

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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Second Isaiah

IV: Isaiah 40:1-31

The Fulfillment of the Divine Word: God's Faithfulness to Israel

In Isaiah 1—39 we have seen several instances of prophecies that show signs of being reinterpreted in later periods to show how the divine word is capable of more than one fulfillment. Prophecies that were understood to be fulfilled in one historical circumstance were by virtue of their fulfillment thought to contain true divine words which could apply to future events as well. For this reason, in Isaiah 1—39 references to the Babylonian exile and even to the return to Jerusalem after the exile, references usually associated with the exilic prophecies of Second Isaiah, are sometimes intermingled with the earlier prophecies of First Isaiah. True divine words are timeless and can be fulfilled over and over again.

However, in Isaiah 40—55 direct traces of the work of First Isaiah seem to disappear, and all of these chapters assume the reality of Israel's exile in Babylon, which stretched from the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. to the capture of the city of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus II in 539 B.C., a year before the Persian king allowed the exiled Judeans to return to their land. Throughout Isaiah 40—55 the tone of the literature is exhortatory, with the prophetic voice encouraging the exiles to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus himself is hailed as a messianic figure, and themes of liberation and redemption dominate the literature.

The Book of Isaiah does not describe the exile itself, but chs. 34—38 make clear the regular alternation of judgment and salvation that in the mind of Isaiah dominate Israel's history with God. The last words of Isaiah 39 foreshadow the Babylonian exile, while with ch. 40 the attention of the prophet turns decisively to the possibility of return to Jerusalem.

Isaiah 40:1-11 begins with language that calls to mind First Isaiah's call to prophesy in Isaiah 6. In that chapter the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple is transformed in the prophet's vision of the heavenly realm, where God is enthroned. God searches for agents to work the divine will in Israel. The

prophet volunteers and is assigned the task of delivering the word of judgment that has been decreed against the people. Isaiah 40 opens with another divine call for agents, messengers, or servants who are to take on the job of comforting Jerusalem. In the Hebrew text the imperative verb forms in Isa. 40:1-2 are plural (“comfort,” “speak,”), an indication that God is in search of more than one agent. The identity of the addressees is unclear in the text, although God does not seem to be issuing an open call for help, as in Isaiah 6. God seems to have some particular group in mind. However, even if the identity of the agents is not clear, the content of their message is plain. They are to speak to Jerusalem and tell her that she has “served her term” and paid her penalty.

The judicial language of these first verses implies that the city has been serving time for a crime. Even more than that, God, who is clearly the speaker, says that Jerusalem has paid double for all her sins. This is a strange statement that some commentators have connected with laws requiring two-fold restitution for certain types of crime, although why such a law would be relevant in Jerusalem’s case is not clear. More likely the implication of the statement is that Jerusalem has in fact paid a larger penalty than her sins justified. The notion of this extra penalty may be related to Isa. 53:4-6, where God’s servant is said to have suffered vicariously for the sins of the community. If that is also the reference in Isa. 40:2, then the message is that Jerusalem’s suffering has been in some way redemptive, although that idea will not be worked out until later chapters.

In Isa. 40:3-5 a voice, probably either God or another of God’s agents, is said to cry out. The message this time concerns the return of God from exile in Babylon, where the deity has taken up residence temporarily with the displaced Israelites. Again the imperative verbs are plural (“prepare,” “make straight”), so the addressees may well be the same people referred to in vv. 1-2. The people called to “comfort” Jerusalem in Isa. 40:1-2, are also the people told to prepare a road in the wilderness for God’s return. The allusion here may be to the Exodus from Egypt, when Israel crossed through the wilderness in order to reach the land that God had promised to them. However, this time God’s return, presumably followed by the exiles themselves, will be made much easier by the cooperation of nature itself: a road will be prepared, valleys will be raised, mountains will be made low, and uneven ground will be leveled. All of this will happen because of the command of God. The divine word will bring the return from exile into being.

The early Christian church understood this instruction to God's agents or servants to refer to John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way again for the return of God, this time in the person of Jesus (Luke 3:4-6). This New Testament reading of the Isaiah passage is in harmony with Isaiah's notion of the multiple fulfillment of prophecy. The address to God's servants in the Babylonian exile concerning God's return to Jerusalem was fulfilled with the return to the land of Israel, but the prophecy is eternally true, and it can therefore be fulfilled again when John prepares the way for God's Son to return to Jerusalem.

In Isa. 40:6-8, again an unidentified voice commands someone to cry out. This time the command uses a singular verb, and the prophet answers with a question about the contents of the message. The prophet also probably speaks the words at the end of v. 6 and in v. 7: how can the prophet do anything? "All people are grass....The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass." This description picks up the words of Isaiah's oracle concerning Sennacherib during the Assyrian invasion of 701, when God says through Isaiah that the king's attack on Israel is part of a divine plan. When the Assyrians come, the inhabitants of Judah will become like the plants of the field and the grass in the hot summer sun (Isa. 37:26-27). Those words were indeed fulfilled by the coming of the Assyrians, but they were fulfilled again when the Babylonians exiled the inhabitants of Jerusalem to Babylon. Now in Isa. 40:7, the prophet complains that the exiles in Babylon are again like the withered grass. "What", the prophet seems to be asking, "can anyone do"? The divine answer comes in Isa. 40:8 in an affirmation from the community of faith: "Yes, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." God's word of promise to Jerusalem during the Assyrian invasion was fulfilled in the salvation of the city. But now it can be fulfilled again. God has not rejected Israel in exile, but has been with them and will now lead them back to their land. The promise of God's presence in Jerusalem will be fulfilled again when God returns with the people.

In 40:9-11 the prophet finally proclaims the good news. Zion itself is now addressed as one of God's agents and is told to proclaim the news of the return of God, not just to Jerusalem but to all the cities of Judah. God's own return is described, along with the protection and peace which God's return brings. These words of promise must have resounded among exiles whose hopes had been dashed, whose cities had lain in ruins, and whose God had seemed far away and inactive. Their present and their future has just taken an abrupt and wonderful turn.

3. In Isa. 40:8 the writer affirms what may be the central theological truth of the whole book: God's word, once given, will inevitably be fulfilled, not just once, but over and over again. How did this belief help the early Church to understand Jesus and to understand its own role in the fulfillment of God's will. Do you think that this same belief can be applied in the contemporary church?

4. Beginning in Isaiah 40, Second Isaiah places a particularly strong emphasis on the role that human agents play in doing God's work in the world. The text up to this point has talked about several kinds of divine servants: individuals like the prophet, divine beings who are servants, the unidentified group addressed at the beginning of Isaiah 40, the unidentified individual in Isa. 52:13-53:12, whose suffering and eventual exaltation are redemptive for the whole community, and the city of Jerusalem itself, which perhaps suffers for the redemption of Israel and which proclaims God's salvation to all the cities of Judah and ultimately to the whole world. What are the implications of this idea of servanthood for understanding the role of individual Christian communities in the world?

For Further Study

Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 289-311.
John Goldingay, *Isaiah 40—55* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 1.60-92.