

READING ISAIAH 40:1–11 IN LIGHT OF ISAIAH 36–37

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I. INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

This paper proposes reading Isaiah 40:1–11 against the narrative of chapters 36–37: the Assyrian dispossession of the cities of Judah, threat on Jerusalem, and the Lord’s destruction of Assyria and salvation for Israel. This backdrop fills in many of the blanks of the passage and offers new possibilities for the obscurities of the text.

The difficulties of Isaiah 40:1–11 have been well documented.¹ The recipients of the plural imperatives are anonymous (vv. 1–2; נַחֲמוּ, דַּבְּרוּ, and קְרְאוּ); there are possibly four parties involved in the first stanza (God, the intermediary, those addressed, and those who shall be addressed), only two of which are specified (God and those who shall be addressed, namely, Jerusalem). The two voices of verses 3 and 6 are also anonymous. Jerusalem’s transformation from those in need of comfort in verse 1 to those who comfort in verses 9–10 is left without explanation. And the general historical ambiguity of the text has resulted in various proposals for its provenance. In light of these observations, it is no surprise to find a wide range of opinions regarding many aspects of the passage.

II. ISAIAH 40:1–11 IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

The majority of scholars believe this text to be non-Isaianic, the classic consensus being that the exilic Deutero-Isaiah is its author. As such, it is read as a pro-

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¹ There is some dispute over whether or not to include vv. 9–11 with vv. 1–8. There are good reasons to include them. For stylistic and structural arguments that support this see Yehoshua Gitay, *Rhetorical Analysis of Isaiah 40–48: A Study of the Art of Prophetic Persuasion* (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1978) 127–28; J. P. Fokkeman, “Stylistic Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11,” in *Remembering All the Way: A Collection of OT Studies* (ed. A. S. van der Woude; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 68–90, esp. p. 83; David Noel Freedman, “The Structure of Isaiah 40:1–11,” in *Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays and Poems in Honor of Francis I. Andersen’s Sixtieth Birthday, July 28, 1985* (ed. Edgar W. Conrad and Edward G. Newing; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987) 167–93; D. M. Carr, “Isaiah 40:1–11 in the Context of the Macrostructure of Second Isaiah,” in *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What It Is and What It Offers* (ed. W. R. Bodine; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 51–74; Terry W. Eddinger, “An Analysis of Isaiah 40:1–11 (17),” *BBR* 9 (1999) 119–35, esp. 133 and 135; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 300–302. Cf. L. Krinetzki, “Zur Stilistik von Jesaja 40:1–8,” *BZ* 16 (1972) 54–69; Roy F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55* (BZAW 141; New York: de Gruyter, 1976) 82–86.

logue to chapters 40–55 and interpreted against the background of the Babylonian exile, some 150 years after the Hezekiah/Isaiah events recorded in chapters 36–39.²

An organic result of the Deutero-Isaiah thesis is the interpretation of Isa 40:1–11 as a divine call narration. Just as Isaiah entered into the divine council and received his prophetic mandate (Isaiah 6), so now Second-Isaiah receives his orders from God and his heavenly attendants to address the exiles.³ Slightly differing from this, there are those who prefer to see here a reapplication of Isaiah's call, rather than a new call.⁴ Moreover, some scholars emphasize the divine council setting over the prophetic call, though these often overlap.⁵ Agreement with and modification of these proposals pervades scholarship.⁶

While the heavenly council/prophetic call proposal with its variations has gained widespread acceptance, there are very good reasons to question this, as important standard components of typical call narratives and council scenes are lacking. Concerning the council scene, there is no explicit mention of any heavenly being in Isa 40:1–11, except for God (cf. Job 1–2; Isaiah 6; 1 Kgs 22:19–22 where both the beings and dialogue/deliberation are present). Additionally, in the other scenes God speaks directly to the angels. Here, there would be an angelic intermediary between them and God. As Isa 40:1 reads, נחמו נחמו עמי יאמר אלהיכם.

In this case, a head angel would be commanding a host of angels to comfort Israel. God speaking to angels through an angel occurs in no other scene. Lastly, the oft-noted reminiscence of the covenant formula in this verse (i.e. “my people” and “your God”) requires that the referents of “your” (says “your” God) be Israelites; they cannot be angels.

Nor do these verses fit the call narration. Habel is compelled to explain away the lack of a divine confrontation, which is present in every other prophetic call (cf.

² For a convenient compilation of a handful of scholars on this see Debra Moody Bass, *God Comforts Israel: The Audience and Message of Isaiah 40–55* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006) 31–90.

³ So, e.g., Norm Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *ZAW* 77 (1965) 316.

⁴ So, e.g., Christopher Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah,” *JBL* 109 (1990) 238–43. Childs, *Isaiah* 294–300.

⁵ So, e.g., H. W. Robinson, “The Council of Yahweh,” *JTS* 45 (1944) 151–57. Frank Cross, “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah,” *JNES* 12 (1953) 275. James Muilenburg, *Isaiah* (IB 5; New York: Abingdon, 1951) 422–23.

⁶ Cf. Christopher R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 71, 74; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 32; R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 48; Karl Elliger, *Deuterjesaja: Jesaja 40,1–45,7* (Band XI/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978) 6, 12; Melugin, *Formation of Isaiah 40–55* 82–84; Richard J. Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 72–76; Oswald Loretz, “Die Gattung des Prologs zum Buche Deuterjesaja (Jes 40:1–11)” *ZAW* 96 (1984) 210–20; Carr, “Isaiah 40:1–11” 51–74; H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 37–38; Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 15–24; Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 161–62; Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 16–21; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* (WBC 25; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 60; Klaus Baltzer, *A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 51; Øystein Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics in Isaiah 40–55* (FAT II/28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 71; Bo H. Lim, *The “Way of the Lord” in the Book of Isaiah* (JSOTSup 522; New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 49–51.

Judg 6:11–17; Exod 3:1–12; Jer 1:4–10).⁷ There is also no confirmatory sign. These are two of the six elements Habel identifies which make up a call narration. Of the others (Introductory Word, Commission, Objection, and Reassurance) only the final two have gained some acceptance.⁸ In sum, the lack of important elements of standard prophetic calls/divine council scenes in Isa 40:1–11 argues strongly against these proposed settings.⁹

Even more confessional scholars, while typically affirming Isaiah ben Amoz to be the author of Isa 40:1–11, treat the Babylonian exile as its conceptual framework. John Goldingay is an exception, who consents to a Deutero-Isaiah and thus an exilic backdrop for chapters 40–55.¹⁰ Regarding chapters 40–66 in general, John Oswalt defends mid-7th century authorship while maintaining the primary background of Isaiah 40–55 and 56–66 as exile and post-exile.¹¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr. thinks that in chapters 40–55 Isaiah “projects himself into the future and speaks to the exiles.”¹² Gary V. Smith, however, “attempt[s] to discover a more likely historical setting in the pre-exilic era” for all of Isaiah 40–55.¹³ While he does view Isa 40:1–11 in light of the pre-exilic era, he thinks we cannot know its specific setting.¹⁴ J. Barton Payne also argues for a pre-exilic backdrop for chapters 40–66.¹⁵ Unlike

⁷ Habel, “Call Narratives” 314.

⁸ Seitz’s explanation for these missing elements and the lack of explicit divine council components, that Isaiah 40 presupposes Isaiah 6 and its setting, is interesting but not persuasive. The links between chaps. 6 and 40 are not strong enough to warrant the import; cf. Seitz, “Divine Council” 239–40.

⁹ A good number have also opposed one or both of these proposals. See, e.g., Eddinger, “Isaiah 40:1–11” 124; P. E. Bonnard, *Le Second Isaïe: Son disciple et leurs éditeurs, Isaïe 40–66* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1972) 90; Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III, Isaiah 40–48* (HKAT; trans. Anthony P. Runia; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997) 48–51; Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 179–80; John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55* (ICC; New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 63; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* (NAC 15B; Nashville: B&H, 2009) 89–91; Robert R. Wilson, “The Community of the Second Isaiah,” in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (ed. Christopher R. Seitz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 54. Koole rattles off an impressive list of additional dissenters: Koenig, Morgenstern, Steinmann, Simon, Smart, McKenzie, Young, Merendino, and Lack.

¹⁰ John Goldingay, *Isaiah* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) 222.

¹¹ John N. Oswalt, “Who were the Addressees of Isaiah 40–66?” *BSac* 169 (2012) 33–47. Similarly, John Calvin, “It is probable that he [Isaiah] wrote this prophecy when the time of the captivity was at hand . . . he addresses the Jews, who were soon after to be carried into the hard captivity in which they should have neither sacrifices nor prophets.” John Calvin, *Isaiah* (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, Baker, 1996) 197. Calvin thought Isaiah wrote the words of 40:1, “Comfort, comfort my people, your God *will say*,” to a future generation of prophets who would take up these words when God’s salvation drew near (ibid. 198–99). Barry Webb takes a similar position: “In the latter part of his life Isaiah was called to a new task: to comfort God’s people in words that his disciples would cherish and preserve in the dark days ahead until Israel was at last ready to hear them” (*Isaiah* 160–61; cf. Edward J. Young, *Who Wrote Isaiah?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958] 78–79; Franz Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960] 139; J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* [TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009] 277).

¹² Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 92.

¹³ Gary V. Smith, “Isaiah 40–55: Which Audience was Addressed?,” *JETS* 54 (2011) 704.

¹⁴ Ibid. 702; cf. idem, *Isaiah 40–66* 91.

¹⁵ J. Barton Payne, “Eighth Century Israelitish Background of Isaiah 40–66 [Pt 1],” *WTJ* 29 (1967) 179–90; idem, “Eighth Century Israelitish Background of Isaiah 40–66 [Pt 2],” *WTJ* 30 (1967) 50–58; idem, “Eighth Century Israelitish Background of Isaiah 40–66 [Pt 3],” *WTJ* 30 (1968) 185–203.

Smith though, he assigns Isaiah 40 to “the time of Sennacherib’s withdrawal.”¹⁶ The options of exile or a setting-less passage with the message at the fore, in my view, miss the background.¹⁷ This article seeks to substantiate the Sennacherib setting for Isaiah 40:1–11.¹⁸

III. MY PROPOSAL

Isaiah 40:1–11 serves as a poetic recollection of the events and messages recorded in chapters 36–37, drawing upon several key elements of the earlier literary construction. In the midst of the following positive exegetical observations which build this case, I demonstrate how this larger interpretive framework offers solutions to several of the difficulties mentioned at the outset of the article.

IV. ISAIAH 36–37 AND 40:1–11

1. *Jerusalem: Needing comfort and comforter of the cities of Judah.* One of the more striking features of Isa 40:1–11 is the dual role Jerusalem plays as both comforted (vv. 1–2) and comforter (v. 9). Verses 1–2 read, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Here Jerusalem is clearly the recipient of comfort. A few verses later, verse 9, she assumes the role of comforter; “Ascend a high mountain, herald-Zion! Raise your voice with strength, herald-Jerusalem! Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”¹⁹ What prompts the change in role?

¹⁶ Payne, “Background of Isaiah 40–66 [Pt 2]” 50.

¹⁷ There are several scholars who think the ambiguity of the text’s setting and addressees serves the purpose of highlighting the message. So, e.g., Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* 93; Ulrich Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (HTKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2008) 98; Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 32; Bonnard, *Le Second Isaïe* 85; North, *Second Isaiah* 71.

¹⁸ Payne’s work is occupied with the broader question of Isaiah 40–66’s background. As such, it does not allot much space to Isa 40:1–11, except to make the claim cited above.

¹⁹ I understand Isaiah 40:9’s *מְבַשֶּׂרֶת צִיּוֹן* and *מְבַשֶּׂרֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם* to be in apposition; Jerusalem and Zion are heralds of good news. Incidentally, they also refer to the same entity (cf. Isa 30:19; 31:9; 33:20; 37:22, 32; 52:8–9). The fact that Judah’s cities are to be distinguished from Zion/Jerusalem (cf., e.g., Isa 1:1; 2:1; 3:1, 8; 36:1; 44:26) makes this decisive. Other favorable factors include the presence of both feminine participles and feminine imperatives, which must here refer to and be addressed to Zion/Jerusalem. The Peshitta, Berges, Beuken, Blenkinsopp, Calvin, Childs, Elliger, Fokkelman, Freedman, Koole, North, Oswalt, Watts, Westermann, and Whybray favor an appositional reading, which is *contra* the accusative reading of Targums, LXX (which changes the fem. form of the participle to masc. reading *ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος*; Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion maintain the fem. form), and Vg. These interpret the herald as speaking *to* Zion and Jerusalem. Robert Fisher most extensively defended this view. Robert Fisher, “The Herald of Good News in Second Isaiah,” in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974) 118–24; cf. Reinoud Oosting, *The Role of Zion/Jerusalem in Isaiah 40–55: A Corpus-Linguistic Approach* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 65–66. Both Fisher and Oosting are swayed by 41:27 and 52:7, where Zion/Jerusalem clearly receives a herald. But there the participles are masculine. Oosting rightly criticizes Fisher’s explanation for the fem. forms (Fisher proposes that, as in Arabic, the fem. ending intensifies the forms; but this would be the only place in the Hebrew Bible where this occurs) and thinks the participle is used like *יְשֻׁבֶת*, as a collective or personification. This does nothing to explain why the feminine is used here but the masculine appears in both Isa 41:27 and 52:7. Further, a collective would imply more than one herald, which is also unlike Isa 41:27 and 52:7. To rely on those two places to understand to whom the herald is sent and to ignore

Pace Smith, I think this adds historical flesh to a seemingly context-less text. It depicts a time when Jerusalem was in need of comfort and, having received it, turned to give comfort. The separation of Jerusalem/Zion and the cities of Judah, and the former comforting the latter, adds additional flesh and would be strange if everyone was in exile. Chapters 36–37 explain Jerusalem’s twofold function and the distinction between Jerusalem and Judah’s cities.

Chapter 36 begins, “In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came up against all the fortified *cities of Judah* and seized them.” The phrase “cities of Judah” only appears three times in all of Isaiah: 36:1, 40:9, and 44:26. In 44:26, as opposed to 36:1 and 40:9, Jerusalem is uninhabited.²⁰ In Isa 36:1 and 40:9, Jerusalem is standing; in 40:9, she acts as the *מבשרת* (“herald of the good news of victory in war”; see below) to Judah’s cities. This reads nicely against the Assyrian context, where Judah’s cities have been captured by Sennacherib, while Jerusalem, though initially threatened, does not fall and ultimately witnesses the Lord’s victory, putting her in a position to herald good news to Judah’s captured cities.²¹

Following Rabshakeh’s taunt and threats (Isa 36:2–20), the initial depiction of Jerusalem is of Hezekiah and his people in a state of mourning and distress (cf. Isa 36:22–37:3). Later in the narrative, Hezekiah receives a word from Isaiah that Yahweh will save Jerusalem, and the narrative closes with Jerusalem’s witness of victory and Assyria’s departure. Isaiah 37:35–36 reads, “I will defend this city to save it for my sake and for my servant David’s sake.’ And the Angel of the Lord went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold (*הנה*) all of them were dead corpses.” Having seen Assyria’s fall, they can announce the news to Judah’s cities.²²

Jerusalem’s title in Isa 40:9 (*מבשרת*) corresponds well with her witness of victory in chapter 37. The *מבשר* was responsible for proclaiming the good news of success in war which he had witnessed (cf., e.g., 2 Sam 18:6–33).²³ In Isaiah 40:9, Jerusalem is told to shout out the news, *הנה אלהיכם*. The *הנה* could recollect the two uses of *הנה* in Isa 37:11 and 36. Rabshakeh spoke in Isa 37:11 to call attention to the war accomplishments of the Assyrian kings, “Behold (*הנה*) you have heard

them concerning the gender and number of the herald(s) is inconsistent. It appears that there is clearly something distinct being described in Isa 40:9.

²⁰ Isaiah 44:26 reads, “[The Lord] causes the word of his servant to stand, and the counsel of his messengers he will complete, who says of Jerusalem ‘she will be inhabited,’ and of the cities of Judah, ‘they shall be built up, for I will raise her ruins.’”

²¹ In Isaiah 52:7, Jerusalem is no longer the *מבשרת* but rather receives the *מבשר*, highlighting the difference between Jerusalem’s status during the Assyrian crisis and that during the Babylonian. In the former she stood and heralded, in the latter she had fallen and needed/received a herald.

²² Cf. Christopher North’s comment defending an appositional reading of Zion/Jerusalem, “[This reading] is in keeping with the wider context: Zion-Jerusalem has already heard glad tidings (vv. 1–2) and is now to pass them on to her ‘daughter’ townships.” He assumes a Babylonian setting for the passage and does not explore this further. North, *Second Isaiah* 79.

²³ For an in-depth study of *מבשר* and especially its use in Isaiah see Matthew Seufert, “Isaiah’s Herald,” *WTJ* (forthcoming). The present article develops the argument for an Assyrian background mentioned in this article.

what the Assyrian kings have done to all the lands.” The second use in Isa 37:36 attends what the Angel of the Lord did in war, “Behold (הנה) 185,000 dead Assyrian bodies!” The “Behold (הנה) your God!” of Isa 40:9 both nicely summarizes Isa 37:36’s statement and contrasts the power of God with that of the Assyrian kings.

In brief, when Assyria stood at the gates of Jerusalem threatening her welfare, Jerusalem was in need of comfort (cf. Isa 40:1–2). She received this through the word of Isaiah (cf. 37:6–7). After witnessing the Lord’s defeat of Assyria, she becomes the comforter (or herald) to the previously captured cities of Judah (40:9). Chapters 36–37 provide the historical background for Jerusalem’s change in role and the distinction between Jerusalem and the cities of Judah.

2. *Lexically and metaphorically connected.* Another point of connection between chapters 36–37 and 40:1–11 is the lexical and metaphoric overlap. In Isa 40:6–8 and 37:27, people are referred to as grass (חציר – 4x in vv. 6–8) and as vegetation/a flower of the field (צִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה – 40:6b; עֵשֶׂב שָׂדֶה – 37:27a).

The Lord addresses Sennacherib in Isa 37:26–27, “I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash ... while their inhabitants were short of strength, they became like the vegetation of the field (עֵשֶׂב שָׂדֶה), like tender grass, like grass (חציר) on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.” Every city which the Assyrians set out to conquer, they conquered, and the people were like grass, according to the plan of the Lord.

Isaiah 40:6–8 wholly corresponds with this, “All flesh is grass (חציר) and its loveliness like the flower of the field (צִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה). The grass (חציר) withers, the flower falls, when the breath of the Lord blows against it. Surely the people are grass (חציר). Though the grass (חציר) withers and the flower falls, the word of our God stands forever.”²⁴ Here too, the people wither like grass and the flower of the field falls because of the Lord (“when the breath of the Lord blows against it”).²⁵

If we read these words of chapter 40 against the Assyrian context, an interpretive translation would be: the inhabitants of cities have fallen as grass because of Assyria’s conquests; likewise, the inhabitants of Judah’s cities have fallen as the flower of the field, because the Lord was angry with his people and Jerusalem’s warfare had not yet ended (Isa 40:2).²⁶ And though all peoples have proven to be as

²⁴ There is a split among scholars as to whether these verses are to be understood as an objection to the command to cry out (so, e.g., Habel, Seitz, Westermann) or as the content of the message to be called out (so, e.g., Elliger, Smith). I agree with Elliger’s assessment of the former as an “*Überinterpretation*” (Elliger, *Deuterjesaja* 22). The “objection” interpretation relies heavily on the call proposal, which is itself problematic.

²⁵ This is precisely what Sennacherib says in Isa 36:10 (and what the Lord says in 37:26): “And now, is it apart from the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, ‘Go up to this land and destroy it.’” And it is what Hezekiah thinks in Isa 37:3: “This day is a day of distress, rebuke, and contempt.”

²⁶ Some soften the language used in Isa 40:2 (מְלֵאָה צְבָאָה) and translate צְבָאָה with “service” or “hard service,” with reference to the exiles’ service in Babylon (cf. Job 7:1; 10:17; 14:14; Dan 10:1), rather than its typical meaning of “warfare” (cf., e.g., Judg 8:6; 9:29; Isa 13:4; 34:2; Jer 51:3). So, e.g., Westermann, *Isaiah* 40–66 35; North, *Second Isaiah* 73; Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* 100. Berges notes that this is the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where the word would refer to the service rendered to the victorious nation by

frail as grass before the Assyrians, his word will stand firm (n.b. “Though the grass withers ... the word of our God stands forever”), and he promised to strike them down when they became proud (cf. Isa 10:12–16; 37:28–29) and to preserve a remnant of his people (cf. Isa 10:21–22; 37:31–32).

The specific referent of “the word of our God” in Isa 40:8, if this is correct, would be God’s word in Isaiah 10 to strike down Assyria when she became arrogant and to spare a remnant in Zion (cf. Isa 10:12–27). “He (Assyria) will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop off the bough with terrifying power, those raised in height will be hewn down and the lofty ones will be brought low” (10:32–33). These promises are reiterated in chapter 37 (cf. Isa 37:28–32) and carried out by the Angel of the Lord (cf. Isa 37:36), upholding the Lord’s word amidst a people fading like grass.

3. *Mountains made low.* Chapter 10’s promise to level Assyria, which was carried out in chapter 37, finds a correspondence in our passage. The people’s identification as grass (v. 7) gives us good reason to suppose that the terrains of verses 4–5 are also metaphors. For the purpose of this article, this is especially illuminating with regard to verse 4’s phrase “every mountain and hill will be made low (וכל־הר וכל־הר יִשְׁפָּלוּ).”

Mountains and hills can stand in for the haughty and proud. Their leveling/lowering, then, represents the humbling of arrogant men. As Isa 2:11–14, 17 reads,

The haughty looks of man shall be brought low (שָׁפַל), and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up, and it shall be brought low (שָׁפַל); against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the lofty mountains (כָּל־הַהָרִים), and against all the uplifted hills (כָּל־הַגְּבוּעוֹת). ... And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of man shall be brought low (שָׁפַל), and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

The inclusio formed by verses 11 and 17, “the haughty looks of man shall be brought low ... and the Lord will be exalted in that day,” shows that the topographical descriptions ought to be understood in this way.

The use of שָׁפַל throughout Isaiah also points to a metaphorical understanding of this phrase in Isa 40:4. Of the 50 occurrences of שָׁפַל in the OT, 18 are in Isaiah (cf. Isa 2:9, 11, 12, 17; 5:15 [2]; 10:33; 13:11; 25:11, 12; 26:5 [2]; 29:4; 32:19; 40:4; 57:9, 15 [2]). Isaiah 5:15 encapsulates its use up to this point in the book: “man is humbled, and every man is brought low (וַיִּשְׁפָּלוּ), the eyes of the haughty are brought low (תִּשְׁפַּלְנָה).”²⁷ Read in light of Isaiah’s use of the term, Isa 40:4’s

the subdued nation. The reading of “warfare” squares nicely with the end of the Assyrian threat against Jerusalem recorded in chap. 37 (cf. Isa 39:8).

²⁷ As in chap. 2, in certain cases it is another high object (e.g. the high fortifications of a wall in Isa 25:12) being brought low. But this is in the context of the Lord laying low the pride of Moab (Isa 25:10–11). Its use in Isa 57:9 is the one exception, “You journeyed to the king with oil and multiplied your

description of mountains being lowered consistently refers to the humiliation of the Assyrian king (cf. Isa 37:7).

Isaiah 10:12's evaluation of Assyria's king fits this: "[the Lord] will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes" (cf. Isa 36:13–21 and 10:6–11). And again, Isa 10:32–33: "He (Assyria) will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop off the bough with terrifying power, those raised in height will be hewn down and the lofty ones will be brought low (שפל)." Isaiah 40:4's "every mountain and hill shall be made low" is a recollection of Isa 10:12 and 10:32–33's promise concerning Assyria, and chapter 37 recounts the promise's realization. Thus 40:5b, mountains are made low "for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

4. *Jerusalem/Zion's command and Rabshakeh's threat.* As already introduced, in view of the destruction of Assyria, Jerusalem/Zion is addressed as a herald. She is commanded in Isa 40:9 to ascend a high mountain, and told to **קוֹלְךָ בְּפֶחַח הַרְיָמִי**. This echoes the manner in which Rabshakeh announced his threat in Isa 36:13, **קוֹל עַל־מִי הָרִימוֹתָהּ קוֹל, וַיַּעֲמֵד רַב־שָׁקֵה וַיִּקְרָא בְּקוֹל־גְּדוֹל** and **קוֹל** both occur in Isa 40:9 and Rabshakeh's **בְּקוֹל־גְּדוֹל** parallels Jerusalem's **קוֹלְךָ**. As Rabshakeh raised his voice to call out his pending defeat of Jerusalem in the hearing of the Judeans (cf. Isa 36:11–15), so Jerusalem/Zion is commanded to raise aloud her voice to the cities of Judah proclaiming Yahweh's action. Rabshakeh's threat of defeat is literarily countered by Jerusalem's cry of victory; both are addressed to Judah.²⁸

5. *The following verses: Isa 40:12–31.* The verses following Isa 40:1–11 also lend their support to the Assyrian background. Yahweh's monologue in Isa 40:12–31 is a response to Rabshakeh's rhetoric, "Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands has delivered their land from my hand, that the Lord would deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (Isa 36:19–20; cf. 37:10–13; 10:10–11). This finds an appropriate answer in the following verses,

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span.... All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? An idol? A craftsman casts it. And a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. ... To whom then will you compare me that I should be like him?* says the Holy One. ... Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; the creator of the ends of the earth ... they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength (40:12a, 17–19, 25, 28a, 31a).

perfumes; you sent your envoys far off, and you sent down (וּתְשַׁפְּרִי) to Sheol." Isaiah 57:15 speaks of the Lord being near to those of a lowly spirit. cf. Lim, *The "Way of the Lord"* 65–66.

²⁸ Jerusalem/Zion is also told **אֶל־תִּרְאֵי**, which is the command given to Hezekiah in Isa 37:6 (**אֶל־תִּרְאֵי**).

The twice-repeated variation of “to whom will you liken me, no one is like me” and the disgust that the object of comparison is “an idol! (הַפְּסֵל)” is an apt reply to Rabshakeh’s claim that Yahweh will fall as the gods of other nations. Hezekiah’s prayer (Isa 37:16–20) identifies these “gods” as idols made by the hands of men, which is the language used in Isa 40:19–20. It is also supportive to note that chapter 10’s description of Assyria’s taunts uses the same idol language in drawing a comparison between the other kingdoms and Jerusalem, “As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols (וּפְסִילֵיהֶם), whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols?” (Isa 10:10–11).

Melugin’s form-critical analysis of Isa 40:12–17 supports this, as it connects these verses with Isa 36:20. He labels them “disputations with questions introduced by *mi*.”²⁹ Sennacherib’s “Who (מִי) among all the gods of these lands” (Isa 36:20) parallels Yahweh’s “Who (מִי) has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand ... to whom (אֵל-מִי) will you liken God?” (Isa 40:12, 18; cf. 40:25: “to whom (אֵל-מִי) will you liken me?”). I also note the similar language of 37:23 in the Lord’s response to Rabshakeh’s taunts, “Whom (אֵת-מִי) have you mocked and reviled? And against whom (וְעַל-מִי) have you raised a sound?”

In addition to the formal and dialogical correspondences between Isa 40:12–31 and chapters 36–37, Hezekiah’s prayer identifies God as the one who “made heaven and earth” (Isa 37:16), language expanded on in Isa 40:12–31. For example, Isa 40:28: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth” (cf. Isa 40:12, 22, 26). The rhetoric of “have you not heard (הֲלֹא שָׁמַעְתָּ)” (cf. Isa 40:21: הֲלֹא תִשְׁמַעוּ) in order to call attention to the Lord’s doings is also reminiscent of chapter 37 (Isa 37:26: הֲלֹא-שָׁמַעְתָּ).

Both the form and content of Isa 40:12–31 point us back to chapters 36–37 and support reading verses 1–11 in light of them. Though Rabshakeh is sure that Yahweh = idols and so Jerusalem will fall as any other nation, the Lord, who is the creator, declares there is none like him, and he can save. He makes the rulers of the earth as nothing (cf. Isa 40:23 and 37:29, 33–38) and strengthens those who wait for him (cf. Isa 40:29–31 and Jerusalem/Hezekiah).³⁰

6. *Verse 3*. “A voice cries, ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; in the desert make straight a highway (מַסְלָה) for our God.’” Various scholars think this verse describes the path of the exiles through the desert from Babylon to Palestine.³¹ There are others who understand the verse metaphorically, as a way of

²⁹ Melugin, *Formation* 32 n. 27; cf. Roy F. Melugin, “Deutero-Isaiah and Form-Criticism,” *VT* 21 (1971) 330–33. Melugin’s study focuses more on the connection to Wisdom disputations (e.g. Job 40:25–32) and he does not argue for an Assyrian context for the later verses.

³⁰ Goldingay also alludes to the connection of these verses with the Assyrian threat (*Isaiah* 225).

³¹ So, e.g., Childs, *Isaiah* 299; Koole, *Isaiah III* 58; Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* 38–39; Elliger, *Deutero-Jesaja* 18.

expressing the Lord's coming *parousia*.³² A third group embraces both the literal and metaphorical reading of the verse.³³

The previously noted metaphors of this passage (i.e. people/grass; Sennacherib/mountain) stand against a literal reading of the highway/road, as does the recognition that the road and the highway are for God.³⁴ Complementing this, several scholars have noticed the similarities between verses 3–5 and other biblical theophanies (cf. Nah 1:2–8; Hab 3:3–16; Psalm 68), including a road in the desert (v. 3), the changing of landscape (v. 4), and the revelation of יהוה כבוד יהוה (v. 5).³⁵ “In these theophany passages the point, throughout, is to describe YHWH coming to the aid of his needy people, vanquishing their enemies and pouring out blessing and prosperity upon his people.”³⁶ The appearance of the Angel of the Lord at the end of chapter 37, the Assyrians' leveling, and Jerusalem's subsequent peace, provide a perfect backdrop for Isa 40:3–5 when read in a non-literal theophanic way. And Isa 40:10–11 provides additional support for this reading: “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense is before him. Like a shepherd he will tend his flock; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom; he will lead those that are with young.”

In addition, Isaiah at times uses “desert” and “wilderness” to describe desolate cities; “Who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities?” (Isa 14:17); “the fortified city is solitary, a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness” (Isa 27:10); “Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness” (Isa 64:9; cf. 51:3). The capture of Judah's cities (Isa 36:1) would have made them a veritable wilderness, to which the Lord here (Isa 40:3–5) promises to come.

Even if the road were to be taken as a literal road, or at least a way of expressing the people's return, nothing necessitates that it be a road leading from Babylon to Jerusalem. There is good reason to suppose an Assyrian setting for it. Brevard Childs points to several “intertextual” links between Isa 40:1–11 and “First Isaiah.” Among them are Isa 11:16 and 12:1.³⁷ Isaiah 11:16 describes a highway (מסלה) from Assyria on which the “dispersed of Judah” (v. 12) will return, which corresponds with the destruction of the cities of Judah in Isa 36:1 and the good news proclaimed to them in Isa 40:9. If a return of the people is referenced here, this would be it. A consideration of Isa 12:1's connection with Isa 40:1 perhaps points in this direction.

Scholars often make much of the word נחם at the start of chapter 40, as a way of distinguishing it from chapters 1–39, which, they say, are occupied with judgment. But verse 1 of chapter 12, which as a unit “is understood as a song of

³² So, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 181; Watts, *Isaiah 34–66* 609; Lim, “*Way of the Lord*” 61–63; Smith, *Isaiah 40–66* 95–96. For discussion of less popular readings see Childs, Elliger, and Smith.

³³ So, e.g., Baltzer, *Isaiah 40–55* 54; Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics* 93–94.

³⁴ Contrast Isa 62:10's דרך העם and Isa 40:3's דרך יהוה and אלהינו. Also in Isa 62:10, a highway (מסלה) is to be cleared of stones and a signal lifted for the peoples.

³⁵ So, e.g., Lim, *The “Way of the Lord”* 61–62; Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics* 86–87.

³⁶ Lund, *Way Metaphors and Way Topics* 87.

³⁷ Childs, *Isaiah* 297–99.

thanksgiving for the deliverance from Assyria,³⁸ speaks of the comfort (נחם) the Lord will give Zion after his anger relents. Isaiah 40:1, then, recollects the promise given to Zion regarding her salvation from Assyria.

7. *The plural imperatives and anonymous voices.* This backdrop also offers a new solution to the problem of the plural imperatives of verses 1–3: to whom are the imperatives addressed? Those who hold to the divine council scene or call narrative propose angelic beings. LXX adds the vocative ἱερεῖς in Isa 40:2. Vulgate reads MT's עמי in Isa 40:1 as a vocative; *populus meus*. Targums supply נבייא אתנבו. “That prophets are being addressed is also the view of most medieval commentators.”³⁹ Various other proposals include Israel (Watts), all flesh (Freedman), “all those who love Zion” (Torrey),⁴⁰ each one who is able to comfort (Duhm),⁴¹ and “the collective indistinct others” (Landy).⁴² Lastly, some think their identity is undiscoverable (e.g. Smith, Eddinger, and Goldingay). I suggest that the imperatives are addressed to Hezekiah’s messengers: Eliakim, Shebna, and the senior priests.

These men relay messages between Isaiah and Hezekiah in the narrative (cf. Isa 37:2–6, 21). The content of their message to Hezekiah from Isaiah is one of hope and comfort (cf. Isa 37:6–7, 21–35): Assyria will be brought low and Jerusalem will be saved. Thus, I propose that the plural imperatives of verses 1–2—נחמו (2x), דברו, and קראו—were spoken by Isaiah to Hezekiah’s messengers when the king sent them concerning Assyria’s taunt (Isa 37:2–4). Isaiah responded to them, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and call out to her that her warfare is complete, that her punishment has been accepted, for she has received from the Lord double in exchange for her sins*” (Isa 40:1–2).

The line of the message’s transmission would be: God → Isaiah → Hezekiah’s messengers → Hezekiah/Jerusalem (the four parties mentioned at the outset of this article). Though the notion of a fulfilled punishment for sin is not explicit in the narrative of chapters 36–37, this is how the Assyrian crisis was understood, and there are hints of the idea in the narrative itself (Isa 37:3, 26–27; cf. 10:5–12, 25).⁴³ Further, these chapters juxtapose Sennacherib and his mouthpiece (Rabshakeh) and the Lord and his (Isaiah): (1) Sennacherib sends (2) Rabshakeh to call out to (3) Hezekiah’s messengers to tell (4) Hezekiah the message of the king (cf. Isa 36:2–22; 37:10–14). This is countered by (1) the Lord who gives (2) Isaiah a word for (3) Hezekiah’s messengers to give to (4) Hezekiah/Jerusalem (cf. 37:2–7, 21–35). In Isa 36:4, Rabshakeh commands the messengers with a plural imperative to deliver the message of Sennacherib to Hezekiah (אמרונא אליחזקיהו כהאמר המלך הגדול).

³⁸ Ibid. 298.

³⁹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55* 179.

⁴⁰ Cited by Blenkinsopp.

⁴¹ Cited by Elliger, *Deuterofesaja* 5.

⁴² Francis Landy, “The Ghostly Prelude to Deutero-Isaiah,” *Biblical Illustrator* 14 (2006) 338. She also says they may be divine beings, prophets, or ordinary people.

⁴³ The imperatives of v. 3 are also plural, “*Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*” As this is another way of saying, “the Lord is coming” (see above), there is nothing against understanding its addressees as Hezekiah’s messengers. They are to return to Jerusalem/Hezekiah with Isaiah’s message that she should be comforted because the Lord is coming.

מלך אשור). This finds a nice balance in Isa 40:1–2 if Isaiah is the speaker (vs. Rabshakeh) and the messengers are again the recipients of the plural commands. Now they are given the message of the Lord (vs. Sennacherib) to deliver to Jerusalem/Hezekiah (נחמו נחמו עמי יאמר אלהיכם דברו על־לב ירושלם) (cf. Isa 37:10). Isaiah 37:6 comes closest to this, where Isaiah commands the messengers (with a plural imperfect) to speak to Hezekiah a word from the Lord (ויאמר אליהם ישעיהו כה) ותאמרון אל־אדניכם כה אמר יהוה אל־תירא אדניכם. Here (Isa 40:1–3), then, would be part of the original message which was sent to Hezekiah, or a poetic recounting of it.

The narrative also suggests an explanation for the anonymous voices of verses 3 and 6. The voice of chapter 40 is one that calls and one that says; קול קורא (v. 3) and קול אמר (v. 6). It *calls* out that the Lord is coming to deliver Jerusalem and the Assyrians will be made low (vv. 3–5). It *says* that though flesh is grass, the Lord's word of promise to destroy Assyria and spare Zion will stand (vv. 6–8).⁴⁴ In the narrative, Rabshakeh is the possessor of the voice that calls out and says; ויעמד ויאמר רב־שקה ויקרא בקול־גדול יהודית ויאמר (Isa 36:13; cf. 37:23). His message is the opposite of Isa 40:3–8's. He warns not to trust in the Lord, for he will not deliver, and the city will be given over to the king of Assyria (Isa 36:14–20). As shown above, in the transmission line of the message Isaiah corresponds with Rabshakeh; they are two men with opposite messages from two kings. If the voice of Rabshakeh is paralleled by the voice of Isaiah, then Isaiah's is the anonymous voice in Isa 40:3 and 6 calling out a message which competes with Rabshakeh's.⁴⁵

V. CONCLUSION

The Assyrian background helps to shed light on a notoriously enigmatic text. The provision of an explanation for Jerusalem's change in role and distinction between the city and Judah's cities; the lexical, metaphoric, and literary overlap (i.e. the people as grass destroyed by Assyria, Rabshakeh's threats countered by Jerusalem's proclamation, and Yahweh's response to an idol comparison in Isa 40:12–31); the connection with the earlier prophecies concerning Assyria in chapters 10–12; and the observations on high topography, pride, and a theophany all favor reading

⁴⁴ Of course, this depends on the accuracy of the interpretation of these verses given above.

⁴⁵ So also Rosario Pius Merendino, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Eine Untersuchung von Jes 40–48* (VTSup XXXI; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 59–60. Typically the voice is identified with an angel's or is left unidentified. In support of the voice as a human's, cf. Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3; John 1:23. In v. 3, as noted above, Isaiah addresses himself to Hezekiah's messengers. Verse 6 is more complicated: "A voice says, 'Cry out!' And he said, 'What shall I cry?'" The imperative is now masculine singular (קרא). LXX and Vg change "and he said" to "and I said," and this is followed by most (cf. BHS). The "I" is most often understood as the prophet himself, but if the voice is the prophet's, as I am proposing, then the "he/I" would not be. Merendino thinks the prophet addresses Jerusalem. But this is doubtful since Jerusalem is addressed only a few verses later with feminine imperatives. I suggest that Hezekiah is the "he" of the verse, maintaining the MT's reading. He is the individual who receives the word from Isaiah (cf. 37:6–7, 21–35) and surely would have been responsible for giving the positive message to those in Jerusalem. Also, the second message sent to Hezekiah contains the previously mentioned metaphor (the people are grass) present in Isa 40:6–8 (see Isa 37:27).

Isa 40:1–11 in light of chapters 36–37. Further, this background is capable of offering plausible suggestions for the addressees of the plural imperatives and the identification of the anonymous speakers later in the passage. In sum, it is capable of making sense of the whole in a way that previously proposed backgrounds are unable to do.