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Edited by the Rev. W. A. L. Elmslie and the Rev. John Skinner

Excerpt

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ISAIAH

xl.–lv. A GOSPEL OF RESTORATION: THE COMFORTING OF ISRAEL.

xl.–lv. These chapters are a message of comfort and encouragement for Israel. They may be described as a Gospel, for they declare the good news that God has forgiven His people and will grant the blessings of salvation to Israel first, and then, through Israel, to all nations.

The principal topics are the omnipotence of Yahwe, the one real God, contrasted with the impotence of the false gods; the election of Israel to be His servant, and its approaching deliverance through the victories of Cyrus, His chosen agent; the triumphant return of Israel to Jerusalem under the guidance of its God; the renewed glory of Zion-Jerusalem; and an explanation of the nation's past sufferings in the light of its destiny to win for Yahwe the adoration of all mankind. These subjects are not arranged in one progressive logical sequence. On the contrary one of the outstanding features of the prophecy is the constant repetition of the favourite themes with little variation of vocabulary or treatment. The writer is an anonymous prophet, generally called Second- or Deutero-Isaiah (11 Isaiah); and the date of composition falls probably between 546 and 538 B.C. See the Introduction.

xl. 1–11. *The Prelude.* In these opening verses the dominant note of the prophecy is heard. Israel is forgiven and its restoration is at hand (*vv.* 1, 2). Long years of weakness and degradation have reduced it to despair, and there are many who declare that Yahwe has utterly abandoned His people (see *v.* 27). But the prophet, whose heart is attuned to hear the despair of Israel, is also in sympathy with the mind of God. For him the Divine silence is at last broken, and he hears the sound of heavenly voices proclaiming the mercy and the blessings which Yahwe will now bestow on His people. A first voice heralds Yahwe's advent, and commands that preparations be made by certain heavenly Beings for His royal progress through the deserts to Jerusalem (*vv.* 3–5). A second voice bids the prophet proclaim the transience of man and the eternal majesty of Israel's God (*vv.* 6–8). Thirdly, a command is given that messengers shall announce to Zion the approach of Yahwe, the omnipotent protector and the tender shepherd of His people (*vv.* 9–11).

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[More information](#)xl. 1-11. *The restoration proclaimed to Israel.*

- 40** Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; that she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.
 3 The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert

1. Comfort ye, comfort ye: note the repetition, a feature characteristic of the prophet's style. The command is addressed to all who love Jerusalem and can hear the heavenly voice.

2. comfortably to: lit. 'to the heart of,' i.e. tenderly, kindly: cp. Ruth ii. 13; Jud. xix. 3; Gen. 1. 21.

Jerusalem: although the best part of the nation was dispersed among the Gentiles in Babylon and Egypt, yet the hope of Israel still centred in the ancient capital. Its name, Jerusalem or Zion, became the symbol of racial and religious unity. Here it is used as the equivalent of 'my people' (v. 1). If Jerusalem remained blessed, Israel could not be comforted.

warfare: marg. 'time of service.' Originally a military expression, the word acquired a wider significance, denoting any period of severe, painful, toil (cp. Job vii. 1). In the present instance, the reference is to the sufferings of Jerusalem during the exilic period.

iniquity: or 'penalty.' The word denotes not merely guilt but also its consequence, punishment.

is pardoned: rather 'her penalty is discharged' (worked off). Israel's sufferings have at last paid off the debt incurred by its past sinfulness. Its punishment is accounted adequate by the mercy which seasons the Divine justice.

double: an emphatic way of saying that the penalty has been sufficient. There can be no intention of suggesting that God has been unjustly severe.

3. The voice...crieth: 'Hark! one crying.' From the pronoun 'our' at the end of the verse, it is clear that the speaker is not God Himself, whilst the superhuman nature of the task enjoined implies that the voice is not that of a man. We must infer that it is an angelic Being who commands his fellows to prepare the miraculous path in the deserts.

in the wilderness: the A.V. (following the LXX and quotations in the N.T.) punctuates wrongly '...crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye....' The R.V. is correct.

make straight: rather, as marg., 'level.'

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XL 4-9

ISAIAH

3

a high way for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, 4
and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and
the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough
places plain: and the glory of the LORD shall be re- 5
vealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth
of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice of one saying, 6
Cry. And one said, What shall I cry? All flesh is
grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower
of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; 7
because the breath of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely
the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower 8
fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into 9

4. and the crooked...plain: better 'the rugged land shall become a plain, and the mountain-passes a valley.' The language is not wholly metaphorical. Whatever would obstruct the path of the returning exiles, natural as well as political hindrances, will be smoothed away by the power of God.

5. This verse is the climax of the proclamation uttered by the first voice. It may be noted that the phrase 'for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it' is not used elsewhere by II Isaiah; but cp. Is. lviii. 14, also Is. i. 20, and Mic. iv. 4.

6. The voice...saying: 'Hark! one saying.' A second angelic voice, addressing the prophet, now commands him to proclaim the transience of man and the eternity of God.

And one said: better, as marg., 'And I said.'

7. the breath...Lord: the prophet may have in mind the scorching winds, which, 'laden with a mist of fine sand,' blow over Palestine from the deserts and often ruin the spring vegetation.

surely...grass: 'the people' is normally used by this writer to mean Israel; but in this context it must denote 'humanity,' and, in particular, Israel's oppressors whom God will destroy like grass. Since the phrase disturbs the metre and is a prosaic explanation of 'all flesh is grass,' it is probably a gloss.

8. the word of our God: the glory of human plans and achievements vanishes. Nothing abides except that which is effected by the Word of God, i.e. by the expression of His immutable will. The good news of *vv.* 1, 2, is therefore certain of fulfilment.

9. O thou...Zion: lit. 'Herald of good news to Zion,' but the word 'herald' is collective, 'a band of messengers,'

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4

ISAIAH

XL 10-12

the high mountain; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold, your
 10 God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come as a mighty one, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with
 11 him, and his recompence before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, he shall gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, *and* shall gently lead those that give suck.

12-31. *The incomparable might of Yahwe.*

12-17. *His rule over Nature.*

12 Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and com-

doubtless those who carry out the command of *vv.* 1, 2. Another rendering (LXX and A.V.) is 'Zion, herald of good news,' as if Jerusalem is to proclaim the tidings to the surrounding territory. Both translations are sound grammatically, but only the first is probable, being supported by *xli.* 27, *lii.* 7.

be not afraid: lest events should play their hopes false.

10. Probably the prophet is now the speaker, not the angel messengers.

will come...one: or perhaps 'cometh in might.'

his arm: the symbol of His controlling power, *cp.* *xlvi.* 14; *li.* 9; *lii.* 10.

his reward: (1) the blessings God will bestow on His restored people, or possibly (2) the exiles themselves, regarded as spoil captured from the Gentile nations.

11. A verse of wonderful beauty, *cp.* *Jer.* xxxi. 10; *Ezek.* xxxiv. 11-16. To His enemies Yahwe is omnipotence, to His own He reveals Himself as a God of infinite tenderness.

12-31. Faith is not easily renewed. Despite the closing assurance of the prologue that God's grace extends even to the weak and helpless, many in Israel are overawed by the apparent power of the gods of the heathen empires. Is Yahwe really their superior or even their equal? Let the prophet give a reason for the faith that is in him. In reply he contrasts the dominion of the true God over Nature (*vv.* 12-17) with the futility of the idols (*vv.* 18-20), and then in conclusion declares that He who is the sole arbiter of the universe (*vv.* 21-26) is none other than Yahwe, Israel's God (*vv.* 27-31).

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ISAIAH

5

prehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the spirit of the LORD, 13 or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom 14 took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgement, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the 15 nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient 16 to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt

12-17. The true God has infinite might (*vv.* 11, 12), perfect wisdom (*vv.* 13, 14), and therefore absolute supremacy over Man and Nature (*vv.* 15-17).

12. Who...balance: the answer implied by the question is 'None but God.' How immeasurable must be His greatness, since for the creation of the expanses of the firmament and the masses of the earth He required only the smallest units of measurement?

span: the distance between thumb and little finger when the hand is extended.

comprehended...in a measure: lit. 'weighed out...in a tierce' (the third part of an *ephah*).

13. Who: here, and in *v.* 14, the answer implied is 'No one.'

spirit of the Lord: generally in the O.T. this phrase denotes the life-giving power emanating from God. Here it is rather the equivalent of His intelligence.

14. judgement: or 'right.' The world must be created and governed equitably.

and...knowledge: omit, as LXX. The clause disturbs the metre and is redundant.

15. a drop...the balance: a drop hanging from a bucket or a few grains left in a balance are so small that they make no appreciable difference to the weight. Even so in comparison with the Creator all things fade into absolute insignificance.

isles: a word frequently used by 11 Isaiah. As a rule it denotes the Mediterranean coastland and adjacent islands, but in *xlii.* 15 it is used loosely in the sense of 'habitable land.'

16. Even if the forests of Mt Lebanon and the animals dwelling on its slopes were offered to God in one vast holocaust, the sacrifice would not be adequate to His majesty.

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6

ISAIAH

XL 17-20

17 offering. All the nations are as nothing before him; they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.

18-20. *The idols are nothing but material objects.*

18 To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will
19 ye compare unto him? The graven image, a workman
melted *it*, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold,
20 and casteth *for it* silver chains. He that is too impover-
ished for *such* an oblation chooseth a tree that will not
rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to set up
a graven image, that shall not be moved.

17. less than nothing: or '[formed] of nothing,' i.e. unreal, without substance.

vanity: lit. 'a waste' (cp. Gen. i. 2, R.V.), i.e. emptiness, nothing.

18-20. The question at issue has become ridiculous. There is no comparison between Yahwe and the idols; for since He possesses all power, they consequently have none. Manifestly it would be absurd to try to represent the true God by any image. Let Israel conclude that the images of the heathen are impotent fragments of wood and stone, and are wholly contemptible. The same topic is dealt with in xlv. 9-20, xlv. 20, xlv. 1 f.; and cp. Acts xvii. 29.

18. God: the word used is a general term, 'Deity,' which suggests that the argument is addressed to all men and not merely to the Jews. The gods whom the heathen seek to portray in their idols do not exist, and the real Deity, after whom they are ignorantly groping, cannot be depicted by any image.

19. and casteth...chains: lit. 'and (?) chains of silver a refiner.' The LXX omits this unintelligible clause. It is probable that the confusion of the text here and at the beginning of v. 20 has arisen through the misplacement of two verses, xli. 6, 7 (see notes), which may originally have stood after the present verse.

20. He that...oblation: again an uncertain clause. Lit. 'he that is poor as regards a heave-offering'; but even this quite unsuitable meaning can hardly be sustained. Of many emendations, the best is Duhm's, 'He who carveth an image...'

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XL 21–26

ISAIAH

7

21–26. *Know that the Creator of Nature is also the ruler of Men.*

Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been 21
told you from the beginning? have ye not understood
from the foundations of the earth? *It is* he that sitteth 22
upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof
are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as
a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in:
that bringeth princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of 23
the earth as vanity. Yea, they have not been planted; 24
yea, they have not been sown; yea, their stock hath not
taken root in the earth: moreover he bloweth upon them,
and they wither, and the whirlwind taketh them away as
stubble. To whom then will ye liken me, that I should 25
be equal *to him*? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes 26

21–26. The impotence of the idols having been exposed, the theme of God's majesty and His supreme control is resumed.

21. **Have...known** || **have...heard**: better 'Do ye not know? Do ye not hear?' God does not conceal himself, as Israel has foolishly imagined (*v.* 27 f.). To the willing mind and the open ear the truth is always manifest.

from the beginning: the prophet feels that his message is the realisation of an eternal truth to which all ages have borne an eloquent though unheeded testimony.

22. **he that sitteth**: remark the vivid sense of the Divine activity: He, the real God, sits...stretches...spreads...brings...makes.

upon (marg. above) the circle: the 'circle of the earth' is the line of the vault of the sky, reaching from horizon to horizon. This vault rests upon the extremities of the world, which (together with its surrounding ocean) was conceived as a flat disc. The clouds, stars, and planets were thought of as situated between the earth and the under-surface, the concave side, of the arch of heaven: God's dwelling place is above (upon) the upper side of the vault.

24. **Yea...bloweth**: read, as marg., 'Scarce are they planted, scarce are they sown, scarce hath their stock taken root in the earth, when He bloweth...' So feeble and fleeting is the power of earthly potentates.

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8

ISAIAH

XL 27–31

on high, and see who hath created these, that bringeth out their host by number : he calleth them all by name ; by the greatness of his might, and for that he is strong in power, not one is lacking.

27–31. *The incomparable God is—Yahwe.*

27 Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgement is passed
28 away from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard? the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary ;
29 there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint ; and to him that hath no might he
30 increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be
31 weary, and the young men shall utterly fall : but they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength ; they shall

26. these : i.e. the stars. If in any mind there still lingers some fear of the colossal images of the heathen temples, let the eyes be raised to the infinitude of the starry sky, and let the mind consider the might of its Creator.

by the...lacking : render 'from Him who is great in might and strong in power not one is missing.' Every star responds with unswerving obedience to the Divine roll-call.

27–31. The argument is now clinched. The one God, glorious and omnipotent, is Yahwe, the God of Israel. What matter if His ways have been mysterious. Israel must realise that it has in Him the source of inexhaustible strength and succour.

27. Yahwe, so Israel has been imagining, has forgotten His people, and is indifferent to their plight.

my judgement...away : better 'my right (due) is ignored by my God.' Israel feels that its oppressors have ill-treated it beyond measure (cp. Zech. i. 15), but its wrongs apparently roused no resentment in Yahwe.

28. everlasting : God will not therefore grow impatient and desist from His purpose, although the limited intelligence of man may fail to perceive His working.

30. youths...young men : i.e. the very perfection of human strength.

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XLI 1, 2

ISAIAH

9

mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint.

xli. *A judgement scene: Yahwe and Israel; the Gentiles and their so-called Gods.*

1-7. *The signs of the times.*

Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the peoples **41** renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgement. Who **2** hath raised up one from the east, whom he calleth in

31. mount up with wings: better, as LXX, 'put forth pinions.' The thought is not of the renewal of lost strength but of the acquisition of unexpected powers. Instead of stumbling wearily along the earth, Israel, if it trust its God, shall be borne up on the wings of its faith.

xli. The chapter presents a majestic scene in which God Himself is the central figure and the speaker. Before Him on the one hand stand the Gentile nations and their deities, gathered in apparent strength to maintain their claims, and on the other hand Israel in seeming loneliness and weakness. Addressing the nations, Yahwe confounds their pretensions to power: they are on the verge of overthrow at the hands of a new conqueror whom Yahwe has foreseen, since He it is that has called him and He that will bring him to complete victory (*vv.* 1-5). Then turning to Israel, Yahwe owns it as His servant, promising that it shall receive great glory and be the object of His unfailing care (*vv.* 8-20). Finally Yahwe challenges the idols to show any sign of life or of thought. Which of them can thus anticipate the future? But the idols are silent; the challenge dies away unanswered (*vv.* 21-28). Verdict accordingly is given: the gods of the heathen are nought, and their worshippers deluded (*v.* 29).

1-4. The claims on behalf of Yahwe, made generally in ch. xl., are now brought to the test of contemporary events.

1. renew their strength: the words, which are inappropriate here, have been copied by mistake from xl. 31. The original reading was doubtless a verb parallel to that in the first clause, 'keep silence.'

judgement: judicial process, cp. Mal. iii. 5.

2. Who: the answer is of course 'God,' since He alone can perceive the significance of the new figure in the drama of history, and can foresee the career of the conqueror whom He has called into action.

one from the east: the allusion is undoubtedly to Cyrus (see *Introd.* p. xiv).

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10

ISAIAH

XLI 3–5

righteousness to his foot? he giveth nations before him,
 and maketh him rule over kings; he giveth them as the
 3 dust to his sword, as the driven stubble to his bow. He
 pursueth them, and passeth on safely; even by a way
 4 that he had not gone with his feet. Who hath wrought
 and done it, calling the generations from the beginning?
 5 I the LORD, the first, and with the last, I am he. The
 isles saw, and feared; the ends of the earth trembled:

whom...foot: 'whom victory attends at every step.' According to the Hebrew idea, the litigant who wins his suit is thereby declared to be 'in the right,' 'righteous,' and here the ordeal of battle is conceived as a trial of right. Hence 'righteousness' in this passage denotes not a moral quality but simply the fact of the success of Cyrus in his campaigning, and is therefore best rendered 'success' or 'victory.' See *Intro.* pp. xvi, xxiv.

kings: possibly an allusion to Cyrus' conquest of Astyages, King of Media, in 549 B.C., and of Croesus of Lydia in 546 B.C.

he giveth...bow: read either 'his sword maketh them like dust, his bow like driven stubble'; or 'he maketh their sword as dust, their bow as driven stubble,' i.e. he makes their weapons utterly impotent to resist the conqueror's advance.

3. even...feet: render 'the path with his feet he does not tread': i.e. so swift is his advance that his feet seem scarcely to touch the ground.

4. calling...beginning: it is better to take this clause as the answer to the questions of *vv.* 2–4. Translate 'He that calleth....'

with the last: existent before the dawn of history, Yahwe remains unceasingly active to the end of time.

I am he: rather 'I am the same.' II Isaiah is fond of this phrase, which alludes to the explanation of the name 'Yahwe' as 'I am that I am,' given in *Exod.* iii. 14 f. He is the unchanging God.

5. and came: the LXX adds 'together to judgement,' but the verse, which breaks the connection of Yahwe's speech (*vv.* 8 ff.) is perhaps a gloss due to the mistaken insertion of *vv.* 6, 7—see foll. note.

6, 7. It is highly probable that these verses originally stood after xl. 19, where they suit the context. In the present position they are extremely awkward. The only interpretation of the text as it stands is that the heathen, afraid of the advance of the conqueror proclaimed by Yahwe, resolve that the best way of impeding his advance is to construct some new idols.