



Isaiah – A New World

Background Notes 4

Use in conjunction with published notes.

(WB2) And then there is a pause—a long pause. The reader of the book of Isaiah must endure a very long pause before taking up chapter 40, for the space between 39:8 and 40:1 signifies the defining interruption in the life and faith of Israel as it is construed in the book of Isaiah. Chapter 39 is ostensibly enacted some time after 700 B.C.E., and chapter 40, according to common judgment, is voiced about 540 B.C.E. The gap between 39:8 and 40:1, reckoned in chronological time, is thus about 160 years, a long pause indeed. During that gap much happens: the collapse of Assyria, the rise of Babylon as the new superpower, the death of the good king Josiah, and the near anarchy brought about by his royal sons. Most important, however, is the massive destruction of the entire Jerusalem establishment—city, dynasty, temple—and the complete infrastructure of that social and theological entity. What remains after the Babylonian incursion of 598 and the Babylonian devastation of 587 is a city in ruins, plus a scattering of Jews deported here and there. Among those deportees is the most influential concentration of displaced Jews in Babylon, Jews who sat "by the rivers of Babylon . . . and wept" (Psalm 137:1).

But Babylon in turn is defeated by Persia.

Passage 1 Isaiah 40. 1-11

(JG) The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 is unrecorded but presupposed in the book; it is the more radical answer to the question of whether Yahweh will stay long-tempered forever. But that catastrophe, too, cannot be the end of the story. After fifty years of the city's devastation and the exile of many of its people, Yahweh declares that the time of its chastisement is over; the time for its comfort has come. Yahweh intends to return to the city, taking its exiles back with him. The community is withered like grass by Yahweh's searing wind, but Yahweh's word stands forever. Thus, there is good news to be proclaimed to Zion-Jerusalem (Is 40:1-11).

(WB2) The core claim of this poetry is that Yahweh has defeated the power of Babylon and now permits Judah to leave Babylon for its joyous, triumphant return home. This single assertion, that Yahweh has defeated Babylon and Judah is free to

depart exile, is the primary theme of all of Isaiah 40—55. Indeed, the poet in the sixth century has a primal term for this announcement of victory for Yahweh, defeat for Babylon, and emancipation for Judah. The term is *gospel*.

Passage 2 Isaiah 65. 17-25

This passage gives foresight to life as God will have it at some point in the future.

(JG) How could the city's future be envisioned in any more glorious terms? By picturing it as the creation of a new heavens and new earth (is 65:17-25). The context makes clear that the prophet is not referring to a literal new cosmos but to a whole new world for this city. "The sound of weeping and the sound of a cry will not make itself heard there again," in contrast to Isaiah 5:7. People will thus live out their lives instead of having them cut short. They will build houses and live in them, plant vineyards and enjoy their fruit, rather than having them destroyed by enemies. Thus "they will not toil to no purpose, they will not bear children to terror." They will have a relationship of living, instant communication with Yahweh, one in which the new creation vision of Isaiah 11:6-9 will be realized. It will indeed be a whole new world.

(WB2) These verses are commonly taken to be a new rhetorical beginning that offers an extended, exuberant divine oracle of the newness Yahweh is about to give. It is worth noting, however, that the promissory tone of these verses is especially appropriate after the affirmation of verse 16. In that verse, the faithful God of Israel promises to the obedient (who seek Yahweh) a newness in which "former troubles" are overcome. Our verses then portray in considerable detail the "latter time" about to be given that is in total contrast to "former troubles." Although the oracle itself is exceedingly large in scope, the structure of verses 1-15 concerning a sharp division in the community suggests that the newness here is not offered generally. It is, rather, an offer made only to the obedient. They are the ones now about to be inducted into a gospel newness.