

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
ISAIAH
Chapters 40-66

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IV. THE VOCATION OF SERVANTHOOD (40:1–55:13)

A. MOTIVE FOR SERVANTHOOD: GRACE (40:1–48:22)

1. THE SERVANT'S LORD (40:1-31)

a. *The comforting Lord (40:1-11)*

- 1 *"Comfort, comfort my people," says¹ your God.*
- 2 *"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and² call out to her
that her hard service³ is completed,
that her iniquity is atoned for,⁴
that she has received from the hand of the Lord double⁵ for all
her sins."*
- 3 *A voice crying out,
"In the desert prepare the way of the Lord;
in the wilderness make a highway straight for our God.*
- 4 *Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;*

1. Calvin makes a considerable point of the imperfect tense of the verb "to say," insisting that it be rendered "will say." Later commentators are divided on the issue. The gnomic present "says" is just as possible and seems to fit the context better: In any time, this is what God says.

2. Pieper rightly identifies the *waw* attached to the imperative *qir'û* as *waw explicativum*, to be translated "that is" or "namely."

3. The root *šb'* evidently connotes a period of enlistment in burdensome work; see Num. 4:21; Job 7:1; 14:4.

4. Heb. *niršâ* has the basic meaning of "to be acceptable" (see Lev. 26:41-43). How Israel could make amends for that iniquity is not spelled out here, but see 53:11.

5. The exact sense of *kiplayim* here is not clear. Some commentators believe it should be taken literally in the sense that she has suffered twice as much as she deserves, or that it means two generations have suffered (A. Phillips, "Is. 40:2: Double for All Her Sins," ZAW 94 [1982] 130-32). G. von Rad suggested the idea of equivalency ("*kiplayim* in Jes. 40,2 = 'Äquivalent'?" ZAW 79 [1967] 80-82). Alexander and others have suggested that the reference is to the reward of grace and favor now about to be received. But the previous two phrases indicate that this is not the case. Calvin's suggestion that the sense is "large and abundant" seems to fit best here. See also Westermann. All three phrases suggest completeness: service — fulfilled; iniquity — atoned for; sin — paid in full.

- rough places⁶ shall be made smooth,
and high places into a valley.*
- 5 *Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed;
all flesh will see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*
- 6 *A voice saying, "Call out!"
I⁷ said, "What shall I cry?"
"All flesh is grass;
all its dependability⁸ is like the flower of the field.*
- 7 *The grass dries up; the flower withers
when the breath of the Lord blows on it.
Surely the people are grass.⁹*
- 8 *The grass dries up; the flower withers,
but the word of our God will stand forever."*
- 9 *Get up onto a high mountain,
Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
Jerusalem, herald of good news.
Lift [it] up, do not be afraid;
say to the cities of Judah, "Look, it is your God."*

6. Following A. Berlin, "Isaiah 40:4, Etymological and Poetic Considerations," *HAR* 3 (1979) 1-6, who suggests that *'āqôb* should be read as "indentation" in parallel with "valley." See also Alexander.

7. Following LXX and IQIs^a. MT reads "He." In a consonantal text, before the insertion of vowels, the two forms (3rd masc. sg. perfect and 1st common sg. imperfect) would be indistinguishable. From a text-critical point of view, one could justify either reading. On the one hand, if "he said" is original, it is easy to see how a scribe could have changed it to "I said" to make it agree with the next verb. On the other hand, since the two forms are so similar (אָמַר, אֶמַר), it is also easy to see how "he said" could have entered the text for "I said." Modern versions are divided, with NRSV, NIV, and REB opting for "I," while both NEB and JPSV translate "another asks."

8. LXX has *doxa*, "glory," which is not used to translate *hesed* anywhere else in the OT. Thus *BHS* suggests emending to a more common equivalent, *heder*, or to *hemed*, which differs only slightly from *hesed* in appearance and would fit the context. But see the commentary below.

9. Scholars do not agree concerning the originality of the last phrase. Muilenburg believes that its "presence is in conformity with the prophet's literary style"; North thinks it "may be a gloss"; Elliger says it is definitely secondary. IQIs^a is in disarray. It appears that v. 7 was omitted, but then the second and third cola of v. 7 have been written above v. 8 to be inserted between its first and second cola. The result would read, "The grass dries up, the flower withers, because the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people is grass, but the word of our God stands forever." Nonetheless, the presence of the phrase in IQIs^a attests that if it is a gloss, it is a very early one. The entire verse is missing in the LXX. Most commentators agree that the omission is through homoiarcton.

- 10 *See, as a strong one¹⁰ the Sovereign Lord¹¹ comes,
and his arm will rule for him.
See, his wages are with him,
and his repayment is before him.*
- 11 *Like a shepherd he will feed his flock;
with his arm he will gather the lambs
and carry [them] in his bosom.
He will lead the nursing ewes.*

The recurring theme in chs. 7–39 was that God could be trusted in the face of the threats from the surrounding nations. Yet the people of Israel were continually tempted to trust other nations to help them. God's response was to say that those other nations would fail them and the result would be destruction, sometimes from the very nation trusted for help (8:5-8; 30:1-5; etc.). Nevertheless, Isaiah had declared, God's trustworthiness was so great that even after the well-deserved destruction had come, God would not forsake his own, but would deliver them from what had overtaken them (9:1-6 [Eng. 2-7]; 30:9-33; etc.).

Chapters 40–55, especially chs. 40–48, take up the latter part of the theme, showing how this truth will work itself out in the reality of the coming exile. God's trustworthiness does not end at the point of disobedience. He was the Lord of history who delivered those who would obey (37:30-38), and he continues to be the Lord of history to deliver those who would disobey but would then turn to him in faith (44:24-28). Thus the path to servanthood for Israel lay through an experience of the utterly unmerited grace of God. He was not required to deliver them. They had been amply warned of the consequences of their disbelief. If they persisted, as persist they would, God would have no obligation to them whatsoever. Yet these chapters speak of a God who, knowing that his people would forsake him, nevertheless promises in advance to redeem them, and that "without silver and without price" (55:1). Surely this God can be trusted.

Chapters 40–48 particularly address the questions concerning God's ability and desire to deliver that the exile would pose. This focus is evident immediately in ch. 40. Would not the exile prove that God had either forsaken his people or was not the Lord of history? Would it not mean that he had been

10. LXX and IQIs^a read "in strength," but the adjective here seems to be used as a substantive, as also in 28:2, with a *beth* of essence (cf. GKC, §119i). Note the stress that the word order places on the idea: "as a strong one he comes."

11. The addition of the term "Sovereign" (*'ādōnāy*) to the divine name is an example of Isaiah's characteristic way of referring to God with multiple titles (see 1:24; 2:1; 10:16, 33; etc.).

unable to defend his people from the pagan nations or that he had been defeated by his people's pernicious sinfulness? Isaiah's answer to both questions is a resounding no! He shows that a new historical situation would not invalidate the truths he had proclaimed to Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Indeed, the new situation would only make those truths clearer. The exile would give God an even greater opportunity to show his sovereignty and his trustworthiness. Thus ch. 40, the introductory chapter, makes two points: God is the sole ruler of the universe (vv. 12-26), and he can be trusted to deliver (vv. 1-11, 27-31).

The basic content of chs. 41-48 can be stated fairly easily. God will demonstrate his absolute superiority over the idols by doing something new, something unheard-of to that point: causing a people, his people, to return from exile (41:1-44:22). He will do this by destroying proud Babylon through Cyrus, a previously unknown ruler who will not come from any of the established kingdoms of the Mesopotamian valley (44:23-47:15). A Jerusalem delivered through no merit or effort of its own would be the evidence of Yahweh's claims (48:1-22).

Beyond these broad statements, however, scholars find it difficult to agree on the structure of the section. A survey of the commentaries as well as books and articles dealing with the subject leads to one conclusion: the number of opinions closely approximates the number of writers.¹² Perhaps the main reason for this disagreement is the author's tendency to repeat themes several times in differing relations to one another. This tendency leads scholars to create sometimes elaborate hypotheses of chiasm, parallelism, and so on. Unfortunately, the complexity of the material renders one proposed arrangement no more compelling than another. The general outline just given has some broad support. Any more detailed proposals should be offered only with some degree of diffidence.

As regards ch. 40, the main disagreement revolves around whether vv. 1-11 should stand alone as a prologue to chs. 40-55, with vv. 12-31 as the opening part of the body of what follows, or whether the entire chapter serves an introductory function. Since the two main questions addressed in chs. 40-48 concern God's desire and ability to save, and since these are the two major issues addressed in ch. 40, it seems likely that the entire chapter is an introductory unit (see also Delitzsch, Pieper, Wright, Knight, etc.). This impression is strengthened by the forceful opening of ch. 41, with its call to the nations

12. See J. Goldingay, "The Arrangement of Isaiah 41-45," *VT* 29 (1979) 289-99; M. Haran, "The Literary Structure and Chronological Framework of the Prophecies in Is. xl-xlviii," in *Congress Volume: Bonn, 1962*, *VTSup* 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1963), pp. 127-55; R. P. Merendino, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Eine Untersuchung von Jes. 40-48*, *VTSup* 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1981); C. Stuhlmueller, "Deutero-Isaiah: Major Transitions in the Prophet's Theology and in Contemporary Scholarship," *CBQ* 42 (1980) 1-29.

to enter into a disputation, an opening that suggests the start of a new literary unit.

Having said that ch. 40 functions in an introductory way, one must immediately qualify that statement. One should not think that the chapter introduces all the major themes of even chs. 41–48, let alone chs. 41–55 or chs. 41–66. Three major themes that are not touched on are witness, the Servant, and the salvation of the nations.¹³ Thus the chapter does not provide a summary of what follows but rather sets the stage. In so doing it establishes the tone (“Comfort my people”), and the bases (“All flesh is grass,” “Who is like me”) for the ensuing pronouncements. The chapter also functions as a bridge from the first part of the book. The theme of “comfort” was already introduced in ch. 12, while the “highway” had appeared in chs. 11, 19, 33, and 35. One can also hear overtones of ch. 6 as the prophet’s commission is now expanded to the word of hope that had previously been denied him (see below). In the entire chapter the central focus is on God. As noted above, this is in response to the questions about the character of God that the exile would pose for the theology promulgated in chs. 1–39.

Verses 1-11 provide a stirring opening for the new section of the prophecy.¹⁴ In four evenly balanced strophes the prophet lays the groundwork for the rest of the book. He establishes that the theme from this point on will no longer be judgment but restoration (vv. 1-2), that this restoration will be through the personal intervention of God (vv. 3-5), that no human force or condition can prevail against God’s promise (vv. 6-8), and that there is good news of divine might coupled with divine compassion (vv. 9-11).

Through the entire segment, speech is the prominent element. Eleven words relating to speaking appear. Three times the speech of God is mentioned. Alongside God’s voice are other voices, perhaps those of angels (see below on v. 2); there is also the voice of the prophet and the voice of Jerusalem. This good news must be spoken, announced, proclaimed.¹⁵ God has spoken,

13. Stuhlmueller (*CBQ* 42 [1980] 5) concludes that the so-called Servant Songs must have been added after ch. 40 was written. This conclusion is unnecessary if one understands the function of the chapter as I have described it.

14. This segment has provoked no shortage of learned studies; among the more significant are F. Ettore, “Isa. 40:1-11, una lettura strutturale,” *RivB* 28 (1980) 285-304; Y. Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion: A Study of Isaiah 40-48*, Forum theologiae linguisticae 14 (Bonn: Linguistica Biblica, 1981); O. Loretz, “Die Gattung der Prolog zum Buche Deuterjesajas,” *ZAW* 96 (1984) 210-20; L. Stachowiak, “Die Sendung des Deuterjesaja im Lichte von Jes. 40:1-11 und der späteren Text Traditionen,” in *Dein Wort beachten: alttestamentliche Aufsätze* (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1981), pp. 102-15; H. J. Stoebe, “Überlegungen zu Jesaja 40:1-11; zugleich der Versuch eines Beitrag zur Gottesknechtfrage,” *TZ* 40 (1984) 104-13; N. Tidwell, “The Cultic Background of Is. 40:1-11,” *JTSA* 3 (1973) 41-54.

15. Muilenburg points out that the verb *qr*, “call, proclaim,” occurs more than 30 times in chs. 40–66. This frequency underlines that the word must be proclaimed.

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament

Robert L. Hubbard Jr., general editor

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