

CONTEXT

Isaiah 40:1-10 marks a pivotal transition in the Book of Isaiah, unveiling the second major division, often called the 'Second Isaiah' (Isa. 40-55). This section shifts dramatically away from the themes of judgement and condemnation that dominate Isaiah 1-39 and towards a sense of comfort, hope and eventual restoration.¹ In addition to thematic change, Isaiah 40 ushers in an intensification of a poetic mode of discourse in comparison to the mixed approach of prophetic poetry and prose found in previous chapters.² The structure of four strophes and usage of parallelism and double entendre, amongst others, are also noted about Isaiah 40 but sit outside the confines of this assignment.³

Addressed to the exiles in Babylon, the passage introduces God's assurance of Israel's redemption and return to their homeland despite their initial disobedience, framing him as jointly a powerful sovereign and a tender shepherd who cares for those whom he loves.⁴ Crucially, the passage contains a reference to the imminent arrival of the God in power and as a reward for his people, and it is this motif that is echoed by John the Baptist (Mt 3:3, Mk 1:2-3, Lk 3:4-6, Jn 1:23) to declare the coming of Christ, connecting the hope of God's intervention and comfort in the Old Testament with its fulfilment in Christ's arrival.

DIVINE COUNCIL – ISAIAH 40:1-5

The opening of Isaiah 40 introduces the audience to the God of enduring comfort. Such a motif of comfort and direct speech to the heart of Jerusalem counters the pitiful opening of Lamentations where, imagined as a widowed woman, she (Jerusalem) has no one to provide such comfort (Lam. 1:2).⁵ Whilst the call for comfort is clear, some

¹ A. V. Seters, 'Isaiah 40:1-11' in *Interpretation* 35, 4 (1981), p. 402.

² Katie Heffelfinger, 'Isaiah 40-55', in *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah*, ed. by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (London: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 119.

³ T. Eddinger, 'An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1-11 (17)', in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 9 (1999), p. 119.

⁴ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 45.

⁵ Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 271.

questions remain concerning the speaker and recipients. The imperative tone suggests a directive from YHWH, but towards whom?

Geller suggests the author employs intentional ambiguity, which masks the proposed audience of YHWH's divine call to provide comfort to those in exile.⁶ This leaves an opening that arrives at two possibilities. YHWH speaks to either his divine beings (angels) or human agents (prophets) and instructs them in turn to deliver the message of comfort to Jerusalem. If the former becomes the accepted reading, then Isaiah 40 should be correctly seen in the context of the divine council.

The unusual usage of a series of plural imperatives within the initial verses of Isaiah 40 and the additional usage of plural prenominal suffixes in verses 1 and 3 suggest that the instructions are issued to a concealed audience with required actions that cannot be achieved by 'earthly addressees'⁷ supporting the view that YHWH addresses his heavenly subjects with the instruction to provide comfort to Israel. Seitz takes this further with his comparative work on Isaiah 40:1-10 in relation to Isaiah 6 and Zechariah 1, two accepted divine council encounters, to highlight similarities and a pattern of approach that includes reassurance and commissioning which further enables Isaiah 40 to be read in the context of a divine council.⁸

The consequence of such a heavenly council is profound. The blind and unbelieving people of Jerusalem (42:18-20; 43:8), who further feel abandoned (49:14), will become the recipients of unmerited divine comfort and restoration because God has instructed his heavenly court to ensure it is so. Angelic beings now act on their behalf to usher in a Jerusalem that is free to 'fulfil her new role in God's plan'.⁹

CHANGING VOICES - ISAIAH 40:6-8

⁶ S. Geller, 'A Poetic Analysis of Isaiah 40:1-2', in *The Harvard Theological Review* 77. 3-4 (1984), p. 415.

⁷ M. Heiser, 'The Divine Council in Late Canonical and Non-Canonical Second Temple Jewish Literature' (PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), p. 103.

⁸ C. Seitz, 'The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah', in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109. 2 (1990), pp. 239-240.

⁹ John Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary: Isaiah 34-66* vol. 25 (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), p. 609.

The acceptance of a divine council in Isaiah 40:1-5 helps establish an understanding of the levels of communication that are present within the text, and yet significant challenges remain concerning who speaks and when in verses 6-8. The fact that the succeeding verses of Isaiah 40:12-31 are comparatively straightforward, with a singular prophetic voice that references God and Jacob taking centre stage throughout, adds to the potential that this ambiguity is a deliberate act by the author.¹⁰

The opening voice of verse 6a resonates with the approach found in verse 3 but with one subtle difference. Rather than plural imperatives akin to earlier verses, 6a contains a singular imperative command in the form of קִרְא. This suggests an angelic member of the divine court is bringing a command to the prophetic author, and it is he who interjects in verse 6b with a question. However, there are issues with reaching this conclusion. Namely, while the LXX potentially supports reading the question of 6b as the narrator referring to himself for the first time, the MT suggests that this is a further unnamed voice at play beyond the prophet.¹¹

Seitz supports a view that verse 6b is unlikely to be the voice of the prophet based on a comparison of other divine council scenes in Isaiah 6, Zechariah 1 and 1 Kings 22. His comparison with Isaiah 6 suggests that if the prophet is the accepted voice, the objection presented in verse 6b should be met with a clear statement of acceptance in verse 8, much like Isaiah 6:8, but this is not the case.¹² If the prophet is not the speaker of verse 6b, then at least he has been transferred via vision into the occurrence of the divine council and is witnessing an exchange between angelic beings.¹³

This is key because the angels are not engaged in a conversation of their own thoughts but rather relay the intentions of the Lord towards Jerusalem, and it is this that

¹⁰ P. Tull, 'Who Says What to Whom: Speakers, Hearers, and Overhearers in Second Isaiah', in *Partners with God: Theological and Critical Readings of the Bible*, ed. by Shelley Birdsong and Serge Frolov (Claremont: Claremont Press, 2017), p. 164.

¹¹ D. Clines, 'The Many Voices of Isaiah 40', in *Let us Go up to Zion*, ed. by Iain Provan and Mark Boda (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 114.

¹² Seitz, *The Divine Council*, p. 236.

¹³ Roy Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1976), p. 83.

transcends voice and agency. Not only is comfort the overarching divine agenda (vv. 1-2), not only will the previous obstacles between the Lord and His people be overcome (vv. 3-5), but the recipients are served with a reminder; they are frail and finite (even more so in a season of exile) in comparison to the one who endures forever.¹⁴

COMFORTED TO COMFORTER – ISAIAH 40:9-11

The purpose of comfort and the reminder of divine endurance come into plain view in the concluding verses. For Limburg, such purposes include the ushering in of a new message from the mouth of the prophet.¹⁵ Their witness to the divine council should now lead into a fresh proclamation for the nation, and the pessimism and frailty of verses 6-8 are replaced with a call for response through the language of ‘go up’, ‘bring’ and ‘lift up’.¹⁶ As such, the comforted and imminently restored Jerusalem is invited to transition into the role of herald, being ‘*evangelists of the good tidings*’ to Judah and beyond.¹⁷

The feminine singular particle (מְבַשֵּׂרָה) for herald in Isaiah 40:9 appears to offer a challenge to this understanding. For Landy, the feminine structure renders the herald unlikely to be Zion/Jerusalem as she contrasts the male herald of Isaiah 52:7, but that is not necessarily the case.¹⁸ The expected masculine heralds of Isaiah 41:27 and 52:7 present the bringing of a message to Zion/Jerusalem.¹⁹ Should we not expect a call that places the nation as their own herald to the good news to, therefore, be uniquely different and subsequently feminine in nature as it is here? The consistent use of feminine verb forms throughout, flowing from the instruction toward feminine character

¹⁴ Geoffrey Grogan, *Isaiah: The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), p. 579.

¹⁵ James Limburg, ‘Isaiah 40:1-11’, in *Interpretation* 29. 4 (Richmond: Union Theological Seminary, 1975), p. 408.

¹⁶ Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55*, pp. 83-85.

¹⁷ Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 300.

¹⁸ F. Landy, ‘Isaiah 40: A Study in Poetic Technique’, <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/LandyIsaiah40.pdf> 29 November 2024.

¹⁹ H.G.M. Williamson, ‘Good News to or From Zion? A Reconsideration of Isaiah 40:9’, in *Herald of Good Tidings: Essays on the Bible, Prophecy, and the Hope of Israel in Honour of Antti Laato*, ed. by Lotta Valve and Pekka Lindqvist (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021), p. 17.

at the outset, adds to a unique picture; Zion/Jerusalem is addressed as the herald of good news with a command to bring such to the daughter cities of Judah.

CONCLUSION

Isaiah 40:1-10 serves as a theological and literary pivot in the Book of Isaiah, and more specifically chapters 40-55, presenting a transformative message of comfort and restoration. The passage's deliberate ambiguity in voice and agency invites rich interpretative exploration, including the potential context of a divine council. This framing underscores YHWH's sovereign authority and enduring compassion as angelic beings act to deliver His promises. The shift from lamentation to proclamation culminates in Zion's call to herald the good news, embodying a transition from recipient of divine comfort to active participant in God's redemptive plan. Isaiah 40 thus encapsulates both the immediacy of restoration and the far-reaching vision of messianic fulfilment.

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