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Comfort through divine deliverance (Isaiah 40:1–48:22)

At this point in Isaiah there is a major shift in outlook and theme, and the following chapters contain some of the most sublime passages to be found in Old Testament prophecy. However, there is an ongoing divergence of viewpoint as to how to account for this material. The overwhelming majority of modern interpreters introduce the figure of Second Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah, who is presumed to have been active over a century and a half after the events of chapters 36–39. This anonymous figure is presented as living in the period which saw the rise of Cyrus, the ruler of Persia, who overthrew Babylon in 539 BC and brought the exile to an end. It is argued that just before that time Deutero-

Isaiah prophesied to the Israelites in exile regarding the deliverance Yahweh would shortly provide for them. It is also commonly assumed that a further writer or writers, labelled Third Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah, subsequently contributed chapters 56–66.

The precise way in which these additions to the material of Isaiah were thought to have been made has differed over the years and between different authors. At first it was supposed that totally separate anonymous works, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah, had been accidentally appended to the prophet's original writings. However, increasingly the existence of a school of Isaiah has been posited to account for the considerable similarities in language and theme between the various sections of Isaiah, and it is argued that later writers deliberately commented on and expanded the work of the earlier prophet. Indeed, Deutero-Isaiah is sometimes put forward as the final editor of all the material, who gave it its present form and thematic unity.¹

Conservative writers have opposed this understanding of the origin of the book. The scriptural evidence requires that Isaiah be acknowledged as the originator of the work.² Also, it is highly implausible to posit that such a major thinker as Deutero-Isaiah would have remained anonymous. Furthermore, predictive prophecy—even of events in the distant future—must not be ruled out *a priori*. Indeed, it is fundamental to the whole argument of these chapters that Yahweh does preannounce events (cf. 45:21).

However, for the most part even conservative commentators have worked with a hermeneutical stance quite similar to that of the critical approach. They have assumed that at this point Isaiah of Jerusalem began a new ministry that was addressed to the exiles of a much later period. The God who transcends history displayed his knowledge and control of events by giving to Isaiah in prophetic vision information about what was to come upon Judah

after the exile. In this way he was enabled to speak as if he were a contemporary of the exiles and to lay up in store material which would act as a source of encouragement to the future generation by reminding them of the way in which Yahweh remained in control of history.³

Nevertheless, to introduce Babylon and Cyrus into chapter 40 is to misread the testimony of the book. The chapter is addressed to Jerusalem, and is designed to be read as the continuation of Isaiah's prophetic activity among his own contemporaries.⁴ In this ministry of consolation Isaiah presents material drawn from what has been divinely revealed to him regarding past, present and future events. This does indeed include the rise of Cyrus and the return of the exiles from Babylon but, while these constitute a significant development of the prophet's theme, they are not its climax. His vision culminates in the work of the Servant (chapter 53) and the implications of that for the people of God (chapters 54–66). All this was of immediate relevance in the prophet's own day, as well as subsequently.

So these chapters record the grand message which Isaiah was given regarding gospel reality, and the truths expressed here transcend specific situations and apply with equal pertinence in every generation. There is a twofold challenge to the outworking of God's purpose through his people: their own weakness and the threats of their enemies. Neither of these predicaments can be resolved by their strength or wisdom. There is only one way in which both problems may be overcome, and that is the provision that Yahweh alone can make. That was the lesson that Judah had just learned in the enforced departure of Sennacherib from Jerusalem. It was the same lesson that would be reinforced by the future collapse of the Babylonian Empire. It is repeated throughout the history of the church: God's covenant commitment

is not exhausted with the imposition of the penalty of the broken covenant on his people when they are unfaithful. God chooses to redeem them even from the consequences of their rebellion against him (cf. Lev. 26:40–42; Deut. 30:1–10). And that is supremely seen in the provision of the Servant as God's final answer to the problem of disobedience and sin.

Comfort for Jerusalem (Isaiah 40:1–11)

In chapter 40 Isaiah provides an introduction to the message which follows in chapters 41–48, indeed through to chapter 66. It is not, however, the case that he deals exhaustively with each theme when he first takes it up. He also feels free to introduce other matters later on. For instance, there is as yet no mention of the Servant or of the salvation of the nations (but note 'all flesh' in 40:5). What is provided is a selection of items which form a background for the remaining prophecies.

While it is undoubtedly the case that there is a shift in style here from the largely narrative section of the preceding chapters to elevated, rapturous poetry, it would be going too far to view this as a totally new element in the prophecy. Style and theme alike have been present in earlier portions of the prophecy (cf. 35:1–10; 37:26–27).

There is scholarly division over whether 40:1–11 is the prologue to what follows, or whether chapter 40 in its entirety should be considered as a prologue. The two major issues addressed in chapters 40–48 are God's desire and God's ability to save. It would seem, then,

to be the whole chapter that is the prologue, with God's desire to save explored in 40:1–11 and his ability to do so in 40:12–31. In this initial section the focus is on the return of the King to Jerusalem. The divine command to bring a message of consolation to Jerusalem (40:1–2) is explored through the commentary of various additional voices which present the need for preparation for the royal return (40:3–5), the enduring basis for what is forecast (40:6–8) and the character of the coming King (40:9–11).

I. Jerusalem's comfort (40:1–2)

40:1. *'Comfort, comfort my people,'
your God keeps saying.*

This message of tender reassurance sets the tone for the remainder of the prophecy. The focus of the comfort referred to here is spiritual solace and support for those in inner perplexity regarding their place in the purposes of God, not the alleviation of physical suffering. The command, 'Comfort', is plural, and it is not immediately apparent to whom it is addressed. Earlier sources supposed that it was divinely given to a group of prophets (the Targum), or of priests (the Septuagint), and more recently the heavenly council of chapter 6 has been proposed as the appropriate recipients.⁵ While there is scant evidence for either of the last two options, the first receives some support from the fact that the subsequent description of the actions of those addressed is in terms of the announcement of the authoritative purposes of God. However, the stress is not on the identity of the agents commissioned to carry out the task, but on its divine origin, and especially its effective provision of comfort, a fact emphasized by the repetition of the verb (for such repetition, cf. 51:9). Comfort

is not a new theme in Isaiah. It has already been found in 12:1 and 22:4. What is significant here is the altered balance of the prophet's proclamation, which is no longer predominantly one of judgement.

When is this task to be carried out? In an unusual idiom used elsewhere by Isaiah (cf. 1:11,18; 33:10; 40:25; 41:21; 66:9), it is emphasized that this is an injunction that is repeatedly given: 'your God keeps saying'. Throughout the flow of history the people of God are to be found living in circumstances of affliction and distress, and to them God mandates his messengers to present his message of comfort.

We must remember how deeply the community in Jerusalem had been affected by the demise of the northern kingdom twenty years earlier. Many refugees from the north were to be found in the city. Equally there had been the devastating impact of Sennacherib's invasion. Though it is improbable that all of the 200,000 he claims to have taken captive were in the event deported, the loss of life and physical destruction left the inhabitants of the land traumatized. Equally, for those who were prepared to accept the prophet's predictions, there was the looming shadow of worse to come (39:6–7).

So this message was of immediate relevance, as well as continuing to speak during the exile to those who despaired that they had any future in God's purposes. Indeed, throughout the New Testament era this divine provision of comfort remains an ongoing reality for the church of God to enable them to persevere (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3–7; 2 Thess. 2:16–17).

The basis for the message is to be found in the words, 'my people' and 'your God'. Though the latter reference might be to the God of those who had been given the commission to speak in his name, in this context (cf. 40:9) it undoubtedly is designed to assure those who heard the message of the continuance of their covenant

relationship with Yahweh. It was this bond, ‘You will be my people, and I will be your God’ (Jer. 7:23), which alone could explain why Yahweh would intervene to guarantee their future. Though they were undergoing divine chastisement for their sin, this had not annulled his commitment to those whom he calls ‘my people’, the subjects of his kingdom and the members of his family (cf. 1:3). Throughout his prophecy Isaiah is exploring all that is implied by that relationship as it determines Yahweh’s dealings with those he has claimed as his own.

40:2. *‘Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
and cry out to her
that her time of service shall be fulfilled,
that her penalty shall be paid,
that she shall receive from Yahweh’s hand
double for all her sins.’*

Further details are given of how this ministry is to be effected. ‘Speak to the heart of’ (another plural imperative) describes tender and reassuring speech (cf. Gen. 34:3; 50:21; Ruth 2:13; Hosea 2:14) which expresses genuine concern and sympathy for those addressed. The ‘heart’ refers to an individual’s inner faculties—intellectual and emotional—which are all addressed by Yahweh’s message, so that the recipient is lifted out of the gloom of despair and impelled to look forward in hope.

Those addressed are styled ‘Jerusalem’. It is significant that the focus is not on the people in their subsequent exile in Mesopotamia, but on the capital city of Judah, which had been described as ‘the place Yahweh your God will choose to make his name dwell there’ (Deut. 12:11). By metonymy, the city stands for its inhabitants who constituted the covenant community. Though

‘Zion’ and ‘Jerusalem’ are frequently used as synonyms, the former term views the community more in the light of the spiritual privileges Yahweh has extended to it, whereas ‘Jerusalem’ is often used to depict the actual situation of the people rather than their ideal status. It is appropriate, then, that ‘Jerusalem’ is used here to refer to the grief-stricken and bewildered men and women of Hezekiah’s day—and subsequently to all those who are their spiritual heirs. To them God required that comfort be extended by public proclamation (‘cry out’).

The following three clauses express the content of the message. English translations render the verbs as past tenses, understanding them to refer to what has already been accomplished at the time the prophetic declaration is to be made. In that case the people do not yet realize what has happened, and are called on to grasp the implications of the fact that there has been a major turning point in the outworking of their destiny. It is, however, more probable that the verbs are prophetic perfects (cf. comment introducing 9:1–7), setting out what Yahweh has already resolved and is therefore guaranteeing shall occur.⁶ The message of comfort consists of a call for faith which grounds its trust in the expressed commitment and utter dependability of Yahweh.

There are three aspects to the assurance that is to be given.

Firstly, ‘Her time of service shall be fulfilled.’ ‘Time of service’ refers to an obligation to work imposed by a higher authority, and may point to conscription for military service (cf. Num. 1:3; 31:3) or for service in the sanctuary (cf. Num. 4:3; 8:25). It is not, as such, a reference to punishment, or to the duress and hardship of the exile, but to the role Yahweh allotted his people as they sought to remain true to their commitment to him in a hostile environment. Jerusalem is given the promise that her existing toil will come to an end, and there will be a transformation of

her circumstances and prospects that will be of epoch-making proportions.

Secondly, Jerusalem's situation was troubled by more than the difficulties encountered in loyal service rendered to Yahweh. The stark fact was that she had failed in this. Her 'iniquity' (*āwōn*, cf. 1:4) here more probably indicates the 'penalty' incurred by her failure, which it is announced 'shall be paid', with the passive verb leaving unstated how or by whom this will be done. 'Paid', or 'accepted', reflects the sacrificial ritual in which the word was used of an offering acknowledged as rendering a satisfactory payment for an offence (cf. Lev. 1:4).⁷ Such favour goes beyond anything that occurred at the return from the exile and looks forward to the sacrifice of the Servant whose life will be an offering for sin (53:10) and who will bear the iniquities of many (53:11). In this way the spiritual barrier which interposed between the people and their God will be effectively removed.

Thirdly, the phrase 'double for all her sins' is not without difficulties. It is unclear what is being viewed as doubled. Despite 61:7, where the people are promised a double portion of blessing instead of shame, it is improbable that a similar thought is being expressed here. The word 'double' is different in the two texts, and so is the preposition employed.⁸ What is being described here is negative. Even so, it is unlikely that there is a reference to the law of double restitution required in cases of offences involving property (cf. Exod. 22:9). Yahweh is not asserting that Zion will receive twice as much punishment as her sins deserved. Either 'double' is being used in a general sense, such as 'full' or 'ample', or the reference is to a 'duplicate'.⁹ 'For', or 'as the payment for', would show that God does not turn a blind eye to the errant behaviour of his people; on the contrary, he will exact an equivalent and appropriate penalty (cf. Hosea 2:2–23). This would in fact bestow a

measure of comfort to Zion, in that it would assure her that, despite her offences, her affliction would not continue indefinitely, but would be divinely limited to exactly what was fair.

Reflection

In a world in which suffering and woe abound, there is ongoing need for consolation and encouragement. Christians derive this from ‘the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we can comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God’ (2 Cor. 1:3–4). This comfort is extended to others by proclamation. The good news of the gospel is brought to those who have not previously accepted it so that they may come to faith in the provision made by Christ for their deliverance and reconciliation with God, and it is the same message of divine intervention and grace that is proclaimed to those whose vision of it has been obscured by the sufferings of this life.

2. The royal route (40:3–5)

40:3. *A voice is crying out:*

*‘In the wilderness clear a way for Yahweh,
level in the desert a highway for our God.’*

‘A voice is crying out’ provides us with further information about the message of comfort extended to Jerusalem by Yahweh’s prophetic heralds. There is a call for the people to prepare to receive their King, who is viewed as residing at a distance from them and returning on a royal visit (cf. Deut. 33:2; Judg. 5:4; Ps. 68:7; Hab. 3:3).