

Exile in Babylon 597-538 Isaiah Scroll 40-55

07. Isaiah 40-41



A dramatic turn of events came with the victories of Cyrus II of Persia. The ailing Babylonian Empire was ruled by the usurper Nabonidus. In 550 Cyrus of Persia conquered Ecbatana, the capital the Median Empire. Three years later he captured Sardis, the capital of Lydia. Then he took Susa, the capital of Elam. News of Cyrus's victories and of his policy of allowing exiles to return to their homeland awakened a similar hope in the exiles from Judah.

The Isaiah School

It is often assumed that the material found in the Isaiah Scroll chapters 40 to 55 is the work of an unnamed individual prophet, called for convenience 'Deutero-Isaiah'. I am following those who attribute it to a 'School' of prophet-preachers. These prophet-preachers show familiarity with the Isaiah tradition, as they do with other prophetic and Deuteronomistic material, but their writing has its own distinct character, which has most in common with the [temple singers](#) responsible for the [psalms](#).

It is likely that the oratorical nature of the material in Isaiah 40-55 is because it was composed for the preaching that took place in the synagogue.

These prophet-preachers saw Cyrus as the instrument raised up by YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, to liberate his people. Their exile, which the Babylonians saw as proof of the superiority of their god over YHWH, is presented by the Isaiah School as a victory for YHWH who raised up the Babylonian power to purify Judah. Now YHWH, in fulfilment of earlier prophecies, was raising up another foreign power, Persia, to take his purified people back to the Promised Land.

We need to keep in mind the pressure the deported Judeans were under in this multicultural environment with its powerful imperial deities. This helps account for the polemic against idols, but more importantly for the stress throughout that YHWH, the God of Israel, is the lord of creation and the lord of history.

The writings of the Isaiah School in Exile fall into two parts:
Isaiah 40-48 and Isaiah 49-55

Part I. Isaiah 40-48

This material is like nothing that has preceded it. The prophet Isaiah carried out his ministry against the background of Assyrian aggression. The prophet Jeremiah ministered in the catastrophic years of the rise of Babylon and the collapse of Judah.

These nine chapters of the Isaiah scroll promise an end to exile and a return to the Promised Land. They call for hope and trust and look forward to the excitement of taking part in a second Exodus. YHWH, the Lord of creation and the lord of history, is coming, not to punish, but to comfort and redeem (40:1; see 41:10; 43:1). We have in these chapters an inspired response to the call to 'sing a new song'(42:10). It is a call, also, to mission (42:1-7).

We will grasp the message of Isaiah 40-55 best if we place ourselves among the exiles in Babylon, join them in the synagogue, and listen to the words of these prophet-preachers sharing with us what they have heard in prayer. They have been told by YHWH to comfort us, to assure us that we are, indeed, his people. Through their prophetic words YHWH is calling us to share the good tidings with others. Back in Jerusalem we heard so many disturbing words, and the terror of the siege, the occupation of the city by the Babylonian army, and the deportation that we experienced proved that those disturbing words were, indeed, from YHWH. When we hear the preacher use the expression 'says your God' we know we are listening to a claim that it is YHWH who is, once again, speaking to us – this time to comfort us.

Isaiah 40:1-2

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from YHWH's hand

double for all her sins.

We have been struggling to make sense of the disasters that overtook Judah. Many of our parents have died in this godforsaken Babylon, and our children have known nothing but exile. Though living in Babylon, our hearts are in Jerusalem, as is the heart of the preacher. Rumour has come through of a Persian army that is having victory after victory over our hated captors. It is, indeed, comforting to hear the man of God tell us that YHWH has not forgotten us, and that, at last, he wants to speak tenderly to us, and assure us that we are forgiven. We are like soldiers who have been engaged in battle, and now, at last, we have served our term. It is time to go home.

Isaiah 40:3-4

A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH,
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 a plain.

We have been thinking of YHWH as being somehow back there in Judah from where we have been exiled. Could it be true that he is going to appear among us, here in this foreign land, victorious over the gods of Babylon? We have seen the locals levelling the road in preparation for the procession of their gods. Now the preacher is telling us that we must make preparations for the coming of our God, YHWH.

Isaiah 40:5

Then the glory of YHWH shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of YHWH has spoken.”

God cannot be seen, for God is beyond the created world and cannot be contained within it. Yet we know, too, that our God fills the whole universe. We are being assured that, while we cannot see YHWH, his glory (kābôd) will be revealed (see Isaiah 6:3) through what he is going to do among us. Others, too, will see it and marvel at the presence and action of ‘our God’(40:3). In case this proves too much for us to believe, the preacher adds: ‘the mouth of YHWH has spoken’, once again insisting that he is not speaking for himself, but is moved to speak by God.

Isaiah 40:6-8 [quoted 1 Peter 1:24]

A voice says, “Cry out!” But someone says, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of YHWH blows upon it.

The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever.

The mission we are being given does not depend on us. We are fragile, it is true; but then so is Babylon. Borrowing an image from the great prophet, Isaiah ben Amoz (see 28:1-6), the preacher assures us that all human power and pretension is no more permanent than the grass or flower in the field. What matters is the will of YHWH. His word, coming to us through his prophets, will not wither or fade. It will ‘stand forever’.

Three times in this opening oration stress has been laid on the reliability of God's prophetic word. This assurance given here at the beginning is repeated at the end. It is a central theme.

'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it'(Isaiah 55:10-11)

Isaiah 40:9-11

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

See, the Lord YHWH comes with might
and his strong arm asserts his rule;

his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Jerusalem – called Zion when the focus is on the city as the seat of the Davidic dynasty and the temple – is being summoned to break the good news to the villages and settlements of Judah that their God has not abandoned them, but is coming in triumph

Isaiah 40:12-14

If YHWH can create, surely YHWH can redeem!

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 directed the spirit of YHWH, [1 Cor 2:16; Romans 11:34]
or as his counsellor has instructed him?

Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice?

Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?

As will become clear later, the preacher is contrasting YHWH with the Babylonian creator god, Marduk. Marduk needed the counsel of Ea. Not so YHWH.

Isaiah 40:15-17

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness (tōhû).

YHWH took the 'formless void'(tōhû wa bōhû, Genesis 1:2) and brought forth the universe. If he can create and rule creation, surely the nations who are accounted by him as 'less than nothing and emptiness' cannot thwart his will.

Isaiah 40:18-20

To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal?
says the Holy One.

The preacher is challenging the claim made by the Babylonians for their god, Marduk: “none among the gods can equal him”(Enuma Elish 7.14).

He goes on to satirise the manufacture of idols:

An idol? —A workman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.
As a gift one chooses mulberry wood
— wood that will not rot —
then seeks out a skilled artisan
to set up an image that will not topple.

Isaiah 40:21-25

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood 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 live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

Isaiah 40:26

Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

The significance of these words is clearer when we recall how important astronomy was in Babylon. The heavenly bodies were considered to be alive. They were composed of the finest element, fire, and were considered gods and worshipped. We are reminded of the fact that they belong to YHWH (he names them), and that they journey through the heavens at his command.

Isaiah 40:27-31

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,

“My way is hidden from YHWH,
and my right is disregarded by my God”? (40:27).

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

YHWH is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding cannot be fathomed.

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

Those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength,

they shall fly with renewed wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 41:1-4

Listen to me in silence, O coastlands;
let the peoples renew their strength;
let them approach, then let them speak;
let us together draw near for judgment.

Who has roused a victor from the east,
summoned him to his service?

He delivers up nations to him, and tramples kings under foot.

2He scatters them with his sword like dust.

like wind-driven stubble with his bow.

He pursues them and passes on safely,
scarcely touching the path with his feet.

Who has performed and done this?

The one who summons the generations from the beginning.

I, YHWH, I am He, the first and the last.

אֲנִי־יְהוָה ἐγώ εἰμι.

Isaiah 41:8-9

Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners, saying to you,
“You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.”

The word ‘servant’ highlights YHWH as ‘lord’, and the ‘servant’ as the one committed to carry out the mission given by his lord.

- Abraham is the servant of YHWH
- Moses is the servant of YHWH
- Israel is to follow them – into the Promised Land

Isaiah 41:10, 13-14, 17

Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand ...

- It is not surprising that they experience fear at returning.

For I, YHWH your God, hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I am here to help you.”
Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you insect Israel! (metamorphosis)
I will help you, says YHWH; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.

- YHWH as Redeemer is a key theme

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with thirst,
I YHWH will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.

Isaiah 41:18-20

I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.

I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together,
so that all may see and know,
all may consider and understand,
that the hand of YHWH has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has **created** it.

Isaiah 41:21-29 : The gods of Babylon are useless

41:24

You are nothing and your work is nothing at all.

41:27

I, the First, declared it to Zion,
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings.

41:28-29

When I looked there was no one;
among these there was no counsellor
who, when I asked, could give an answer.

No, they are all nothing;
their works are inexistent;
their images but a passing wind, empty chaos.



Always Loving You