

I. AN IN-OTHER-WORDS EXPLANATION [EXEGESIS] OF THE TEXT

Part 1: Verses 1-2: A welcome announcement of a turn in Yahweh's Intentions for Israel, from judgment in exile to a joyous, glory-filled return from it.

A single figure speaks for God primarily¹ to a group² of angelic beings. He commands that comfort come to God's covenant "people" (i.e., the Israelites who are in exile in Babylon). The comfort comes by way a) "speaking tenderly," as a husband to a wife, to Jerusalem, and b) by "calling out" three things: (i) that her time of military-service-style hardship is over, (ii) that her iniquity has been forgiven (in one sense by the 'time served', but in another, by a future payment for sin as described later in the book); and (iii) that she has, as stipulated in Exodus, paid twice back to the Offended Party for the crime committed against Him.

Part 2: Verses 3-5: A decisive announcement of the plan through which comfort will come, as well the means of its execution and its desired effect. (verses 3-5).

A heavenly being declares God's plan to build a direct, straight, smooth highway for Himself³ that runs, surprisingly and audaciously, through the wilderness from Babylon to Jerusalem. The execution of the plan will be by God (as reflected in the use of the passive voice, "will be") and done by, in the words of the figurative language, raising valleys, lowering mountains, straightening crooked ways, and making bumps smooth. The point of the metaphor is that God will remove any obstacle in the path of His way to bring the Israelite's straight home from 'captivity'⁴ and to do it in such a way as a) to have the effect of dramatically manifesting His glory (v. 5) and b) to be in keeping with His commitment to act tenderly towards Israel (a smooth, gentle, VIP ride as it were).

Part 3: Verses 6-7: An invitatory announcement to "call out" is met with objection on the grounds that human life is too transitory for God's purpose to be seen and His plan to be fulfilled

¹ This is a fairly secure judgment based on cultural and biblical context (Isa 6, 1 Kings 22:18ff.), but a more surface-level (but no less significant) read is that the words are now spoken by God (whether directly or indirectly) to the readers (plural).

² We know it is a group because the word comfort is plural, a command addressed to a group.

³ That the highway of "of" and "for" God more than it is "for the exiles" places emphasis on God, which is elaborated upon with reference to his agency (by use of passive verbs in v. 4) and glory (v.5). The highway is associated with God more than the exiles might also be because, in ancient times, highways were built not so much for public travel, as for gods, priests, etc., to process to and from shrines and such.

⁴ They weren't captives in the sense of being incarcerated; they were free to live and do pretty much as they wished in Babylon; it was akin to captivity in the sense that they were traumatized by displacement, living where they did not wish to live, and removed from their physical and spiritual home, temple, etc. (See, for example, Ps 137.)

Another unnamed voice from within the angelic council summons the prophet to call out, but he objects. Why? On the grounds that humans, described as withering grass and fading flowers, soon die off, because the spirit/breath of God snuffs them out. Key question: Why does the prophet complain on this basis? One view is that prophet's objection, citing grass and flowers, is based on Isaiah 28:2b-4, which is a summary of the prophet's earlier ministry of judgment. In other words, Isaiah is saying my ministry of judgment was that of a former era; I have nothing to say in the present. My own view is that the prophet's objection is based on his own awareness that the historical Isaiah of the 8th century should be (and is?) long dead and gone. This is why all the voices in the passage are anonymous and why the prophet doesn't say "and I said" of himself—Isaiah of Jerusalem—in v. 6 but "he said"; in other words either Isaiah of Jerusalem is pondering how he could still be alive to see and proclaim such things, or he has been replaced by a much later disciple who explores the enigma of a prophet's mortality from the perspective of himself, a mortal replacement. The point: "Lord, prophets and all others die,⁵" but what is continuing is Your prophetic word; it endures, bringing salvation and comfort.

Part 4: Verse 8: Adding to the dilemma of transitory human voices, there now comes a climactic response to the prophet's objections that comes from an unannounced voice (verse 8)

Verse 8 is taken by most interpreters to be a response to the prophet's objection that everyone, including him, is transitory. Yes, Isaiah has gone (or at least should have, given we are speaking of a time 150+ years ahead) and present different voices (if such they be) will go too, but: the word of God stands forever. Here the word of God is specified in terms of the prophecy of Israel's safe return home, which is good news that was hard for the people to believe.ⁱ

Part 5: Verses 9-11. With the prophet's objection addressed, either he (or an angelic voice) commends sharing the good news of God's imminent arrival

Either the prophet himself or a further unspecified heavenly voice summons the city of Zion (i.e., its people) to become prominent heralds of good news, proclaiming the exciting, arresting news that God is coming! God is coming in might, as vanquisher of Babylon, bringing home the wages of conquest—the redeemed exiles themselves (v. 10). But, equally, God is coming in tenderness as a conscientious shepherd who does general tending, specific self-gathering, and taking special care of the needful (v. 11). (There seems to be telescoping in the time reference in that the exiles are pictured as returning with God, but the people are already present in Jerusalem proclaiming good news of God's return to other cities in Judah.⁶)

II. HELPFUL QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

Now both imperial arrogance and exilic despair are countered. Yahweh is present, powerful, active; Yahweh's presence changes everything." (Brueggemann, 21, brackets my adaptation.)

⁵ Which, among other things makes your long-term plans hard to follow and believe.

⁶ Whybray: "Jerusalem is pictured as God's messenger or herald already aware of the victory and under orders to spread the news of it. The victory, believed by the prophet to be imminent, is pictured as already won." (51-52.)

"[T]he sum of our happiness . . . 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" (John Calvin on Isaiah 40:9-11, cited by Brueggemann.)

"What is in prospect is an amazing new revelation of the glory of the Lord, not now for Israel only (as in her temple, for instance), but for all mankind (v. 5; cf. 60:1-3)." (Grogan, 242.)

"Already the Lord is near and we share the excitement of the threefold 'Look! (verses 9-10)" (Alec Motyer.)

"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, [some of] the exiles in their despair construed a world without Yahweh." (Brueggemann)

A. A Major transition in the Book of Isaiah

Kidner, "We emerge in 40:1 in a different world Nothing is said of the intervening century and a half; we awake, so to speak, on the far side of the disaster, impatient for the end of captivity. In chapters 40–48 liberation is in the air; there is the persistent promise of a new exodus, with God at its head; there is the approach of a conqueror, eventually disclosed as Cyrus, to break Babylon open; there is also a new theme unfolding, to reveal the glory of the call to be a servant and a light to the nations. All this is expressed with soaring exultant eloquence, in a style heard only fitfully hitherto (35:1-10; 37:26f.), but now sustained so as to give its distinctive tone to the remaining chapters of the book." (Cited in Gowan, EBC 6, 240.)

B. Historical Background

In 539/539 BC, the exile of the Hebrews in the land of Babylon ended when the country was conquered by Cyrus, king of Persia. He allowed the Hebrews to return to their homeland and restore their temple and worship.

C. Summary of Chapter 40

"Chapter 40 introduces the concern of chapters 41 to 55 by addressing three questions the Jewish exiles will be asking: (1) Does Yahweh want to deliver (vv. 1-11); (2) Can Yahweh deliver us (vv. 12-26); Will Yahweh deliver us (vv. 27-31)? By answering all of these questions affirmatively Isaiah successfully establishes the foundation of divine grace for chaps 41–55." (ZNIVSB, 1393.)

D. Summary of 40:1–11

1. Childs (following Seitz): "In the prologue of chapter 40 [vss. 1-11] 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 Israel is called as a herald of the good tidings." (*Isaiah*, OTL, 294.)
2. Childs again (*ibid.*): "The key to the prologue lies in its intertextual reinterpretation of Isaiah 6 and thus serves as a crucial interpretive bridge . . . It signals the change from the "old things" of chapters 1 to 39 to the "new things" of chapters 40ff. The former deals with judgment associated with Assyria, the latter with redemption from Babylon."

E. Summary of 40:1–8⁷

⁷ Some regard the unit to end at verse 8 (e.g., Brueggemann), others at verse 11 (e.g., Childs).

Brueggemann: “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 super highway across the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem for an easy, triumphant, dazzling return home (vss. 3-5). We have already seen in 35:8–10 the image of the 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* (vss. 1-2) issues in *homecoming*, a persistent theme in chapters 40 to 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 homecoming. 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. 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.” (*Isaiah 40-66*, 18-19.)

F. Summary of 40:9-11

“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 is 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.)”

“A highway in the desert”

“Was it a processional highway prepared for the triumphal entry of a God or king such as pictured from Babylonian sources? Was there originally a cultic setting for the imagery? Within Second Isaiah the theme of a highway is part of a larger set of images describing the transformation of the wilderness into a garden (41:18ff, 42:15ff) in order to facilitate the return of the Exiles. Equally important for the biblical imagery is the appropriation of the language of the exodus from Egypt (11:16, 51:9ff, 52:11ff.) as the two events are fused into a single all-encompassing paradigm of divine deliverance. . . . Already in chapter 11 the promise of the return of the dispersed Judah (v. 12) is portrayed in terms of a highway from Assyria. Chapter 40 again signals the fulfillment of this promise, but adjusts the geography to include also the wilderness separating the Babylonian exiles from Zion.

However, the strongest . . . tie with 40:3-5 is found in chapter 35. The chapter addresses the return of Zion expressed in terms of a highway called the Holy Way (v. 8), of the seeing of the glory of the Lord (v. 2), and the coming of God to save his people (v. 4).” (Childs, 299.)

G. Application to the New Testament

Brueggemann (p. 19): “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 public homecoming for all those alienated and dislocated.”

Childs (p. 303): “The reality of God’s salvation was manifest in Jesus Christ in such a way that his advent provided a perfect morphological fit according to its redemptive substance with the Old Testament promise [given here]. In a word, the salvific significance of Jesus Christ was understood in the light of the Old Testament prophecy, while, conversely, the Old Testament promise gained its true meaning from the revelation of the Christ in the fullness of God’s time.”

III. RELEVANT PASSAGES

Isaiah 5: 22-24—an oracle of doom against drunken legislators, whose end is described in terms of a flower fading or falling, comparable to 40:

Isaiah 6:1-13—*Isaiah’s previous commission involving the pronouncement of judgment in the form of an invasion by Assyria (whereas Isaiah’s commission now involves pronouncing a time of restoration in the form of return from Babylonian exile)*

Isaiah 12:1-3—*an earlier prediction of the sort of comfort and rescue announced in Isaiah 40:1-11.*⁸
Similar wording is marked in bold.

¹You will say in that day:

“I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
that you might **comfort** me.

² “Behold, God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will **not be afraid;**
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation.”

³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day:

“Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples,
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Isaiah 28:1-6—an oracle against Samaria (and its drunken rulers) in which a similar metaphor is made of its beauty fading like a flower (in contrast to the unfading wreath, so implied, of God). The leads some to regard 40:

Isaiah 35:2-8

⁸ Childs elaborates as follows: “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 . . . the radically new word of deliverance announced by Second Isaiah has already been 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). (*Isaiah*, OTL, 298.)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; **the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;** ²it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing . . . **They shall see the glory of the LORD,** the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; **fear not!** Behold, **your God will come** with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth **in the wilderness,** and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸**And a highway shall be there,** and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.¹ ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰**And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.** (ESV)

ⁱ Note that what helps belief is the joyful boldness on the part of the herald. (S)he isn't afraid and, believing the good news, is happy to tell anyone and everyone that God is present, good, mighty, caring and redeeming