

in Jesus Christ, the anointed. With a boldness which was heard as blasphemy by many, the followers of Jesus laid claim to a long, cherished hope spawned by God's promise to David. In Jesus of Nazareth was seen the vindication of the faithfulness of the Promise Giver. In Jesus of Nazareth an ancient promise was fulfilled and reinstated that those who accepted it could learn to live anew in hope. In Jesus of Nazareth God's effective rule was proclaimed and the certainty of a kingdom marked by the absence of injustice, pain, and death, was announced as certain and secure. God has indeed anchored the divine commitment in Jesus Christ. A Savior is born and his Kingdom is forever!

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Isaiah 40:1-11

THE ASSOCIATION OF ISAIAH 40:1-11 with Advent may be familiar but its interpretation as Advent theology is far from self-evident. These verses may be read word by word and visualized image by image, but who is speaking to whom, and about what? Out of what social and historical setting did this text presumably originate? How has the poetry been shaped rhetorically? In its present canonical form, how does it continue to speak to successive generations, including our own? Will we discern afresh from these verses the continuing significance of God's presence and future coming from our Advent situations and celebrations?

1. On the very surface of this text an unusual journey is unveiled. Only secondarily is this a human journey. Primarily, the presence and coming of God dominate. Through all four strophes (1,2/3-5/6-8/9-11) this domination is apparent.

God speaks imperatives to bring comfort and the hand of Yahweh executes punishment. On a super highway the radiant glory of Yahweh will be universally visible because Yahweh's mouth has said so. In contrast to human transitoriness, which is like fading grass and wild flowers dried by the wind of Yahweh, the Word of God endures forever. So the proclamation to the peasants of Judah's countryside is announced: *Behold your God*. Yahweh comes. Yahweh comes as the victorious warrior-king and as the patient shepherd leading his straggling flock.

2. To the elite of a former Jerusalem who had been marginalized in sixth century Babylon, news of a return to Judah was totally unexpected. Refugees usually make the adjustment to their new surroundings and now, after half a century, many had become bilingual. But they were also understandably lethargic about a religion of Yahweh that had long been centered so much on a city now devastated and on a temple now nonexistent. *Surely the people is grass* Yes, it was true that times were changing. Nabonidus had lost Babylon to Cyrus without a battle. Furthermore, the new king of Media-Persia had a policy of encouraging deported peoples to return to their homelands. But that was still a walk of perhaps nine hundred miles if one traveled the trade route. *All flesh is grass*

The command to the unnamed poet-prophet to proclaim this good news was a shock as well. *What shall I preach?* He knew the combination of a blazing sun and a drying wind: all vegetation withers and turns to the color of straw. His human condition was like that. But a voice set that frailty and hopelessness into a theological framework. *The word of our God stands forever*

Theology changes the whole perspective, and the poet made that clear. The oppressed, whether in babylonian exile or scattered throughout ravished Judah, are not just a part of *all flesh*, they are a covenant people. *My people—your God* is God's opening description. This is the new covenant language of Ezekial 36:28. From first strophe to last the deity is mentioned repeatedly, almost alternating between God and Yahweh. God is always personalized: *your God, our God* Yahweh is presented in more anthropomorphic terms: *hand, mouth, spirit/wind, and arm* which together emphasize relentless power.

This was indeed a surprising message for a suppressed people. It was also profoundly comforting. According to this Advent theology, the way through the desert of human existence does not focus on the people as those who journey, but on their God who commands, enables, and becomes present once again to them. Their humanity is apparent, their sinfulness alluded to. Their faith or struggle is not even mentioned. Their position is covenantal by the grace of God who continues to choose them and speaks of himself in relation to them.

3. Rhetorically, the speaking of God (directly or indirectly) controls. Each strophe is shaped by direct discourse. Only in the third (6–8) is there a human response using indicatives exclusively. The divine word piles up imperatives: *comfort/speak/cry/make clear/make straight/preach/get up/do not be afraid/speak* In content as well, every movement converges on God. The reason for the exile was God's punishment; its end will be traversed because God has ordered the creation of a stupendous highway. This, however, is not described as a special shortcut for the returning refugees. It is for Yahweh, for

unveiling the glory of Yahweh. Similarly, in the last strophe the female herald does not shout news about the returning exiles except indirectly in two oblique metaphors (the booty of battle and the wandering flock). She declares the coming of Yahweh: *Behold your God*.

The people are a foil for God. They are the reward of Yahweh, the booty of the warrior's victorious battles. They are the wobbly lambs which need to be picked up and the ewes with their full udders which require water and rest. As such they point to the gentle patience of the shepherd. *All flesh is grass. The people is grass*.

Throughout Deutero-Isaiah, for which these eleven verses are an introduction, this contrast between Yahweh's strength and Israel's need continues to be interwoven until finally summed up in the epilogue of Isaiah 55. The impoverished may *buy wine and milk without money* (v. 1). Yahweh will make with them *an everlasting covenant* (v. 3). *Our God will abundantly pardon* (v. 7). His *thoughts and ways* are higher than those of his people (v. 9), but his Word can be trusted: *it will accomplish that which I (Yahweh) purpose* (v. 11).

4. Further, the original rootedness in history is no longer explicit in these verses (40:1ff.) and has contributed to the difficulty of knowing who is speaking to whom and how much discourse belongs to which voice. Yet this may provide a hermeneutical clue for hearing the text today.

The geography, with the exception of the *towns of Judah* (v. 9), is symbolic. Jerusalem and Zion are euphemisms for God's people. The mountains, hills, wilderness, and desert cannot be located on a map just as the highway does not correspond to a particular road between Babylon and Jerusalem. The date is not even alluded to. The "I" of verse 6 is an unknown figure. Even the so-called divine council that seems to be implied in the first two strophes has receded from view.

All this is in sharp contrast to other prophetic passages in which a prophet seems called to speak (as here in the third strophe). In Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; and Ezekiel 1 and 2 names, dates, and locations are quite precise. Even the divine council is evident in the first of these calls. These omissions, therefore, are not accidental, but evidence of a canonical shaping within the whole of the present Book of Isaiah and within the wider Jewish or Christian canon.

The intentional juxtaposing of the fortieth chapter to chapters 1–39 contributes to the prophetic development of this poetry. The anger of Yahweh in the opening chapters of First Isaiah have been prophetically fulfilled according to 40:2. But the vision has moved beyond mere history to eschatology and its scope beyond human instruments to cosmic forces which lop off mountains and pull valleys up from the bottom to make a divine highway.

5. Apparently the New Testament writers understood this text eschatologically: as an eschatological hope centered in the Advent of Jesus. In Mark

1:1-11 John, the baptizer, becomes the preparer of the way of Yahweh by calling the country folk of Judea and the city folk of Jerusalem to make Yahweh's paths straight by their repentance and baptism. They come to him in the wilderness beside the Jordan River. They prepare themselves for the Coming One who appears, and whose identity is unveiled in language partly drawn from Deutero-Isaiah. In John 1:14, 15 the baptizer's activity is linked with the glory of the Word become flesh. Yahweh's glory, which was to be seen by *all flesh* (Isa. 40:5) is unveiled in the flesh of Jesus. Luke's Gospel adds the divine council declaring this glory as God's glory (2:14).

By means of this same hermeneutical approach of prophecy and eschatological fulfillment, Isaiah 40 continues to speak and point. Advent hope includes the Second Advent. Deutero-Isaiah calls us to trust the Second Coming of Jesus as the Warrior-King and the lamb upon his throne. If we analyze our contemporary world and its politics with William Stringfellow (*Conscience and Obedience* [Waco, 1978]), we may appreciate how crucial for our theology the Second Coming really is. Hope ultimately rests *only with God* and the continuing vitality of the Word of God.

6. The ramifications of this theological perspective can be pursued in a number of directions especially when we continue to reflect on the text. We may move in the direction of human frailty and explore the helplessness that people experience when they feel overwhelmed by economic, social, political, and military systems and vested interests. Advent theology declares that these staggering powers do not have the last word. The Word of Yahweh is ultimate. We may focus on marginalization. Whether of class, sex, or circumstances the oppressed particularly are called and encouraged. Peasant farmers, and displaced refugees are addressed and women can no longer be hidden or distorted through translation. The presence of Yahweh is especially among them.

If we tend to trust the "powers that be" or human resources and reform programs, Advent theology reminds us that, in the final analysis, these will not bring in the Kingdom. We may strive to right injustices and to humanize conditions, but God must dominate our theology. The hand, the arm, the mouth, and the Spirit of Yahweh are determinative in history.

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Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

AT FIRST LOOK THIS APPEARS to be a simple message of good news, just the sort



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