yahweh* could do all this. The questions are not unlike the great doxological “put-downs” of Job in Job 38.

The second question implies that *no one* can advise Yahweh (v. 13), and the third question implies that *no one* consulted or taught Yahweh. Thus, although the questions enhance Yahweh, they also dismiss the claims of all other gods. The dismissal in context is not generic but concerns the gods of Babylon who had too long impressed and intimidated the exiles. The subtext is that there is no ground for being intimidated by the Babylonian gods.

The second part of the unit turns from *dismissed gods* to the *minimization of the nations* (vv. 15–17). These verses begin (v. 15) and end (v. 17) with reference to all the nations; in between Lebanon, known for its forests, is cited as a case in point (v. 16). All the nations and any of the nations are as nothing. They are small and trivial and unimportant. James Muilenburg notes: “The nations are no threat; they have no power of their own; their pretensions have no weight with God.” Moreover, if verses 12–14 have dismissed Babylonian gods, then these verses in parallel fashion dismiss the reality of Babylonian politics. If taken alone, the empire of Babylon might be formidable. Seen in the purview of Yahweh, however, Babylon is emptiness (*tôhû*, v. 17), not in any way important or substantive.

Like Gods, Like Nations (40:18–24)

- 40:18 To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?
19 An idol? —A workman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.
20 As a gift one chooses mulberry wood
—wood that will not rot—
then seeks out a skilled artisan
to set up an image that will not topple.

- ²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 Has it not been told you from the beginning?
 Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
 and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
 who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 and spreads them like a tent to live in;
- ²³ who brings princes to naught,
 and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
- ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
 scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
 when he blows upon them, and they wither,
 and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

The twin accents of a doxology that enhances Yahweh and a polemic that dismisses alternatives are reiterated. The question of comparability is raised in verse 18. The poet theoretically invites nominations for comparable gods. But then, perhaps without waiting, the poet offers the nomination that must have been on everyone's horizon. The listeners might have nominated Marduk or one of the other Babylonian gods who have seemed quite formidable. But before such a nomination can be made as a credible alternative to Yahweh, the poet preempts the chance by labeling the other gods—including the powerful gods of the empire—in debunking ways. The poet permits them no noble title or adjective, but labels them polemically "idol." The utterance intends to invite ridicule, a good laugh at the gods of the oppressor state. The theological passion of the poet is enormous. As a result, he perhaps deliberately misconstrues, for imperial religion surely assumed that its gods were imbued with real power. The success of the empire, moreover, seemed to indicate as much. In a rhetorical fight that is scarcely fair, however, the poet allows for nothing of imperial claims. In a recurring motif, rival gods are dismissed as "man made" and "man adorned," having no intrinsic power of their own.

The dismissal of the other gods is matched in verses 21–23 with a doxology toward Yahweh. The lyric begins with rhetorical questions, chiding the Israelites for not having recognized who Yahweh is (v. 21). Appeal is made, in parallel with the whirlwind speeches of Job, to Yahweh as creator. Yahweh is the ground of "the beginning, the foundations." Yahweh is the source of all that is in the world. Yahweh is the subject of the great verbs of creation: "who sits, who stretches, who spreads, who brings, who makes." Everything else is an object of Yahweh's verbs. When the verbs

are positive, the object is a feature of creation. When the verbs are acts of negation, the object is nullified. Everything submits to Yahweh's power. In these verses, the move is from earth and its inhabitants and the heavens to princes and rulers. But whereas earth and heavens are established by the power of Yahweh, princes and rulers are negated. Indeed, they become "nothing" (*tôhû*), like the gods they serve (v. 23; cf. v. 17). The poet echoes the old song of mother Hannah:

The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
 he brings low, he also exalts.
 He raises up the poor from the dust;
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes
 and inherit a seat of honor.

(1 Sam. 2:7–8)

And in like manner, the poet anticipates Paul: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:28).

Verse 24 introduces a different metaphor, but the pronoun "they" in verse 24 has "princes and rulers" in verse 23 as its antecedent. Earthly governments are as fragile as newly planted growth. They are exceedingly vulnerable. When assaulted by Yahweh, one gust of Yahweh's hot air makes the nations wither. Yahweh's power is commensurate with the fragility and transitoriness of all else in the world. (Notice the same theme in 40:6–8.) The story line of this poetry is simple and rather one-dimensional, and the main argument is clear. What warrants more attention is the remarkable richness of articulation whereby the case is imaginatively made. The poet intends that listening exiles, upon hearing, should have the emotional experience of having their established "plausibility structures" diminished and nullified. There is no alternative source of life in the world except Yahweh. Any other reliance is foolishness that is sure to fail.

The Incomparable Creator (40:25–26)

40:25 To whom then will you compare me,
 or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see:
 Who created these?

He who brings out their host and numbers them,
 calling them all by name;

because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

In something like a coda, the poet again raises the issue of Yahweh's incomparability (v. 25; see v. 18). The response to the question of incomparability, however, is here somewhat different. Whereas verses 19–20 answered the question of verse 18 by a dismissal of the idols, here the question of verse 15 is answered by the naming of the stars (the "host"). No one can deny that the stars are impressive, especially in a society where astronomy was advanced and astral worship was prominent. But, insists the poet, the stars are not rivals to Yahweh. Rather, they are witnesses to the power of Yahweh; it is Yahweh who created them, who numbers them to be sure they are in the right place, who calls them by name, and who keeps them all present, available, and functioning (see Psalm 143:3–4). No other god, no Babylonian god, no idol can make any comparable claim.

The Creator as the Tireless God of Israel (40:27–31)

- 40:27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God?"
28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

The doxology and polemic of this chapter have thus far remained more or less general. Now, in these final verses, the argument becomes specific. For the first time in this extended doxological unit, the people of Judah are mentioned. The climax of this lyric concerns "Jacob, Israel." Creation

faith comes down to the crisis of God's people in exile. The statement of verse 27 is a question. The poet apparently reiterates a complaint Judah voiced in exile, perhaps a complaint given stylized, liturgical expression. Thus the statement may echo something like Psalm 44:24: "Why do you hide your face?/Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" The question of Israel, deep in crisis, awaits an answer from Yahweh; but the wait is long and the answer is not forthcoming. The dread complaint lingers in alienation between suffering Israel and silent Yahweh. The judgment of Israel against Yahweh implied in the complaint was not a remote conclusion for the exiles. They judged that Yahweh did not care or did not notice or was not able.

But the quotation of a complaint is only a launching pad for the gospel assertion that now follows. The poet, as we will subsequently see, delights to state a complaint in order to provide an overwhelming answer. The answer in verses 28–31 is introduced, as in verse 21, with questions that imply a reprimand for not understanding Yahweh better. Israel should have known!

The answer to the alleged complaint of Israel begins in sweeping monotheistic faith. Indeed, the poet of the exile provides the most extreme claim for the incomparability and singularity of Yahweh as creator. But Yahweh's work as creator is not a one-time deal. It is continuing work that entails Yahweh's endless, energetic attentiveness to creation. Yahweh is not worn out, not exhausted. Yahweh the creator God is directly attentive to the faint and powerless, to those who have no energy of their own. The creator God sustains and gives life to creatures who have no intrinsic power for life of their own. In context, of course, it is precisely the exiles who are resourceless, faint, and powerless. It is precisely for them that Yahweh is decisive.

The concluding verses state a drastic, Yahwistic either/or. *Either* folk will be faint, weary, and exhausted—indeed, even youths, even high-energy young people with seemingly inexhaustible supplies of energy! *Or* those who hope and wait and expect Yahweh will have strength to fly, to run, to walk—with no weariness or fainting (v. 31). Yahweh is the single variable—either weakness or Yahweh. There is no third alternative, no chance for strength apart from Yahweh—not from the gods who are nothing, not from the princes and rulers who are nothing, and certainly not from the exiles themselves.

Taken at face value, this long doxology is designed to enhance Yahweh. It is a piece of eloquent theology. But taken in context, its function is pastoral and political. Pastorally, it asserts that the seemingly abandoned

exiles are not alone but have available a source of energy and power. Politically, the poetry is an invitation for exilic Jews to conjure their life Yahwistically, outside the bounds of Babylonian possibility. Indeed, the double "nothing" of verses 17 and 23 intends precisely to debunk imperial gods and imperial rules. Israel, in territory governed by Yahweh, may take up a life of new possibility.

We need not be so enthralled by the eloquent poetry that we miss the sharp bite of faith given here. In our own time, it is not very difficult to identify as Babylon the global system of consumer capitalism that seems to sweep all before it, so that it has the power through its relentless "liturgy" (that is, advertising) to tell us what is possible. The struggle for women and men of faith now, as always, is to be able to imagine our life out beyond *the system* that seems totally comprehensive and encompassing. It is an act of remarkable courage to utter such a doxological claim that always includes a polemic against alternative claims.

It is also an act of boldness, then or now or any time, to engage in reimagining and reconstruing life in terms of Yahweh, the creator who brings to nought both the wonders of creation and the pretenders of politics. It is easy for people of faith to conclude that the creator God is an irrelevance in a contemporary system that seems to be set in stone.

The poet, however, will not permit such a verdict. The very God taken to be obsolete is the one who governs and gives strength, who makes it possible for life to be taken up again without the force of empire. The claim made by the poet is remarkable, against all the evidence of the empire. It must have seemed outrageous then, as it does now. But there must have been enough listening and treasuring to conclude that this One who speaks can override the nothingness offered by imperial task masters. It is this incomparable, tireless God who is exhibited in the gospel assertion "See, your God!" (40:9).

YAHWEH, POWERFUL AND MERCIFUL 41:1-29

The intent of Second Isaiah is to reconstrue the life and history and destiny of exilic Israel by placing Yahweh at the center of its existence and discernment. Babylonian ideology had eliminated Yahweh from the horizon of Israel's historical possibility, and now the poet counters the effectiveness and persuasiveness of Babylonian propaganda. That is, the poet sets forth the gospel claim "See, your God!" (40:9). The work of the poet is to