



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of Isaiah 40:1-11

“Babylon’s will for exiles is no match for Yahweh’s resolve for homecoming.”
(Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 18-19.)

“Such a command [as ‘Comfort my people’] must have been a great joy to hear, when the prophet had already been fulfilling such a discouraging commission as given in 6:9-13.” (Grogan, *EBC*, 241-42.)

“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.” (Brueggemann, 21-22.)

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Message about Yahweh’s new Intentionⁱ

¹Comfort, comfortⁱⁱ My peopleⁱⁱⁱ, says your God.*

²Speak with tender encouragement^{iv} to Jerusalem.^v

Call out to her,

that her hard service^{vi} is over,
that her iniquity has been pardoned,^{*vii}

**that she has received from the hand of Yahweh
double^{viii} for all her sins.**

Message about Yahweh’s plan^{ix}

³A voice^x is calling out:*

**“In the wilderness^{xi} prepare the way of Yahweh.
Make a straight highway^{xii} in the desert for our God.”**

The plan

⁴Every valley will be^{xiii} lifted up,

And every mountain and hill will be lowered.*

The execution

**The crooked way will be straightened,
And the bumpy places leveled.**

⁵The glory of Yahweh will be revealed,*

**and all flesh will see together^{xv}
that the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.^{xvi}**

The effect^{xiv}

The prophet’s objection to the message

⁶A voice^{xvii} is saying: “Call out.”*

But he^{xviii} said, “What I shall call out?—

The prophet’s objection^{xix}

After all,^{xx} the flesh in entirety is grass,*
and all its steadfastness is as a flower of the field.^{xxi}

⁷The grass dries,
the flower withers,
for the spirit^{xxii} of Yahweh blows on it.*^{xxiii}

Surely the people are grass!”

Objection overruled

⁸ “The grass dries,
the flower fades—*

but the word of our God stands forever!”^{xxiv}

Message urging proclamation of the good news of Yahweh’s firm-and-gentle rule amid homecoming

⁹ Up you go, on a high mountain,^{xxv} O Zion, you evangelist,^{*xxvi}

raise your voice powerfully, O Jerusalem, you evangelist.

Raise it, don’t be afraid;*

Say to the cities of Judah, “Look! Your God!”

¹⁰ Look, the Lord Yahweh will come in strength,
And his arm rules with Him.^{xxvii*}

**Look, his reward is with Him,
and his wages^{xxviii} before Him.**

¹¹ Like a shepherd^{xxix} shepherds his flock with his arm:^{*xxx}

**He will gather His lambs and lift them into His bosom,^{xxxi}
Gently leading the sheep with young.**

ⁱ This is the prologue to what is an epic turn in the theme of the Book Isaiah, a turn from past judgment involving foreign invasion and exile to future deliverance, involving a homecoming. (The turn begins here and extends at least through chap. 55.) **Here in verses 1-2 God is (said to be) speaking to a group of angelic beings** before whom God is presiding over court or council; cf. Isa 6:1-10; 1 Kings 22:19-23. As Knight (p. 7) puts it, “The angelic forces are here to bring joy to God’s people It is as if the whole universe is filled with God’s word. Here at verse one the air is filled with living creatures. As the servants of the Word, these exist to execute God’s will and purpose both in heaven and on earth. Here we are in the same atmosphere as that the call of Isaiah (6:1-4) . . . there is no line drawn between heaven and earth.” (The actual speaker might be, as perhaps in v. 6a-b, one angelic being addressing others; in support, this compares nicely with Isaiah 6:3 where seraphim were addressing one another, saying, “Holy, holy, holy, etc.” But if that were the case, the referent would be “our” God. “Your God” does not rule out God as speaker, since this could be a third-person self-reference (as if I were to say to my children “Your Dad says, go to bed.”) Nor can we rule out the prophet speaking on God’s behalf to a group of the prophet’s disciples; cf. Isa 8:16, 18. In this case, the setting would be less heavenly and cosmic.

ⁱⁱ Plural imperatives, these verbs convey a command is being given to a group (either the prophet’s disciples or, more likely, angelic beings holding court with God). “Comfort” recalls Isaiah 12: 1. “The word does not mean to comfort or console one in his trouble: it means to comfort him out of his trouble into joy.” (Knight, IBC, 7, emphasis mine.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Especially in a context like this, the words “my people” and “your God” are contractual language, i.e., the language of the covenant made between God and Israel (e.g., Jer 7:23). This means that, despite what might appear to be the case, the covenant commitment remains intact. Whybray observes that it is in response to Israel’s self-pitying cry of Lamentations 1 that “there is none to comfort her.”

^{iv} Literally, “speak upon the heart.” The expression occurs also in 2 Chron. 30:22; 32:6, where it is translated “encourage” (NIV, ESV, NASB, NRSV); JPSV renders, “persuaded/rallied.”

^v The city often stands for its people; as Whybray notes, “that it should be used of a people no longer resident in their home shows the intensity of their commitment to their home” (p. 49).

^{vi} The word is “army,” which can also mean “host,” “warfare.” An exception to the predominant military context, namely that of “hard service” (as translated here), is attested also in Job 7:1.

^{vii} Israel’s iniquity, often mentioned earlier (e.g., 1:4, 5:8), caused her downfall; it was in fact her death sentence (22:14). And although Israel’s time of punishment in exile served in a way to atone for her sin, as noted already in 27:8-9, as we know from the case of Isaiah himself (chap. 6), forgiveness of iniquity is something for which expiation is required; and as we know from 33:20-24, forgiveness of sin is a future expectation for a time when the Lord our king brings salvation to Zion. (I owe much to Childs here, p. 298.) E.J. Young notes, the mention of pardon “is the first intimation of the truth to be more fully revealed in the fifty-third chapter” (cited in Grogan, 242.)

^{viii} It has been argued that the word double here might mean “equivalent.” “The reference to ‘double for all her sins’ is not to suggest that Israel received more punishment than she deserved, but rather the author makes use of a legal image found already in Ex. 22:3 (4), which requires a guilty one to restore double for a crime.” (Childs, 297.)

^{ix} The notion of clearing for a road is a figure of Yahweh’s determination to let nothing get in the way of his plan to bring the exiles home. A close parallel with the highway imagery can be found in chapter 35; there “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). . . . When 40:3-5 is read in light of chapter 35 then the prologue signals not just a general expectation of coming redemption but points explicitly to the end of God’s judgment on Judah, symbolized by its blindness and inability to see (35:5). Moreover, these who return are not merely refugees, but are the ‘redeemed,’ (35:9), those who have been ransomed in order to walk in the Holy Way.” (Childs, 299).

* **In verses 3-5 an angelic spokesperson from within God’s court (or council) is speaking**, delivering Yahweh’s charge (mandate). That the voice is unspecified underscores that what matters is God’s word, not who conveys it. John the Baptist emulates this (and of course the passage and a further stage in its fulfillment) in John 1:19-33.

^{xi} The normal route was around the fertile crescent rather than straight through the desert. The desert (wilderness) denotes God’s miraculous power and straight-ahead determination but, even more to the point, it intentionally echoes the wilderness journey of earlier Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land.

^{xii} See my notes for other options regarding the purpose of highways in the Ancient Near East. Yet Whybray is wise to reject any connection with those used for foreign gods, opining instead, “of the construction or repair of roads in preparation for the advance of a conquering king.” (p. 50.)

^{xiii} The passive voice here and throughout is a way of indicating Yahweh as the subject without actually using God’s name. For its lack of direct reference to God, it implies “providence” more than direct divine action, though its purpose is mainly to denote reverence for God’s name.

^{xiv} This verse brings together key themes of God manifest, flesh seeing (later we see, in passing) and the Word (later we see, enduring)

^{xv} To me, all flesh seeing the glory of God “together” assumes a future context in which departed saints witness the glory of God—the revelation of which in this part of Isaiah is always universal—beyond the grave; i.e., it is eschatological and presumes life after death in some form.

^{xvi} Presumably what the mouth of Yahweh has spoken was the command to prepare a way in the desert, which, to judge from the passive voices in vss. 4-5, has been effectual. In this regard, there are echoes of Genesis 1:3ff. Note that here begins the contrast between flesh and the Word.

Childs (299): “The theme in v. 5 of the revealing of the glory of God reflects also a close connection with . . . chapter 6. The glory of God is that aspect of the divine image which is made visible to human perception. The prophet first spoke of “seeing Yahweh” (6:1), but immediately the language is rendered more precisely to indicate that it was only his glory that was rendered accessible. . . . The point of his experiencing God’s presence in chapter 6 is that only to the prophet was the revelation disclosed. However, in chapter 40 a

sign of the inbreaking of a new age of salvation is that the glory of God will now be revealed to all flesh.” (Emphasis mine.)

^{xvii} Here an angelic spokesperson addresses an individual, likely the prophet himself; cf. Isaiah 6:8-10.

^{xviii} An ancient, influential Greek translation and an important Dead Sea Scroll (1QIsa^a) have “and I said,” which matches Isaiah 6:8 more closely. The Hebrew “and he said” is harder to explain than “I said” and should be retained. But who is “he”? Most take him to be another angelic being from Yahweh’s council—so, for example, Childs translates, “another asks”— but this assumes the first being was addressing the second; but, if that were so, one would expect the second person to be given more pride of place. **I take the speaker here in v. 6b to be the prophet, referring to himself in the third person.** Why would he do that? Because the time-frame spoken of here in this prophecy is long past the lifetime of Isaiah. In other words, in Isaiah 6, when the prophecy is contemporary with Isaiah, the prophet says “I said”, whereas in 40, when the prophecy pertains to a time centuries later, the prophet says “he” with reference to Isaiah. (The difference involves not a change in the Hebrew consonants, only a change in the vocalization rendered by the expert scribes.)

^{xix} Here I follow Brueggemann: “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 is countered in v. 8.” (p. 19.)

^{xx} “After all” is not in the Hebrew text; I have added it for clarity.

^{xxi} Cf. Isa 28:2b-4.

^{xxii} The word is *rûah*, which can also mean “wind.”

^{xxiii} Either as in blowing on a candle or as in the wind parching. Even the frailty of humanity is attributed to the Enduring Word.

^{xxiv} In context the statement refers to the plans of the nations not prevailing. Cf. Isa. 8:1: “Hatch a plot---it shall be foiled; Agree on an action—it shall not succeed. For with us is God.” “The phrase **word of God** (see the fuller expression in 55:10ff.) includes the idea of the prophetic word but it is not restricted to it. . . . Isaiah constantly had to struggle to convince his hearers that his message could be relied upon and to this end frequently pointed to God’s earlier fulfillment of his own promises made through the prophets (42:9; 44:6-8; 45:21; 46:8-11; 48:5).” (Whybray, 51.)

^{xxv} To make it easy for everyone to hear.

^{xxvi} Or “O Zion, evangelist. . .”; or, similarly “O Jerusalem, evangelist . . . Here, again, **an angelic member of the divine council addresses an individual, almost certainly the prophet**, who was present at the council and overheard the debate. The prophet is called “evangelist” (or, more commonly, “herald of glad tidings”). (The verbal root behind this word, *bśr*, denotes a military runner who brings news most often of the army’s *victory*.)

^{xxvii} “There is a perfect balance of strength and tenderness here. ‘His arm’ suggests Exodus power (Deut 4:34), very appropriate in relation to a return from exile, and due to be most wonderfully expounded later (see 53:1).” (Grogan, 243.) Motyer (p. 302), “[N]ote the balance between the ‘ruling arm’ of verse 10 and the ‘carrying arm’ here [v. 11].”

^{xxviii} There is now general agreement that the “reward”/“wages” are the exiles themselves, a sort of beneficent booty brought back to Judah/Jerusalem by God who plundered the Babylonians by reclaiming his own. On this understanding, the booty and the home crowd to share it at are one and the same; it is like God taking back stolen plants by uprooting them, bringing them back home safely (booty) and replanting them to flourish and be secure again on native soil, with God as their gardener. (The garden metaphor is in fact used in places to complement that of the highway.)

^{xxix} Motyer (302), “This shepherd exercises general care (*tends his flock*) is watchful for particular needs (*gathers the lambs*) and identifies with concerns within the flock (*those that have young*).”

^{xxx} See three notes earlier.

^{xxxi} I.e., close to his heart, indicating tender, loving care. (Motyer, 203.)