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ISAIAH

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42. Isaiah 40:1-11

- 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
- 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and declare to her
that her term of service is over,
that her iniquity has been pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make level in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 Let every valley be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low.
Let the uneven ground become smooth
and the rugged places a plain.
- 5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all flesh as one will see it,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
- 6 A voice says, "Cry!"
Another asks,^a "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass,
and all its strength^b like a wildflower.
- 7 The grass withers, flowers fade
when the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
- 8 The grass withers, flowers fade,
but the word of our God stands forever.
- 9 Get up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings.^c
Lift up your voice with might,
O evangelist Jerusalem
Lift it up, do not fear.

- Say to the cities of Judah
 "Behold, your God."
 10 See, the Lord GOD comes in power,
 and his arm triumphs for him.
 See, his reward is with him,
 and his retribution before him.
 11 Like a shepherd he will feed his flock,
 gathering them in his arms;
 he will carry them in his bosom,
 gently leading those with young.

- a. The translation is that of the MT. The LXX and 1QIs^a read "and I said" (BHS). Cf. Petersen, 20.
 b. The exact meaning in this context is contested (cf. Kuyper).
 c. The syntax of *m^e baššeret šīyyôn* is debated. The LXX, Targum, and Vulgate and render it as an accusative object = "good tidings to Zion" (cf. 41:27; 52:7). Others take it in apposition (cf. 41:14) = "herald of good tidings" (Delitzsch, Dillmann, Torrey).

Selected Bibliography

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In the prologue of chapter 40 God announces his will for a new dispensation toward Israel of forgiveness, peace, and restoration. His redemptive message is then proclaimed from the heavenly council as a confirmation of the truth of his word, and redeemed Jerusalem is called as a herald of the good tidings.

1. Structure and Context

The initial verses of the prologue, vv. 1–8, have often been divided into smaller units, either according to a form-critical (Begrich) or rhetorical-critical analy-

sis (Muilenburg): vv. 1-2; 3-5; 6-8. However, from their style, content, and movement, vv. 1-8 clearly function as a unit within chapter 40. Somewhat more controversial is whether vv. 9-11 also constitute part of the prologue. I shall argue below that these verses do form part of the prologue, even serving as its climax. As is often the case in Second Isaiah, the creative force of the author in shaping the content of his prophetic proclamation allowed him to employ a traditional literary genre (a herald's cry) in a fresh fashion for his own kerygmatic goals.

The more difficult and truly the decisive exegetical question turns on establishing the context for the prologue's interpretation. One's decision fundamentally affects the understanding of both the passage and the whole of Second Isaiah. The problem, of course, emerges because of the lack of any superscription, which usually introduces a new prophetic collection. To suggest that it has been lost in transmission is a completely speculative thought and highly misleading. It is also clear from the attempts of the LXX and the Targum to supply an alleged addressee ("priests"; "prophets") that the problem was recognized.

One characteristic way of establishing a context, which increasingly emerged as the majority opinion once the authorship of chapter 40 was assigned to an anonymous prophet of the sixth century, was to see the prologue as a call narrative of a new prophet. However, apart from the difficulty of introducing a first person pronoun into v. 6 according to the LXX's reading, the unit lacks most of the elements of a traditional call and shares a host of anomalies, such as the unidentified voices of vv. 3 and 6.

A much more compelling reconstruction of a context was proposed by Cross in 1953. Cross argued that vv. 1-8 reflect a genre that he described as "divine directives to angelic heralds," with its setting in the divine council. Parallels for this genre occur in 1 Kings 22:19ff., Isa. 6:1ff. Job 1:6ff., and in extrabiblical literature. However, Cross then returned to the earlier theory of the prophet's call in vv. 6-8 and spoke of a mixed genre with elements from a call narrative and a divine council.

Finally, credit for a new, decisive interpretation of the prologue goes to Seitz's brilliant essay of 1990, which builds on Cross's analysis but moves the discussion in a very different direction. Seitz sharply rejects the call narrative context along with all the accompanying biographical and psychological features that have been widely assumed (cf. Westermann). Rather, he sees the exegetical key to lie in an intertextual relation between chapters 40 and 6 of Isaiah. Both chapters share the language of the heavenly court. In a conscious dependency on chapter 6, chapter 40 does not offer a new independent call narrative, but rather provides a reapplication of Isaiah's call. The commission of Isaiah of Jerusalem has been fulfilled by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587. The prophetic message of judgment has been summarized in 40:6b-7 by an intertextual reference to 28:2b-4: "the fading flower of his glorious beauty." However,

the point of the prologue is the announcement of a divine decision that now reverses the commission of judgment assigned to Isaiah: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over" (v. 2). The prologue signals that the old age is passing away and a new day is dawning. Historic Isaiah is now a distant figure of the past, but extending into the future is the word of God which endures forever. Seitz writes: "God speaks again from the divine council as he had done formerly in Israel's day. . . . [T]he word of God goes forth directly, commissioning the heralds of good tidings" (245).

The full force of Seitz's argument comes out strongly when one reviews his interpretation of the different voices involved in the prologue. In vv. 1-2 God speaks to his divine court in plural imperatives. In vv. 3-5 a divine attendant delivers his charge. Then in v. 6a a heavenly voice addresses someone individually with the imperative to "cry." Seitz understands vv. 6b-7 to be an objection: "What shall I cry? All flesh is grass; it withers when the breath of Yahweh blows on it." In this objection Seitz sees an intertextual reference to the words of 28:1-4 that summarize Isaiah's judgment on Israel, which constitutes the "former things" of chapters 1-39. However, the objection is overridden in v. 8 and a charge of "new things" is delivered in vv. 9-11.

In contrast to Seitz's interpretation of the different voices in the prologue, specifically vv. 6-8, the traditional interpretation (e.g., Delitzsch, Elliger) found the answer to the question of v. 6a beginning immediately with v. 6b, which was then regarded more as a seeking for clarification of content than as an objection. In spite of the evanescence of all things (vv. 6b-7), God's word remains steadfast forever (v. 8). However, Beuken (*Jesaja*, IIA, 23) correctly observes that this traditional interpretation does not adequately deal with the tension between vv. 7 and 8 in the passage, and thus his division of voices is akin to Seitz's.

I fully agree with Seitz's interpretation that the key to the prologue lies in its intertextual reinterpretation of Isaiah 6 and thus serves as a crucial interpretive bridge between First and Second Isaiah. It signals the change from the "old things" of chapters 1-39 to the "new things" of chapters 40ff. The former deals with judgment associated with Assyria, the latter with redemption from Babylon. However, as will become clear in the exposition, I differ from Seitz in his characterization of the continuing role of Isaiah of Jerusalem and the nature of his relation to the new things.

For Seitz, Isaiah of Jerusalem is a voice of the past who has been assigned to an old and distant era, and his words are only summarized as "the last gasp of the old" in vv. 6b-7. The message of the new is now given by various anonymous voices. However, I will argue that Isaiah of Jerusalem is understood as the proclaimer of both the "old things" of judgment and the "new things" of salvation. The message of the prologue is that, although the prophetic judgment has been fulfilled, Isaiah's word of future salvation is now about to be accom-

plished in the new things. The continuity between chapters 1–39 and 40ff. does not lie in the historical *persona* of Isaiah—in this Seitz is right—but rather in the word of God, faithfully proclaimed by Isaiah, which extends into the future and fulfills itself in the new things of which Isaiah had also spoken. The strongest evidence for the continuity of chapter 40 with First Isaiah is the ongoing description of the “new” in terms of an intertextual reference to the earlier corpus of his prophecy.

2. Exposition

[40: 1–2] The prologue opens with God’s calling on divine attendants (note the plural form of the imperative) to “comfort my people” (first person). The command is then interrupted in the unit with the formula, “says your God.” The formula is somewhat unusual since normally it is given in a past tense, and here the present seems to reinforce the sense of urgency. Some form-critics (e.g., Elliger) have argued that the formula marks the end of the divine speech and that another voice takes up the command in v. 2, addressing God in the third person. However, this is hairsplitting, and the coherence of the divine speech in vv. 1–2 should be maintained. Most important is that God confirms his relation with the people of Israel. He is their God and they are his people, a formula that reverberates as a distant echo from the ancient covenant tradition.

An immediate elaboration of the message of comfort follows with three announcements of change in the divine purpose, each introduced with a *kî*: “that her term of service is over,” “that her iniquity has been pardoned,” and “that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” The reference to “double for all her sins” is not to suggest that Israel received more punishment than deserved, but rather the author makes use of a legal image already found in Ex. 22:3(4), which requires a guilty one to restore double for a crime.

In an unpublished paper submitted to a Yale graduate seminar, Naoto Kamano argues for much closer attention to intertextual references in the prologue of chapter 40. He makes the point that recognition of an intertextual echo is often the key to the reinterpretation that Second Isaiah effected on the prior Isaianic tradition. The first example of such an interaction occurs immediately in v. 1: “comfort, comfort” (*naḥ^a mû, naḥ^a mû*). The verb in its piel form occurs frequently in Second and Third Isaiah (49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13), and sounds a note of divine restoration that is central to the second half of the book of Isaiah.

However, the more difficult question turns on the verbal parallel in 12:1. In a liturgical passage that concludes the first section of First Isaiah (chapters 2–12), the voice of faithful Israel testifies to its faith in God’s eschatological promise of salvation. “In that day” his anger would turn and he would “comfort” *te naḥ^a mēnî*) his people. In its song of praise, an obedient remnant anticipates in faithful worship

the experience of divine comfort. What then is the relation of this passage in 12:1 to that of 40:1? The usual historical-critical response is that 12:1 is simply a later redactional retrojection from a late postexilic period expressing the hope of Second Isaiah. Indeed, from a diachronic, redactional analysis, 12:1 may well be a retrojection. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical issue raised by a synchronic reading of these two texts that have been juxtaposed according to a certain order cannot be so lightly dismissed. At least for the reader of the book as a whole, the reference in 40:1 resonates immediately with its earlier parallel in 12:1.

But 40:1 does more than just resonate with 12:1. Its use in the prologue effects a reinterpretation of First Isaiah. Chapter 12 looks forward in anticipation to the day when God delivers Israel, when his anger has abated, and he comforts her. Chapter 40 announces the beginning of God's comfort to his people, who have already experienced judgment. Moreover, chapter 12 is understood as a song of thanksgiving for the deliverance from Assyria, but chapter 40, following 39:7, suggests that the assurance of comfort is for those being freed from Babylon's oppression.

Of greatest hermeneutical significance is that through the technique of intertextual exegesis the radically new word of deliverance announced by Second Isaiah has been already adumbrated in chapter 12. The comfort of 40:1 was already a part of the prophetic word of First Isaiah. Far from being simply a voice of the past, Isaiah's word of promise is precisely "the word of our God [that] stands forever" (40:8).

Another important intertextual link between chapter 40 and First Isaiah can be traced in the reference to Israel's iniquity (*'āwôn*) being forgiven (v. 2). Much of Isaiah's attack on Israel focused on a "people laden with iniquity" (1:4; cf. 5:18). Indeed, the people's self-indulgence and refusal to repent was an iniquity that would not be forgiven, but rather issued in a death sentence (22:14). Again, Isaiah's response of despair in seeing the Lord seated upon a throne (6:1ff.) arose not only on account of his own guilt, but from his dwelling among a sinful people. Only after his sin was expiated did he hear the voice within the divine council and accept his commission. Yet at the same time, the description of the redeemed city Zion, "a peaceful habitation, an immovable tent," is climaxed by an anticipation that the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity (33:24; cf. 27:9).

[3–5] A voice from the heavenly council now picks up the divine message of coming redemption with a cry that continues the urgent imperatives to a plural addressee: "prepare the way," "make level a highway" for the coming of "our God." Then the imagery of the highway is further expanded. Valleys will be raised, mountains levelled, and the rough terrain made flat. This is in preparation for the unveiling of the glory of God that will be revealed to all. The oracle closes with a formulaic assurance that "the mouth of Yahweh has spoken."