

# Isaiah 40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 27 November 2021

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Isaiah chapter 40. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places are plain, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, Cry, and I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. 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? Who has measured the spirit of the Lord? Or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult? And who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales. Behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him. They are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness compare with him?

An idol? A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He seeks out a skilful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

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 dwell in, who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness? Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?

says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see. Who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name. By the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. 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? 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. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might, he increases strength.

[ 3 : 59 ] Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they 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. In Isaiah chapter 40 we move into a new section of the book.

Until chapter 12 of the book, the text especially focused upon the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war during the reign of King Ahaz in the 730s BC and the years prior to it. The oracles against the nations and against Judah that followed them, in chapters 13 to 35, had the wider Assyrian crisis as their focus. This climaxed for Judah in 701 BC when Sennacherib came up against Jerusalem, an event recorded in chapter 36 and 37. In the latter half of the book, however, the book speaks concerning a very different situation, where the dominant power is no longer Assyria, but seems to be Babylon, where Judah is in exile, but return is promised under Cyrus and the Medo-Persian empire.

However, even though Babylon and Cyrus do come into view more directly at certain points, the material of the rest of Isaiah is overwhelmingly far more general in its visions of judgment and restoration, with sparse details to tether it to specific historical and personal reference.

In this and other respects, something like chapter 35 is perhaps the closest comparison to it within the first 39 chapters of the book. After chapter 39, Isaiah's name is no longer mentioned, and he no longer features as a character as he did in various of the earlier narrative sections. Specific historical references and allusions to specific kings and times being addressed, or references to dates at which things happened, which we find at a few points in the first 30 chapters, are also lacking. Scholars commonly further argue that there is a discernible change in the style. The weight of these facts probably should not be overstated. For instance, besides the superscriptions that open the first two chapters, and the narrative sections of chapter 7 and chapters 37 to 39, Isaiah's name is only found in a superscription in chapter 13 and in two adjacent verses in chapter 20. Furthermore, those arguing for a shift to a far more poetic style after chapter 39 often also argue that certain material from the first 39 chapters should be attributed to a later hand, given its similarity to material of the concluding 27 chapters of the book. In particular, as the gaze of the prophet moved beyond his more immediate historical horizon, and regarded a more eschatological and archetypal vista of salvation in various passages in the earlier part of the book, he seemed to employ a similar poetic and figurative style. The suggestion that there might have been two or more authors of the book of Isaiah is not a new position. It's been around for at least 850 years. However, the theory of a first and second or proto and deutero Isaiah, later expanded to include a third or trito Isaiah, typically seen as running from chapter 56 to 66, became dominant in large measure on account of the rise of higher criticism. Higher criticism's instincts tended towards radical fragmentation of texts into different sources and forms, and could treat texts as untrustworthy witnesses, betraying the political and partisan interests of those who wrote and edited them. Besides this, on account of their liberal unbelief in predictive prophecy, many could not accept, for instance, that Isaiah could foretell the name of Cyrus in Isaiah chapter 44 verse 28, over 150 years prior to

Cyrus' decree. It's important to recognise that the arguments against Isaiah's authorship of the entire book are not simply based upon such unbelief. Even in the case of the declaration of Cyrus' role in the return, it is not immediately obvious that the text of Isaiah chapters 44 and 45 read most naturally as a prediction of a figure nearly a century before his birth. Likewise, even if we believe in predictive prophecy, we still need to explain why a prophet would seemingly address a radically transformed situation of around 150 years later. In recent decades, commentators on Isaiah from the school of the canonical approach, such as Brevard Childs and Christopher Seitz, have reasserted the importance of the unity of the completed text of Isaiah in its canonical form, so that this position now enjoys a lot of respect within mainstream scholarship. While they hold to the presence of different sources from different historical periods in Isaiah, they maintain that the unified book itself must be given priority, and that it is manifestly a single piece of literature, with 2nd Isaiah bearing the hallmarks of being formed in terms of 1st Isaiah, for instance. Even if Isaiah was not the author of the entire book named after him, the entire book is a unified work of literature. If traditional higher criticism were like treating the Bible as a jigsaw to be disassembled, its pieces gathered into the different sources of contrasting colours and the different forms of contrasting shapes, the canonical approach is the gentle reminder that the pieces ultimately belong together in the completed puzzle.

[ 9 : 16 ] Nevertheless, many conservative scholars are not quite so prepared as Childs and Seitz and others to deny Isaiah's authorship of the entire book. It is difficult to discern the intended addressee of the later part of the book, while the future foretold would be most directly relevant to the exiles of Judah in Babylon in the years leading up to 539 BC, we should recall that Isaiah had foretold the rise of Babylon and Judah's captivity to Babylon in chapter 39, which immediately precedes this section. That future was already a projected event in the consciousness of the hearers of Isaiah at the end of the 8th century BC. Consequently, a prophetic projection of deliverance and restoration through and from that exile in a much less specific and more poetic form would not be out of place. Isaiah could meaningfully prophesy about that future to people in his own day. Furthermore, much as the form in which the oracles of imminent judgment in the earlier part of the book foreshadowed the future judgment that would come upon

Babylon over 150 years later, so the more abstract and poetic accounts of judgment and redemption would have enabled faithful people at the time of Isaiah to recognize themselves in the projected experience of their descendants. Alec Machia, in making his case for Isaiah's authorship of the entire book, observes details such as the references to idol-making that seem to presume the context of Palestine, where suitable trees for idol carving could be obtained. As for the specifying of Cyrus's name, there is no reason in principle why this should be rejected. King Josiah's name was predicted centuries before his birth in 1 Kings chapter 13. Besides, considering the great emphasis that the later chapters of Isaiah place upon the Lord as the one who is the master of history, who declares the future before it unfolds, the power of these chapters to address not merely people of Isaiah's day but also those of a time yet to come might not be quite so out of keeping. In many respects, arguments for Isaiah's authorship of the entire book are on a stronger academic footing now than they were throughout the past century, as mainstream scholarship rediscovers the theological and ideological unity of the entire book.

However, there remain difficult questions for such position, and where there are not underlying theological commitments holding them to single authorship, it's not surprising that some commentators who are otherwise theologically conservative and believe in predictive prophecy would nonetheless be unpersuaded that Isaiah authored the entire prophetic book of his name. This is a debate that is not yet over.

In chapters 40 to 48, the theological themes of the Lord's steadfast love for his people, his commitment to save them, and his power over all other so-called gods come to the fore. The death of exile would come, but it would not be the end of the story. The Lord would bring his people back to life after their national death. In the process, he would demonstrate his identity and supremacy as the sovereign over creation, history, the nations, and all of their gods. Here, the theological heart of Isaiah's prophecy comes into view. This, above all things, is a book about God. As John Oswalt notes, there are several things in chapter 40 that recall the commissioning of Isaiah in chapter 6. He writes, The calling voices of 40 verse 3 remind us of the seraphim who called to each other in chapter 6 verse 3.

The announcement that all flesh will see the glory of the Lord, chapter 40 verse 5, recalls the statement of chapter 6 verse 3 that the whole earth is full of the glory of the Lord. The prophet's what shall I say in chapter 40 verse 6 sounds like the response how long in chapter 6 verse 11.

[ 13 : 09 ] Finally, the announcement of good news to the cities of Judah, chapter 40 verse 9, looks very much like a reversal of the command in chapter 6 verse 11 to speak the word of God until the cities lie in waste.

Reading these two chapters in terms of each other then, we might hear an answer to Isaiah's sorrowful question, how long, back in chapter 6, in chapter 40's assurance that the time of judgment has passed and that restoration is at hand. The Lord loves his people and will restore them in his mercy, grace and righteousness as the God who keeps his covenant. The great covenant formula, I will be your God and you shall be my people, is gently alluded to in the tenderness of the chapter's opening words of encouragement and reassurance. The Lord has not disowned his people, but he will redeem them for himself. A new commission is given to messengers of God, a declaration of peace, forgiveness and then of return. The exile was the work of the Lord, dealing with the sins of his wayward and wicked people, but now their sins have been dealt with, they're forgiven, pardoned and released. Again the messenger in verse 3 is uncertain, but his message is a joyous one. Earlier parts of Isaiah spoke of fruitful lands being reduced to wilderness under the Lord's judgment, but now a way is being provided through the wilderness, a way for the Lord's return, presumably at the head of a vast company of his returning people.

We've already had an intimation of this return through the wilderness to Zion, back in chapter 35 verses 8 to 10. 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. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it. They shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there, 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. The way back through the wilderness suggests that a new exodus is occurring, much as the exodus from Egypt. The path of return from Babylon did not pass through the wilderness as that from Egypt did, but the path of return was most definitely through a figurative wilderness.

A vast work of terraforming is described, valleys being lifted up, mountains and hills made low, and a levelled path being spread before the Lord, the returning king, all obstacles removed from his route.

Again, we might here recall the great eschatological vision of Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The lifting up of the valleys, and the lowering of the mountains, much like the lifting up of the mountain of Zion over the other mountains, speaks to the Lord's radical transformation of the powers of the world, humbling those who are lifted up, and lifting up the humble. When the Lord returns, his glory will be seen by all, decisively demonstrating his identity.

[ 16 : 57 ] While this clearly looks to the return from Babylon, it no less clearly looks beyond that to a more complete and final demonstration of the Lord's uniqueness in history. In verse 6, the voice of verse 3 cries out again, but now to summon another to cry out with it, perhaps the prophet himself. The message is one of frailty and transience, comparing flesh to grass that withers, and flowers whose beauty fades when the spirit of the Lord blows upon them. A similar message to passages like Psalm 90. This is not the first time that we've seen this message in Isaiah. He had to remind Ahaz that, beyond the terrifying threat of Israel and the Arameans, were merely two frail human beings, reason of Damascus, and Pekah the son of Remaliah. He had a similar message in chapter 31 verse 3 to men of Judah looking to Egypt for aid. The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together. Man is weak, even in his imagined power. Only the word of the Lord will stand forever. True security and certainty can only be known by those who live by faith in that word, rather than depending upon the things of sight. The Lord's promise will not fail.

Zion herself is summoned to take on the part of a herald of good news, of the gospel. The message of the Lord's return to Zion, coming as the mighty warrior, victorious over all of his enemies, with great spoils to deliver to his people. He is also coming as the tender shepherd of his harried and scattered flock. He will gather, restore, and tend to them as a gentle and good shepherd. In Isaiah chapter 52 verses 7 to 10, we will later return to the themes of these verses. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns. The voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice.

Together they sing for joy. For eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together in singing, you waste places of Jerusalem. For the Lord has comforted his people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Facing powers such as the Arameans in the northern kingdom of Israel, then the Assyrians, and then the even greater power of Babylon, the people of the Lord might have wondered whether the Lord was powerful enough to deliver them. Was their God's might sufficient to deliver them from such great foes? These questions would have become even more pronounced in the grave of exile, uprooted from their land, with no realistic prospect of return in sight.

In the teeth of such opposition, Isaiah's message is one of a God whose might exceeds all such creaturely powers. In these passages in Isaiah we see some of the strongest statements of divine sovereignty and power in the entire Old Testament. If the Lord truly intends to deliver his people from exile, Judah needs to be reassured that he is more than mighty enough for the task. The prophet's words here, with their pointed rhetorical questions concerning the uniqueness of the Lord's might, might recall the Lord's speech to Job, declaring his supremacy over all of the forces of death, chaos, and evil that assaulted him. Judah and Israel may just be small nations in their wider region, dominated by much greater nations and empires who serve foreign gods. Considering that the Lord was their God, Israel and Judah could easily fall into the trap of fancying that the gods of the Assyrians, Egyptians, or Babylonians must be greater, as their nations were dominant over theirs.

Yet they needed to be reminded that the Lord was truly the God of the whole earth, the sovereign over all of creation. None of the nations are accounted as anything before him. His wisdom and counsel exceed all humans searching out. His sovereignty extends over the untamed waters of the seas, and rules over the entirety of the heavens. The towering mountains are like small objects to be weighed out in scales for him. Considered in terms of their vaunted power and greatness, the nations that so terrify Judah are utterly inconsequential before him. When one considers the true majesty of the Almighty God, the notion that he is comparable to any other, let alone the idea that one could craft a likeness to him, is utterly ridiculous. In particular, idolatry is exposed for the complete folly that it is. An idol is fashioned by human artisans, who need to be careful that their image doesn't rot or topple over. Yet the true God rules eternal in the heavens, beyond any power to displace him. Verses 21 to 26 reinforce the point of verses 12 to 20, inviting the hearer to contemplate the heavens themselves as a testament to the incomparability of the Lord. As Psalm 19 verses 1 to 6 expresses things,

[ 22 : 10 ] The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The Lord sits enthroned in the highest heavens, above the vault of the firmament, here pictured as a vast hemisphere. The entire realm of human habitation is under this, the Lord having spread out the heavens like a tent over the earth.

Returning to the language of the frailty of flesh, and the comparison of it to grass and flowers, verse 24 speaks of nations, princes, and rulers as akin to such fragile and transient things.

The Lord's question is renewed, with added force. To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him. The Lord is the master of the very stars in the heavens. What mere creature could be considered similar to such a one? The practical import of this great vision of God's glory, splendor, and might is pressed home at the end of the chapter. To a disheartened Israel that might consider itself beyond the Lord's sight or the reach of his arm, Isaiah's declaration of the Lord's incomparable strength, his loving commitment to his people, and his immeasurable wisdom is the very greatest reassurance they could be given. They have not passed beyond the Lord's loving concern and oversight, and none of their oppressors or obstacles before them could withstand his might. He is the true source of strength for those who lack it. Even those who naturally seem to possess great strength will find that their strength fails them. Yet those who draw their strength from the Lord will find unfathomable resources of rejuvenation opened up to them. To a much weakened people, facing the prospect of the death of exile, this is the source of the most remarkable hope.

A question to consider. In the ministry of John the Baptist, he presents verse 3 of this chapter as an explanation for what he is doing. How does an understanding of this statement in its context help us better to understand what John the Baptist is doing with it in his pronouncement?