

ALLIANCE UNIVERSITY

Old Testament Exegetical Commentary of Isaiah 40

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OT651: Isaiah (Eng Text)

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Thursday, April 27, 2023

Introduction to Isaiah 40

1 Historical Background

The narrative of Isaiah 40 is in the backdrop of chapters 36-37. There are three main events that Isaiah 40 needs to be understood in light of. The first being “the Assyrian dispossession of the cities of Judah”¹. The second being the “threat on Jerusalem”². And the third as “the Lord’s destruction of Assyria and salvation for Israel”³. These historical backgrounds help interpret the many questions of the passage as well as the struggles of the text. Most biblical scholars believe that chapter 40 is non-Isaianic, and “the classic consensus being that the exilic Deutero-Isaiah is its author”⁴. It is said to occur about “150 years after the Hezekiah/Isaiah events recorded in chapters 36-39”⁵.

2 Prevailing Conditions

Amongst the four characters in the beginning of the chapter, it can be said that “the two voices of verses 3 and 6”⁶ are anonymous. There is an unexplainable situation of Jerusalem’s position as one who needs comfort in verse 1 to a city who comforts in verse 9 to 10. There is a “general historical ambiguity of the text”⁷ that has resulted in many proposals of interpretation. Chapter 40 of Isaiah is classically read “as a prologue to chapters 40-55 and interpreted against the background of the Babylonian exile”⁸.

3 Main Characters

The audience is anonymous, but studying the first part of the chapter, it can be inferred that there are four characters involved: “God, the intermediary, those addressed, and those who shall be addressed, namely, Jerusalem”⁹.

3.1 God

It is obvious that God is the one speaking in conversation throughout this whole chapter. God is referred to as “your God” (verse 1), “the LORD” (verse 5), “the Lord GOD” (verse 10), “the Holy One” (verse 25), “the LORD” (verse 27), and “everlasting God” (verse 28).

3.2 A Voice

In verse 3, “A voice cries”, and this is message that John the Baptist refers to in the New Testament. There are many interpretations to this voice. Some scholars view verse 3 as a “path of the exiles through the desert from Babylon to Palestine”¹⁰. Some scholars believe this verse

¹ Seufert, Matthew. “Reading Isaiah 40:1-11 in Light of Isaiah 36-37.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 2 (June 2015): 269. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLAI BCA160506001231&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

² Seufert, 269.

³ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

metaphorically “as a way of expressing the Lord’s coming *parousia*”¹¹. Another group of scholars believe “both the literal and metaphorical reading”¹² of verse 3.

3.3 Jerusalem

Jerusalem is an important main character in Isaiah 40. Jerusalem/Zion is referred to as a herald here in light of the destruction of Assyria¹³. Jerusalem is commanded to go beyond a high mountain, and “this echoes the manner in which Rabshakeh announced his threat in Isa 36:13, recounted in Isa 37:23, and both occur in Isa 40:9 and Rabshakeh’s parallels Jerusalem’s”¹⁴. Jerusalem is God’s vessel to cry aloud “Yahweh’s action”¹⁵.

3.4 Judah

Judah is the recipient of Jerusalem’s message encoding God’s words to them. “Rabshakeh’s threat of defeat is literarily countered by Jerusalem’s cry of victory; both are addressed to Judah”¹⁶.

4 Argument

Isaiah 40 argues the foolishness of trusting in idols instead of God. A message is commanded to be told, and an argument unfolds throughout the chapter condemning the folly of trusting in idols and not trusting in the everlasting God. A further argument is developed that shows how amazing God is and leads to the main argument in verses 30 and 31.

5 Purpose

The major purpose of chapter 40 is twofold. It opens up a new section within Isaiah as is very evident with the style of writing, tone, and prose of the passage in light of chapter 39 and moving forward. Second, it shows the greatness of God.

6 Key Verse

“30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; 31 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” (Isaiah 40:30-31).

7 Major Themes

There are a few major themes in chapter 40 of Isaiah. The first major theme is creation. “...Isa 4:2-6, 40-48, and 65-66 hold creation (Gen 1:1-2:3) in tension with exodus and wilderness themes (Exodus 1-18; Numbers 10-21) as types for understanding exile, future return, and the telos of election and redemption”¹⁷. Isaiah understood creation as a backdrop for seeing redemption. The redemption that Isaiah saw was the unfolding of “new creation through the

¹¹ Ibid., 277-278.

¹² Ibid., 278.

¹³ Ibid., 276.

¹⁴ Ibid., 276.

¹⁵ Ibid., 276.

¹⁶ Ibid., 276.

¹⁷ Wardlaw, Terrance Randall. “The Significance of Creation in the Book of Isaiah.”

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 59, no. 3 (September 2016): 449.

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ministry of the ideal Servant”¹⁸. The second major theme is “Israel’s eschatological restoration”¹⁹. Biblical scrutiny of John the Baptist’s ministry and life have shown the focus of his “warnings of the coming judgment and his predictions of ‘the coming one’”²⁰. The third theme is also of “the ingathering of the exiles”²¹ that gets neglected many times. Isaiah 40 is a pivotal aspect of John the Baptist’s ministry that “was frequently read in the Second Temple period as a prophecy of the return of the exiles at the end of time”²². The major themes of Isaiah 40 not only highlight the mighty attributes of God, but it also “provides an interpretive framework for John’s activities”²³ that show his baptism was “not just a symbol of the coming judgment but also of Israel’s restoration”²⁴.

Interpretation and Exposition

1 God’s opening discourse 1-2

“Alexander believed that this chapter does not apply to the Babylonian Captivity but is a general promise of consolation, protection, and change for the better for the church”²⁵. In a time when the impending Babylonian exile was a reason for God not being able to deliver or because of Israel’s sinfulness, the opening of chapter 40 of Isaiah proves otherwise. God is going to show himself faithful and bring comfort, protection, and transformation for his glory. This opening discourse sets the stage for a new beginning and for the rest of Isaiah. This is evident through the double usage of “Comfort” that “suggests emotional intensity”²⁶.

2 Description of the voice that cries 3-5

The prevailing argument in these next verses is “how God could offer sinful people comfort”²⁷? It would be by breaking “into history”²⁸. The main idea in these verses is that God is going to make a way where there was no way. “The idea is that He was certainly coming and His people should prepare for His appearing”²⁹. God would appear, act, and show His glory to everyone. The world will be in awe of God’s rescue, and everyone will be awestruck of the coming Messiah’s saving through His eschatological and salvation workings.

3 Continuing description of a voice that says 6-8

If verses 3 to 5 highlight God’s awesome saving power, these next three verses show the inability and futility “of humans to deliver themselves”³⁰. Two things are highlighted in verse 6.

¹⁸ Wardlaw Jr., 449.

¹⁹ Ferda, Tucker S. “John the Baptist, Isaiah 40, and the Ingathering of the Exiles.” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10, no. 2 (2012): 154. doi:10.1163/174551912x640221

²⁰ Ferda, 154.

²¹ Ibid., 154.

²² Ibid., 154.

²³ Ibid., 154.

²⁴ Ibid., 154.

²⁵ “Dr. Constable’s Expository (Bible Study) Notes.” Plano Bible Chapel. Accessed April 27, 2023: 250. <https://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes/>.

²⁶ Constable, 252.

²⁷ Ibid., 253.

²⁸ Ibid., 253.

²⁹ Ibid., 253.

³⁰ Ibid., 254.

The first is to compare Israel to grass that quickly withers away. The second being that even though “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:8). The only trustworthy and powerful part of Israel’s life is God’s words. “God’s promise of hope could overcome the devastation of His judgment”³¹ through the promise of His unshakable words.

4 Command to declare God’s greatness 9-11

Further exposition of God’s working is described here. God commands Israel to go up on a high mountain, and herald the good news of “Behold your God!” (Isa 40:9). Israel is to declare God’s might, and what He is going to do for His people. God will deliver His people because through blessing Israel. God desires to bless the rest of the world.

5 Set of questions about God 12-14

A set of questions are implored and launched to show who God truly is. “The doctrine of creation is important to the argument of this part of the book”³². Creation “is assumed and built upon”³³ throughout these next loaded questions. A creation worldview is in place by the prophet, and God is shown as someone who “is other than creation”³⁴. He is not creation, “but he is *other* than all of these”³⁵. He holds creation in his hands, and he is the originator of the world, “but he is not the world”³⁶. Verses 13 and 14 is a polemic discourse shot at “the polytheistic religions” of Isaiah’s times, and the concept of transcendence is highlighted while refuting a deterministic world view³⁷.

6 Description of the nations 15-17

Even though the nations may be great in the eyes of the nations and Israel, it is noted here that the nations “are like a drop of bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isa 40:15). The nations are “like fine dust” (Isa 40:15). And not even the whole nation of Lebanon and its beast would be enough “fuel” for God and “for a burnt offering” (Isa 40:16). “All the nations are as nothing before” God, and “they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness” (Isa 40:17). “Unlike the other gods, the God of Israel is not a personalization of his nation”³⁸. God brings all nations into existence, and “he is not an extension of any one of them”³⁹.

7 Turning question and answer for chapter 40 18-20

It is a disappointment that God is even attempted to be compared to an idol. These verses are the first of diatribes “against the idols in 40:18b-20” and “the first of several in this part of the book (41:6-7; 42:17; 44:9-20; 46:5-7; 48:5)”⁴⁰. “It is the complement to the prophet’s

³¹ Ibid., 254.

³² Oswalt, John N. *Isaiah: The Niv Application Commentary: From Biblical Text- to Contemporary Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003, 446.

³³ Oswalt, 446.

³⁴ Ibid., 446.

³⁵ Ibid., 446.

³⁶ Ibid., 447.

³⁷ Ibid., 447.

³⁸ Ibid., 447.

³⁹ Ibid., 447.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 447.

insistence on the transcendence of God”⁴¹. God is not the world, and it is a mistake to compare him in any form present in this world which “has deadly consequences”⁴². Something that humans made cannot be the maker of the people who made them.

8 Comparison of God to Israel’s futile idols 21-24

Another cycle of questions begin in these next verses. This time it is shown “that God is not only other than the world but also other than the heavens”⁴³. God is not only incomparable to creation but even to the majestic qualities of creation like the heavens. God stretches the heavens “like a tent” (Isa 40:22). God is not overpowered by any rulers (Isa 40:23). And the destiny of nation’s rulers is in God’s hands. Verse 24 seems to compare to verses 6-8 where the rulers of nations are also like grass. No nation or ruler will stand in the presence of God.

9 No comparison to God Almighty 25-26

In verses 25 to 26, further investigative questions are asked to show God’s powerful identity. There is no comparison to the Holy One. God even questions who made the starry hosts. “Yahweh is not a god created; he is the creator god”⁴⁴. Not even the starry hosts can compare to God because again God is the creator of all of creation.

10 Set of questions to Israel and God’s great answers 27-29

Another set of questions are reloaded to highlight the Almighty God, but right before doing so, God accuses Jacob and Israel of thinking their ways can be hidden from God. Here the main thesis before launching the main idea of Isaiah 40 is given. “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (Isa 40:28a). Therefore, “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” (Isa 40:28b-29).

11 Main idea of chapter 40 30-31

Finally, the main idea of chapter 40 is written. Not even the most youthful, energetic, and greatest young men and women can stand before God’s Almighty Presence. “Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;” (Isa 40:30) “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” (Isa 40:31). The secret to experiencing God’s power and strength is learning to wait, look, and depend upon Him in everything and at all times.

Application

1 The first application of Isaiah 40 is learning to encounter and know God’s true heart for us. Isaiah 40:1 opens up with the words, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” God commands tender words to be spoken to Jerusalem. And that her warfare is ended, iniquities are

⁴¹ Ibid., 447.

⁴² Ibid., 447.

⁴³ Ibid., 447.

⁴⁴ Wilson, Ian Douglas. “Yahweh’s Consciousness: Isaiah 40-48 and Ancient Judean Historical Thought.” *Vetus Testamentum* 66, no. 4 (2016): 653. doi:10.1163/15685330-12341257.

pardoned, and has received double from the LORD's hand. The overall message of this chapter is not that Israel deserves God's grace, forgiveness, and love, but it is because of who God is. Salvation is wholly based on God's character and God's bringing of it. There is nothing we can do. And this must give us comfort.

2 The second application of Isaiah 40 is to realize who we are in light of who God is. Verses 3 to 8 show who we are in comparison to God's amazing character. Isaiah 40 shows all humanity is like grass. That is what the first voice cries alongside the cry of the message of God's salvation. Grass withers and flowers fade when God's breath blows on them, but God's words will stand forever (Isa 40:8). God's words show us who He truly is and who we truly are. To embrace God's salvation, we must not only accept who God is but who we are in light of God's character.

3 This leads to the next important application. When accepting these two truths into our lives, this puts us in a unique position to become God's herald to this world. Just like how God commands Israel to go up on a high mountain in verses 9 to 11 and declare God's workings. We must not be afraid to be used by God to share His message in actions, words, and His truth in our lives. There is nothing we did to deserve God's salvation. Therefore, we must give everything to be a vessel of His salvation to everyone who desperately need God in their lives.

4 In light of these applications, it is so important to always stay humble. The comparisons in the second half of Isaiah 40 to God, creation, idols, and the nations and their rulers highlight the power and sovereignty of God. Absolutely nothing compares to God's character. Not even the idols we make, the seas and starry hosts, nor the most powerful of nations and their rulers. This must always keep us humble and completely trusting in God no matter what or who stands against or in front of us. It is tempting to trust in our abilities, the things, plans, and ways this world offers, and even the most powerful people and leaders of this world. But we must not bow before any creation or person, people besides God Almighty. Our worship and heart of contriteness, brokenness, fulfillment, and dependence must always be upon our God only.

5 Last but not least, this must be applied through the main idea of Isaiah 40 which is to therefore hope and wait upon the LORD at all times because He is truly worthy of our whole lives. So many times, we get impatient in our walks with God. We wonder is God working? What is He doing? His hand seems so short. He seems to be absent. But when God is silent, it does not mean He is present. Just that life and our circumstances do not go the ways we want, does not mean God has left us. In light of chapter 40 of Isaiah, the verdict is to wait upon the LORD. Even the most youthful, energetic, and powerful young men and women will run out of strength, become exhausted, and need a recharge, but if we wait upon the LORD, we will always renew our strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be tired, and walk and never faint. We cannot control life, but we can constantly and always be submitted to the author of life through our waiting and hoping in God always. The choice is ours. We must choose right.

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