

“Give Comfort, Give Comfort, My People” The Poetic and Discourse Structure of Isaiah 40:1-11

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Isa 40:1-11 must be one of the most pored over texts of the Hebrew Bible. Its structure and meaning, nevertheless, remain vulnerable to further elucidation. I herewith offer a fresh analysis. The conclusions reached are twofold.

In terms of poetic structure, Isa 40:1-11 turns out to be a 22 line unit. 22 line units, acrostic and otherwise, are common in ancient Hebrew poetry. The unit’s lines and strophes and other repeated forms conform to a set of parameters attested more generally in the extant corpus of ancient Hebrew verse.

In terms of discourse structure, analysis suggests that one voice stands behind the entire pericope, that of a prophet, who begins by quoting Yahweh. Self-quotation occurs midway through and at the end (40:6, 10-11). Those who are to bring comfort to Jerusalem and prepare Yahweh’s way before him are addressed first (40:1-5). A report of a commission received and an ensuing dialogue follows (40:6-9). The one commissioned is charged with addressing Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah with the news that Yahweh is about to visit them (40:9-11).

As is clear from 40:9 correctly understood, the one who responds to the commission is a she. She is tasked with heralding salvation to Jerusalem and Judah. She does so, first of all, by reporting for their benefit God’s word to the exiles calling on them to console Jerusalem and prepare Yahweh’s way ahead of him. She discharges her commission even as she reports it. In a final image, she describes how Yahweh will come like a shepherd with a flock in train. The population of Judah and Jerusalem, spoken of as spoken to, but not spoken to directly, is the external recipient of the discourse. The rhetorical device of speaking *of* one’s audience while speaking *to* another, is employed throughout Isa 40-48. As Isa 40:1-11 cumulatively makes clear, and 35:1-10, 49:14-21, and 52:7-12 confirm, Jerusalem’s consolation will consist of an influx of returnees from the diaspora.

Introductory Questions

That Isa 40:1-11 is a relatively self-contained subdivision of its context is widely if not universally accepted. Those who disjoin 9-11 from 1-8 overlook, for example, the repetition of ‘your God’ from 40:1 in 40:9, the thematic link between ‘the way of Yahweh’ in 40:3 and ‘Yahweh’ who ‘comes’ in 40:10, and the way ‘your God’ in 40:9 picks up on ‘our God’ in 40:8. Some scholars conceive of 40:1-11 as a speech delivered orally by a prophet, or a literary imitation of a speech, part of a collection of speeches comprising Isa 40-55 or 40-66 and characterized by the uniformity of diction and thought of a single author. Others propose that 40:1-11 is a layered text built up by many hands, like the rest of Isa 40-66, a product of authors and redactors with divergent concerns. It is not possible to evaluate the widely differing reconstructions here. As an aid to comprehension of the rest of the essay, I briefly sketch my own views.¹

*I wish to thank Jan Fokkelman, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, and David Clines for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The usual disclaimers apply.

¹ Scholars who treat Isa 40:1-11 as a unit include James Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66: Introduction and Exegesis,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible* (ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1956) 422-33; Claus Westermann, *Das Buch Jesaja: Kapitel 40-66* (ATD 19; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

Isa 40-48 and 49-55, to limit the discussion to the first two subdivisions of 40-66, bear the stamp of a single mind responding breathlessly from afar to reports of events that culminated in the fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 BCE and pronouncements by Cyrus thereafter. Like the rest of 40-55, 40:1-11, though committed to writing for purposes of transmission, was designed for oral delivery. An analogous case about which explicit information is given involves a message of salvation composed by Jeremiah while in the land, and written on a scroll entrusted to Seraiah to be read out upon arrival there (Jer 50:1-51:64).² Similar information regarding the history of transmission of Isa 40-55 and 40:1-11 in particular has not been preserved. Nonetheless, the congruence of the likes of Jer 30:10; 31:21; 51:6, 45, 50; and Zech 2:10, 11 with Isa 43:1-7; 48:20-21; 52:11-12; and 55:12-13 suggests that Isa 40-55, like Jer 30-31, 50-51, and Zech 2, was composed with a dual audience in mind, one in the diaspora, and one in Judah, from the point of view of a resident of the land. If direct address to those in the diaspora is considered sufficient grounds for positing a diaspora provenance for Isa 40-55, Jer 30:10; 31:21, 50:8; 51:6, 45, 50; and Zech 2:10,11 and the contexts of which they are a part must also have originated in the diaspora, a patently absurd proposition. The case for a point of origin in Judah for Isa 40-55 is strong.³

If Isa 40-55 is instead the cumulative product of many hands, and 40:1-11 itself a complex redactional unity, the question of the unit's poetic integrity is not thereby decided. Orator-prophets and writer-redactors, we may assume, would have been equally skilled in producing poetry in conformity with the conventions of their day. Recognition

Ruprecht, ⁵1986 [1966] 29-41; Yehoshua Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion: A Study of Isaiah 40-48* (Forum Theologiae Linguisticae 14; Bonn: Linguistica Biblica, 1981) 63-80; 64; and Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck et al; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 6:327-337; 330-32; and Michael Fishbane, *Haftarot: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation [and] Commentary* (JPSBC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002) 278-79. Joachim Begrich, *Studien zu Deuterocesaja* (BWANT 77; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938) 58-59; Roy F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55* (BZAW 141; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976) 82-86; and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19A; Garden City: Doubleday, 2002) 177-87; 185) treat 40:1-8 and 9-11 as separate units. Scholars who consider Isa 40:1-11 and 40-55 as a whole to be a product of plurisecular redactional activity include Klaus Kiesow, *Exodustexte im Jesajabuch* (OBO 24; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979) 23-66; Rosario P. Merendino, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Eine Untersuchung von Jesaja 40-48* (VTSup 31; Leiden: Brill, 1981); and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, "Der Anfang des Zweiten Jesaja in Jes 40,1f. und seine literarischen Horizonte," *ZAW* 105 (1993) 400-19. The case for discerning multiple literary layers in Isa 40-66, and more than one author, is not as strong as often claimed. Seitz argues for a single author of Isa 40:1-52:12 in his commentary cited above (321). Blenkinsopp imagines all but a few verses of Isa 40-48 to be a collection of discourses by a single prophet (*Isaiah 40-55*, 74, 80). Arguments in favor of understanding Isa 40-66 as the work of one author have not received the attention they merit. See Benjamin D. Sommer, "Appendix: Was There a Trito-Isaiah?" in *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 187-95; Christopher Seitz, "Isaiah, Book of. Third Isaiah," *ABD* 3 (1992) 501-507. For the argument that ancient literature was composed to be heard, see Yehoshua Gitay. "Deutero-Isaiah: Oral or Written?" *JBL* 99 (1980) 185-97. For the identification of the fall of Babylon and pronouncements by Cyrus as historical triggers for the composition of Isa 40-48, see Hayim Tadmor, "The Historical Background for Cyrus's Declaration," in *Oz le-David. Biblical Essays in Honor of D. Ben Gurion* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1964) 471-72, cited by Gitay, *Isaiah 40-48*, 59, n. 41. For a summary of the debate on the geographical point of view of Isa 40-55, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 102-104.

² For a discussion, see Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 21C; New York: Doubleday, 2004) 364-510; 501-510).

³ A thorough case to this effect is made by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Geography and Textual Allusions: Interpreting Isaiah 40-55 and Lamentations as Judahite Texts", *VT* 57 (2007, forthcoming).

of the prosodic coherence of Isa 40:1-11 is compatible with the view that it is a literary product at one or more removes from the time and place it ostensibly addresses.

The Poetic Structure of Isa 40:1-11

A hierarchy of repeated forms in accordance with established convention is a characteristic of poetry of any time and place. The scansion of Isa 40:1-11 offered below seeks to lay bare the continuously repeated forms it instantiates. In the scansion, Isa 40:1-11 is reproduced in Tiberian dress. A reconstruction of the phonological structures the text would have had in the 6th century BCE, when, by most accounts, the text originated, along with full text-critical and historical-philological commentary and an analysis of tropes, must await another day.

The prosodic terminology used here requires explanation. A “prosodic word” is a unit dominated by a single main stress whose dimensions are equivalent to an orthographic word to which free-standing prepositions and a few other short words may be cliticized. A “verset,” often by not always equivalent to what others term a colon or hemistich, constitutes the next level up in the prosodic hierarchy. The “line” follows, equal to a major subdivision of a masoretic verse in a majority of cases. A group of two to three lines, usually identical to a masoretic verse, is referred to as a “strophe.” A group of two to three strophes is termed a “stanza.” Two to three stanzas make up a “section,” and two to three sections a poem or major subdivision thereof.⁴

The division of Isa 40:1-11 into versets, lines, strophes, and stanzas is uncontroversial in a majority of cases. The scansion I offer differs from previous scansions on two principal counts.

(1) Line level weak enjambment is posited in 8 cases, not 5, as usually done. Contrary to what is sometimes maintained, line level *weak* enjambment, that is, the distribution of a single clause across the versets of a line in accordance with natural syntactic breaks, is relatively frequent in ancient Hebrew poetry. One third of the lines in the corpus studied by him, O’Connor remarks, exhibit enjambment. More than two thirds of the lines in Lamentations 1-5 are enjambed, according to a landmark study by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp.⁵

The occurrence of weak enjambment in Isa 40:1-11 is widely accepted in 5 cases. The first line of 40:3 involves a break between a verb preceded by a complement and the verb’s object. The last lines of 40:2 and 40:3 present cases involving a break part way through an extended complement to an initial verb. 40:9 presents two cases involving a break between predicate and subject:

| | | |
|----------|--------------------------------|--|
| Isa 40:2 | בְּפִלִים בָּבֶל חֲטֵאתֶיהָ | כִּי-לְקַחָהּ מִיַּד יְהוָה |
| | for she got from Yahweh’s hand | double for all her sins |
| Isa 40:3 | קוֹל קוֹרֵא | בְּמִדְבַּר פְּנֵוּ |
| | The voice of one crying | in the range land prepare the way of Yahweh |
| | | מְסִלָּה לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ |
| | | יִשְׁרוּ בְּעֶרְבָה |

⁴ The text model I work with here is laid out at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

⁵ Michael Patrick O’Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980) 409; Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “The Enjambling Line in Lamentations: A Taxonomy (Part 1),” *ZAW* 113 (2001) 219-39; “The Effects of Enjambment in Lamentations (Part 2),” *ZAW* 113 (2001) 370-95.

| | | |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | make straight in the wild | a highway for our God |
| Isa 40:9 | מִבְּשָׂרַת צִיּוֹן | עַל הַר-גְּבוּהָ עָלִי-לָךְ |
| | Get yourself up a lofty mount | o heraldess to Zion |
| | מִבְּשָׂרַת יְרוּשָׁלַם | הֲרִימִי בַפֶּחַ קוֹלֶךְ |
| | lift your voice with power | o heraldess to Jerusalem |

On the basis of a regularity of ancient Hebrew poetry attested more generally, whereby a verset contains no less than two and no more than three prosodic words, I parse two short clauses of 40:7 and 40:8 as distinct versets. It is also natural to propose examples of weak enjambment in 40:7 and 40:8. This is after resituating the last clause of 40:7 at the head of the first line of 40:8, for which I present arguments below:

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|---------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Isa 40:7 | נְשָׁבָה בּוֹ | כִּי-רוּחַ יְהוָה |
| | For Yahweh's breath | blew upon it |
| Isa 40:8 | יְקוּם לְעוֹלָם | וּדְבַר אֱלֹהֵינוּ |
| | But Yahweh's word | stands forever |
| Isa 40:7, 8 [not cases of enjambment] | נֶבֶל צִיָּן | יֵבֶשׁ חֲצִיר |
| | The grass is sear | the bloom gone pale |

An additional case of enjambment may be posited in the first line of 40:9. A verset of 3 syllables is thus created. 3 syllable versets are common enough in ancient Hebrew poetry. Two examples occur in the first line of 40:3, already discussed.

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|----------|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Isa 40:9 | מִבְּשָׂרַת צִיּוֹן | עָלִי לָךְ | עַל הַר-גְּבוּהָ |
| | Get yourself up | a lofty mount | o heraldess to Zion |

It is also possible that עָלִי לָךְ 'get yourself up' should be treated as a single prosodic word (so MT). The subdivision of this line is in any case irrelevant to a conclusion of a different order, namely, that:

(2) Isa 40:1-11 contains exactly 22 lines. If and only if the cases of weak enjambment proposed above in 40:7 and 8 are acknowledged in lineation, this number emerges. Beyond acrostic poems in which 22 lines or multiples thereof are the norm, 11 non-acrostic 22 line poems have been correctly identified by scholars in the past. Herewith I add 30 more. Examples of 22 line subunits in poems of 34 or more lines are also listed.

Old: Prov 2:1-22; Pss 33, 34, 38, 66, 72, 103; Job 10, 14, 27; Lam 5.⁶ New: Isa 1:10-20; 28:14-22; 35:1-10; 41:21-42:4; 46; 48:1-11; Jer 4:1-9; Joel 1:1-12; Amos 2:6-16; 5:16-

⁶ 22 line poems were identified in non-acrostic contexts by, among others, R. B. Y. Scott (*Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* [AB 18; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965] 71 [Prov 2:1-22]; Mitchell Dahood (*Psalms I: 1-50* [AB 16; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966] 234 [Ps 38]); David Noel Freedman ("Acrostic Poems in the Hebrew Bible: Alphabetic and Otherwise," *CBQ* 48 [1986] 408-31; repr. in *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman, Volume Two: Poetry and Orthography* (ed. John R. Huddleston; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 183-204; 197-202 [Ps 33]); Delbert R. Hillers (*Lamentations* [2d ed.; AB 7A; New York: Doubleday, 1992] 25 [Lam 5, Pss 33, 38, and 103]); Pieter van der Lugt (*Rhetorical Criticism and the Poetry of the Book of Job* (OTS 32; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 124, 165, 299 [Job 10, 14, and 27]); idem, *Cantos and Strophes in Biblical Hebrew Poetry with Special Reference to the First Book of the Psalter* (OTS 53; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 421, 424 [Pss 33, 34, 103]; Klaus Seybold, "Akrostische im Psalter," *TZ* 57 (2001) 172-183 [Pss 72, 103, 66]); Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Traditional Techniques in Classical Hebrew Verse* (JSOTSup 170, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 90 [Lam 5; Ps 38]; Jan Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Prosody and Structural*

27; Pss 7; 17; 19; 22:2-19; 31:2-17; 35:11-28; 42; 51; 59; 77; Prov 4:1-19; 6:1-19; 6:20-35; 8:1-21; Job 4, 8; 11; 28:12-28; Cant 1:2-14; 6.

Many more units of the same dimensions in the extant corpus of ancient Hebrew poetry might be singled out. Once the rules of lineation for ancient Hebrew poetry are understood, it is relatively easy to identify them.

In the scansion I offer, Isa 40:1-11 contains 22 lines, 50 versets, and 120 prosodic words. Each of the three numbers seems stylized. It bears pointing out that the counts obtain with the last clause of 40:7 included. The clause in question is widely taken to be a gloss inappropriate to the context. On independent grounds, I argue below that it is a key component of the larger composition.

At the verset level, to be sure, a different but equally stylized count, 48, will result if, as is more usual, the first line of 40:9 is divided into two parts, not three, and the last clause of 40:7 is omitted as a gloss. At the prosodic word level, the same count, 120, will result if, for example, מַה 'what' is stressed and אָתָּךְ 'yourself' is destressed in 40:9.

The upshot of these observations is the following: stylized numbers at the verset and prosodic word levels obtain on the basis of a number of disparate combinations of distinct text- and literary-critical decisions. Furthermore, a claim to the effect that the stylization of aggregate numbers of versets and prosodic words played a role in the composition of ancient Hebrew verse would be audacious and difficult to verify. Without dozens of examples that appear to bear the claim out, I hesitate to make it. The matter deserves further investigation.

Isa 40:1-11 subdivides into 10 strophes, 5 stanzas, and 2 sections. The division into strophes coincides or is compatible with the masoretic verse division in all cases. The first strophe, to be sure, is distributed over two verses (40:1-2), the fourth strophe, likewise (40:4-5), perhaps for the sake of emphasis of the contents of 40:1 and 40:5. In all other instances, a masoretic verse is exactly equivalent to a strophe.

Korpel and de Moor divide differently in 3 of 10 cases. They treat 40:5 and the last line of 40:9 as strophes consisting of a mere 3 cola. 40:8-9 is treated as one strophe rather than two. On my count 40:8-9 consists of 9 cola, on their count 5, because 4 beat cola are permitted in their system. Quite apart from the correct definition of a colon, there is no need to posit strophes of 14 different types and sizes in ancient Hebrew verse as Korpel and de Moor do.⁷ A classification of strophes into two types, long and short, as Fokkelman suggests, makes admirable sense of the data in hand.⁸

The stanza division proposed here, although compatible with principles of organization observed elsewhere in ancient Hebrew poetry, is not identical with the division into open and closed paragraphs preserved in Codices L and A in two cases. At issue here is a judgment about discourse structure, to be discussed below. Korpel and de Moor's division of 40:9-11 into two stanzas, or "canticles" in their terminology, marks the

Analysis. II. 85 Psalms and Job 4-14 (SSN 41; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000) 522 [Pss 33, 34, 38]. I omit from this list poems thought by others to have 22 lines that in my view do not.

⁷ Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *The Structure of Classical Hebrew Poetry: Isaiah 40-55* (OTS 41; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 51-55; 645-66.

⁸ Jan P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis. II. 85 Psalms and Job 4-14* (SSN 41; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000) 40. To be sure, Fokkelman allows for rare cases of one line and four line strophes, but a look at his examples suggests an analysis into 2's and 3's. E.g., a division into two short strophes is already implied by the masoretic verse division in Ps 31:20-21, and one long strophe is implied by the masoretic division in Ps 103:20-22.

strongest internal division within 9-11 at the end of 9, but overlooks the strong continuity between the end of 9 and the beginning of 10.⁹

The section division after 40:5 is supported by MT's open paragraph division there. On the pericope delimitation after 40:11, there is general if not universal agreement.

To summarize, Isa 40:1-11 conforms without strain to prosodic rules at work elsewhere in the extant corpus of ancient Hebrew poetry. This may be verified by comparing the unit counts at all levels of the prosodic hierarchy in Isa 40:1-11 as scanned here with scansion of other poems offered elsewhere.¹⁰ The net result of trial-and-error prosodic analysis over the entire corpus of ancient Hebrew poetry is a text model which may be summarized as follows:

A prosodic hierarchy of twos and threes structures ancient Hebrew verse. Two to three stress units form a verset, two to three versets a line, two to three lines a strophe, two to three strophes a stanza, and two to three stanzas a poem or section thereof. A poem, if it contains more than 10 lines, typically consists of 12, 18, 22, or 28 lines, or combinations thereof. Among the Psalms, 14 lines is also a common length.

Students of prophetic literature, while aware of the fact that the text before them is poetry in whole or in part, tend to abstain from prosodic analysis.¹¹ In the absence of a convincing text model to compare text units against, this is understandable. A text model for a particular genus of literature, if it is to be persuasive, must work like a sieve. All or most examples of the genus should pass through it. Species of other genera should not. It should also serve to narrow the range of possible scansion of a given text. A strength of the model outlined above is that it succeeds in doing these things to a greater extent than do the less exigent text models of Fokkelman, van Grol, and Korpel and de Moor.¹²

⁹ Muilenburg, *Isaiah 40-66*, 423; Fokkelman, "Stylistic Analysis of Isaiah 40:1-11," *OTS* 21 (1981) 68-90; 69-70; Korpel and de Moor, *Isaiah 40-55*.

¹⁰ E.g., "Isaiah 1:2-20," "Isaiah 5:1-7," and "Psalm 137," at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

¹¹ Exceptions to this rule include: George Buchanan Gray, *Isaiah I-XXXIX* [chs. 1-27 alone are covered] (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912); Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation* (New York: Scribner's, 1928); Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja: 1. Teilband: Jesaja 1-12* (2d ed., BKAT 10/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980 [ET *Isaiah 1-12* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990)]); idem, *Jesaja: 2. Teilband: Jesaja 13-27* (BKAT 10/2, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978 [ET *Isaiah 13-27* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997)]); idem, *Jesaja: 3. Teilband: Jesaja 28-39* (BKAT 10/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982 [ET *Isaiah 28-39* (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002)]); Harm van Grol, "Clause, Sentence and Versification: A Theoretical and Practical Exploration of the Role of Syntax in Versification, with Isaiah 5:1-7 as Example," in *Prophet on the Screen: Computerized Description and Literary Interpretation of Isaianic Texts* (ed. Eep Talstra and Archibald L. H. M. van Wieringen; Applicatio 9; Amsterdam: VU Univ. Press, 1992) 70-117; idem, "An Analysis of the Verse Structure of Isaiah 24-27," in *Studies in Isaiah 24-27: The Isaiah Workshop* (ed. Hendrik Jan Bosman and Harm van Grol; *OTS* 43; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 51-80; Chris A. Franke, *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* (BJSUCSD 3; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994); Andrew H. Bartelt, *The Book around Immanuel: Style and Structure in Isaiah 2-12* (BJSUCSD 4; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996); Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, *Isaiah 40-55*.

¹² Explanations of the text models named above are found in Jan P. Fokkelman, *Dichtkunst in de bijbel: Een handleiding bij literair lezen* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2000); *ET Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (tr. Ineke Smit; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Harm van Grol, *De versbouw in het klassieke hebreuws: Fundamentele verkenningen, Deel 1: Metriek* (diss., Catholic Theological Univ. of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 1986); Marjo C. A. Korpel and Johannes C. de Moor, "Fundamentals of Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetry," *UF* 18 (1986) 173-212 (repr. in *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry* [ed. Willem van der Meer and Johannes C. de Moor; JSOTSup 74; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988] 1-61).

The Discourse Structure of Isaiah 40:1-11

It remains to discuss the more important text- and literary-critical decisions instantiated in the prosodic parse and translation of Isa 40:1-11 offered here. Of the loci discussed, only the last clause of 40:7 and the first phrase of 40:10 are directly relevant to prosodic analysis. Indirectly, however, each locus is important insofar as it bears on the semantic and rhetorical coherence of the whole. In the absence of same the claim made above that Isa 40:1-11 is a prosodically coherent unit would fall under suspicion.

Isa 40:1-2a

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|----|--|---|
| | יֹאמֵר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְקִרְאוּ אֵלַיָּהּ | נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ עַמִּי דַּבְּרוּ עַל-לֵב יְרוּשָׁלַם |
| 1 | Give comfort, give comfort, my people | your God says |
| 2a | speak to the heart of Jerusalem | cry out to her |

The syntax and parallelisms of four passages militate in favor of taking עַמִּי ‘my people’ as the object of נְחַמוּ ‘comfort’ preceding it:

| | | |
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| Isa 49:13 | for Yahweh has consoled his people | כִּי-נִנְחַם יְהוָה עַמּוֹ |
| | for Yahweh has consoled his people | כִּי-נִנְחַם יְהוָה עַמּוֹ |
| Isa 52:9 | he has redeemed Jerusalem | גָּאֹל יְרוּשָׁלַם |
| | he consoled them | וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם |
| Gen 50:21 | and spoke to their heart | וַיְדַבֵּר עַל-לִבָּם: |
| | for you consoled me | כִּי נְחַמְתָּנִי |
| Ruth 2:13 | and spoke to the heart of your maidservant | וְכִי דַבַּרְתָּ עַל-לֵב שִׁפְחָתִי |

Arguments in favor of taking עַמִּי ‘my people’ as a vocative, however, are numerous:

(1) With the speaker identified as אֱלֹהֵיכֶם ‘your God,’ it is logical for the plural addressee to be identified as עַמִּי ‘my people.’ Similar relational language is often found in reported divine speech in ANE literature and serves to characterize a relationship between a divinity and a divinity’s clients in terms of reciprocal obligations and entitlements. Reference to the mutual bond uniting the divinity who speaks and the addressee who hears would not be out of place at the onset of Isa 40-48.¹³

(2) עַמִּי ‘my people’ is a vocative in comparable syntactic frames elsewhere:

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|-----------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Jer 51:45 | Leave her, my people | צָאוּ מִתּוֹכָהּ עַמִּי |
| Isa 10:24 | Fear not, my people | אַל-תִּירָא עַמִּי |
| Isa 26:20 | Go, my people | לֵךְ עַמִּי |

¹³ Stephen Geller emphasizes the relational language referred to above. He states without argument that the interpretation that takes ‘my people’ as the subject of the command is forced (“A Poetic Analysis of Isaiah 40:1-2,” *HTR* 77 [1984] 413-20; 415, n. 9). To be sure, co-occurrences of the expressions ‘your God’ and ‘my people’ are rare (Joel 2:26, 27; Hos 2:25; Ezek 34:30). ‘I will be God for you and you will be a people for me’ is the more usual diction (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12; 2 Sam 7:24; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 36:28; Zech 8:8).

Isa 40:1-2 and 48:20-21 are the bookends, so to speak, of Isa 40-48. Interpreted in light of each other and in light of a comparison with Jer 51:45, the possibility that עמי 'my people' refers to the exiles in Babylon cannot be dismissed out of hand. It should be noted that if 'my people' is a vocative, the vertical parallelism 'give comfort' / 'speak to the heart' linking 40:1 and 2 remains in full force.

(3) In the context following Isa 40:1, עמי 'my people,' עמו 'his people,' and עם 'people' refers, not to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but to those invited to return there: 42:22 (compare 42:19); 43:8, 20, 21 (compare 35:5-10); 49:13 (compare 49:10-12).¹⁴

(4) In parenetic discourse onsets generally, vocatives postposed after an initial verb or verbs are the norm in Second Isaiah's style: e.g., 40:1 [ex hypothesi]; 40:27; 41:1, 14; 42:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 23; 45:8, 20, 22; 46:3, 12; 47:1, 5, 8; 48:1, 12. Who is being addressed may also be specified in other ways: e.g., 41:8; 42:18; 43:1, 14, 22; 44:6; 45:1, 11; 46:5; 48:17. Undifferentiated 2d person plural or singular addressees at discourse onset are rare: 40:18 [but 40:12-26 continues 1-11 in my view]; 42:6 [but 42:5-17 continues 41:21-42:4 in my view]. A characterization of the prophet's audience by God as 'my people' in the discourse onset represented by 40:1 is consonant with Second Isaiah's style.

(5) It is entirely possible for a verb in the piel to occur with the recipient of the verb's action left unstated. Examples of verbs in the piel with object omitted include: אבד 'destroy' (Qoh 3:6); דבר 'speak' (Isa 1:2; Ezek 5:13; Ps 49:4, etc.); ברך 'bless' (Num 23:20; Ps 109:28); קלל 'curse' (2 Sam 16: 5, 7, 10, 11, 13; Ps 62:5; 109:28); נחם 'comfort' (Zech 10:2).

To summarize, similarities with four passages suggest taking 'my people' as the object of the preceding verb in 40:1. But usage of key terms and regularities observable in other contexts suggest taking 'my people' as a vocative. On either construal, I would argue, those who are to attend to the imperatives in 40:1 are best understood as members of the people of God who are to console Jerusalem now that her punishment by God is over.¹⁵

Isa 40:3a

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| | דָּרָךְ יְהוָה | בְּמִדְבָּר פָּנּוּ | קוֹל קוֹרָא |
| The voice of one crying: | in the range land | prepare | the way of Yahweh |

The division adopted here is reflected in the parse of the text preserved by the masoretic accents. A bipartite division is nonetheless attested in other ancient sources and defended by a minority of interpreters:¹⁶

¹⁴ After Isa 49, once a return has taken place, Yahweh pronounces Zion to be his people (51:16). God's people and Jerusalem are then referable as a two-in-one object of Yahweh's comfort (52:9).

¹⁵ Fokkelman argues that the plural addressee of 40:1 are themselves part of the 'my people' they are to console ("Stylistic Analysis," 72-73). For a similar understanding, see Torrey, *Second Isaiah*, 304. Before the present writer, the reading 'o my people' was sustained by Norman H. Snaith, "Isaiah 40-66: A Study of the Teaching of Second Isaiah and Its Consequences," in *Studies on the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky and Norman H. Snaith; VTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 139-46.

¹⁶ Torrey, *Second Isaiah*, 305; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel. Volume IV. From the Babylonian Captivity to the End of Prophecy* (tr. C. W. Efraymson; New York: Ktav, 1977) 167, n. 41. Interpunctuation marks in Greek and Syriac mss divide the line after 'wilderness,' as Korpel and de Moor point out (*Isaiah 40-55*, 24). For a list of ancient Jewish sources that presuppose the same division, see Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, ed., ספר ישעיהו *The Book of Isaiah. Volume Two. Chapters 22-44* (The Hebrew University Bible Project; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981) קעג. For a defense of the division of the line into three parts, see Gitay, *Isaiah 40-48*, 72-73.

קול קורא במדבר פנו דרך יהוה

The voice of one crying in the range land prepare the way of Yahweh

There is little agreement about the interpretation to give this text quite apart from its correct subdivision. According to a widely held interpretation, the voice of the crier is assumed to be that of an angelic herald. According to Blenkinsopp, the supposition that Isa 40:1-11 evokes the scenario of a divine council and that those addressed are members of Yahweh's heavenly court is not well founded.¹⁷

The suggestion that the voice of the crier is that of an angel is in fact far fetched. The voice quoted in 40:3 refers to Yahweh as 'our God.' The language establishes common ground between the speaker and those he addresses. Everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, for a total of 174 times, whenever the phrase 'our God' is used, a human being is speaking. Angels speak often enough in biblical literature. Nowhere do they refer to the God they serve as 'our God.' There are no exceptions. It is simplest to assume that we are to imagine the crier to be a fellow Israelite who makes use of the phrase 'our God' as would any confrere when speaking to another, who cries out to those addressed and beckons them forward to a communal task. The voice is of one authorized by God, who authorizes others in turn. All of the imagery, the building of a highway for our God, the gullies rising and the hills descending, and the selfsame figure of the crier, are evocative rather than strictly referential, even as they point to weighty and impending realities that will dramatically change a pre-existing situation. For קורא in the sense of 'crier' in a similar context, see Isa 21:11.

According to a standard interpretation of this passage, we are rather to imagine that angels are the ones commanded to prepare Yahweh's way before him. But similar commands elsewhere cannot be interpreted in this way. Two passages in particular deserve consideration: Isa 57:13b-15; 61:8-12. Especially in the last passage, it is obvious that those invited to build a road are the speaker's audience, not a celestial road crew to whom we are never introduced. Many agents are named in Isaiah 40-66 for their part in effecting a return to Zion: Cyrus, the exiles themselves, the nations in which they are dispersed, and those already in Zion.¹⁸ Yahweh himself resolves to prepare a way for the returnees (43:19; 49:11). Angels are not identified as co-workers.

Isa 40:6a

קול אומר קרא ואמר מה אקרא

The voice of one saying: cry out! I said: what shall I cry?

ואמר 'And I said' is supported by 1QIsa^a, G, and V. MT has ואמר, perhaps to be understood as 'and another replied.' MT seems to assimilate 40:6 to phraseology found in Isa 6:3. But one expects a *waw* consecutive to follow a participial clause like קול אומר, if the narrated events are consecutive, as they are here. *Waw* consecutives likewise follow participial clauses in 2 Sam 17:17-18 and Isa 6:2-4.

¹⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 178-84; 179.

¹⁸ The passages which speak of the return of the exiles and the manner of the return are numerous. Besides Isa 40:1-5, 8-11, see Isa 35:1-10; 41:9, 17-20; 42:10-17; 43:1-7, 16-21; 45:13-14; 46:1-4; 48:20-21; 49:6, 8-13, 22; 51:9-11; 52:7-12; 54:4; 55:5, 10-12; 56:1-8; 57:13b-15; 60:4-9; 62:4-5, 10-12; 63:11-16 (a prayer that Yahweh remember his accomplishment of the exodus of old, with a view to doing something like it again); 66:7-9, 12, 18-21. It is not too much to say that the primary preoccupation of Isa 40-66 is the return of the exiles and a reversal of Zion's fortunes more generally.

MT Isa 57:14, which reads וְאָמַר once again, also preserves a text in which the subject of the verb ‘to say’ is of uncertain identification. Again it seems best to set MT aside, and vocalize וְאָמַר ‘I will say,’ with Yahweh as speaker. The reading is supported by V.

The ‘one saying’ in 40:6 may well be the ‘one crying’ of 40:3. Again the phrase ‘our God’ establishes a common bond between speaker and addressee, and identifies the speaker as a fellow Israelite, assuming, as many exegetes propose, that 40:8 is to be assigned to ‘the voice of one saying’ in 40:6. As in 40:3, the voice seems to be of one authorized by God who authorizes others in turn. Perhaps we are to imagine one prophet exhorting another to fulfill a felt commission.

Isa 40:6b-8

| | | |
|----|--|--|
| | וְכָל-הַהוֹדוּ כְצִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה | כָּל-הַבְּשָׂר חָצִיר |
| | נֶבֶל צִיץ | יֵבֶשׂ חָצִיר |
| | נִשְׁבָּה בּוֹ | כִּי-רוּחַ יְהוָה |
| | נֶבֶל צִיץ | אָכַן חָצִיר הָעָם |
| | יֵבֶשׂ חָצִיר | וְדָבַר אֱלֹהֵינוּ |
| | יָקוּם לְעוֹלָם | |
| 6b | all flesh is grass | and all its splendor like a field’s bloom |
| 7 | the grass is sear for Yahweh’s breath | the bloom gone pale blew upon it |
| 8 | the people to be sure are grass but the word of our God | the grass is sear the bloom gone pale stands forever |

The reading ‘And I said’ in 40:6a paves the way for taking 40:6b-7 as an expression of solidarity with the distressed population to which the one speaking belongs. On this reading, 40:6b-7 is a description of the sorry state of the population of the city-state of Jerusalem, ‘for Yahweh’s breath blew upon it,’ or, as was said previously, ‘for she received from Yahweh’s hand double for all her sins’ (40:2). Complaint and intercession are implicit in the description. Description of misfortune, complaint, and intercession are of course often found together. One often evokes the other. See Lam 1-5; Pss 44, 74, 79, 80, 83; Isa 6:11; 63:7-64:11; Hab 1:12-17.

Westermann comments, “Only once, and even then only for a moment, does [Deutero-Isaiah] let himself be seen. This is in the prologue, in 40:6-7, which gives his call.”¹⁹ In my view, this is true insofar as what is affirmed, but untrue insofar as what is denied. Another passage, Brenner has argued, contains a self-portrait of the prophetess: 50:4-9.²⁰ Her voice may be heard loud and clear, I suggest, in three other passages: 61:1-9; 61:10-62:3; and 63:7-64:11; and very briefly as here, in 48:16b.

The last clause of 40:7 makes a lame conclusion to the preceding. It is usually omitted as a gloss, a symptom of the fact, in my view, that its discourse function has not been understood. I propose that אָכַן ‘to be sure’ is, as often, discourse initial. See Gen 28:16; Ex 2:14; 1 Sam 15:32; Isa 49:4; Jer 4:10; 8:8. I thus transpose it to the onset of 40:8. On

¹⁹ Westermann, *Isaiah 40-55*,

²⁰ Athalya Brenner, “On the Reader’s Location and Isaiah 50,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carol Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 136-150.

this reading, a counter-reply to 40:6b-7 is contained in the text segment beginning with ‘to be sure.’ The partial recapitulation of 40:6b-7 is thus explained.²¹

The reply continues until 40:9, with a change of subject matter in 40:9, and 40:8 functioning as a bridge from one subject matter to the next. This being the case, it is logical to treat 40:8-9 (including the last clause of 40:7) as a distinct stanza on a par with 40:6-7 preceding and 40:10-11 following.

It remains to give an explanation of the emendation of הַסֹּדוֹ ‘its favor’ to הוֹדוֹ ‘its splendor.’ A graphic ו/ס confusion is assumed. The emendation is supported, though not proven, by G, which translates underlying הוֹד by δόξα on other occasions. Many propose assigning an otherwise unattested meaning such as ‘grace, beauty’ or ‘constancy’ to הַסֹּדוֹ in this passage. 21st century desktop creation of otherwise unattested meanings for words in ancient Hebrew is a hazardous enterprise. The proposal of a graphic confusion has caution on its side. Others think הַסֹּדוֹ has the nuance of ‘loyalty’ here. The latter solution burdens the text with two objects, ‘all flesh’ and ‘its loyalty,’ to compare with a third, ‘grass’/‘flower of the field.’ One-to-one and pair-to-pair comparisons are the norm in ancient Hebrew verse.²²

Isa 40:9

| | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| | מְבַשֶּׁרֶת צִיּוֹן | עָלֵי לְךָ | עַל הַר-גְּבוּהָ |
| | מְבַשֶּׁרֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם | | הַרִימִי בַפֶּתַח קוֹלְךָ |
| הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם | אֲמַרְי לְעָרֵי יְהוּדָה | | הַרִימִי אֶל תִּירְאִי |

| | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Get yourself up | a lofty mount | o heraldess to Zion |
| lift your voice with power | | o heraldess to Jerusalem |
| lift it, don't be afraid | say to the towns of Judah | your God is near |

40:9 forms a segue to 40:8 as understood above. There is no need to posit a change in speaker. The chief exegetical question turns on the best way to construe two parallel phrases, מְבַשֶּׁרֶת צִיּוֹן and מְבַשֶּׁרֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם, ‘mebaššeret Zion’ and ‘mebaššeret Jerusalem,’ respectively. The arguments against the appositional rendering, ‘O Zion, heraldess of good tidings,’ are summarized by Seitz:

Zion is nowhere depicted in the active role of a tidings bringer anywhere else in chaps. 40-66; nowhere else are the “cities of Judah” the special recipients of tidings from Zion; and elsewhere when mention is made of a tidings-bearer, the recipient is Zion/Jerusalem.²³

But Seitz goes on to suggest that the tidings-bearer to Zion is so closely identified with the city that a feminine form and feminine imperatives are used.²⁴ To this one can only reply with argumentation that echoes that of Seitz just quoted: nowhere else does a messenger or other agent with a task to carry out for Zion’s benefit take on, by association, Zion’s gender.

²¹ Korpel and de Moor also make the last clause of 40:7 the introduction to 40:8, with a change in speaker (*Isaiah 40-55*, 18, n. 5). They note that the opening line of the speech beginning with אֲכַן חָצִיר הָעֵמָּם recapitulates the opening line of the speech beginning with כֹּל הַבְּשָׂר חָצִיר.

²² Grotius proposed הוֹדוֹ ‘his splendor’ long ago.

²³ Seitz, *Isaiah 40-66*, 336.

²⁴ Seitz, *Isaiah 40-66*, 337.

McEvenue offers several reasons for supposing that the *'mebaššeret Zion'* is a prophethess, the same who answered the call in 40:6, and probably wrote all of Isaiah 40-55. Two reasons he offers might be singled out. First of all, if 40:9-11 is a continuation of the call narrative form, a hypothesis which has some intrinsic probability, a vocation given to a city, rather than to an individual person, seems unjustifiable on form-critical grounds. Secondly, it is more natural to understand Jerusalem to be one of the cities of Judah to whom God's coming is announced, not a messenger to the cities of Judah. Understood in terms of the logic of the larger literary context, the heraldess receives the commission because the commission given to First Isaiah 'until cities and houses lie waste' (Isa 6:11) has come to end.²⁵

To the arguments of Seitz and McEvenue, I would add the following:

(1) 40:2, 41:27; 44:26, 28 are the only passages in 40-48 besides 40:9 in which Zion +/- Jerusalem + the cities of Judah are named. The congruence of these passages in terms of general semantics, specific phraseology, and discourse structure is not easily discounted. In each passage Zion +/- Jerusalem + the cities of Judah are the addressees of a message of salvation. It stands to reason that Isa 40:9 is to be understood along the same lines.

(2) In Isa 52:9-10, a lyrical preface to a summons to depart from Babylon (52:11-12), the arrival of a *mebaššer* 'tidings-bearer' in the vicinity of Zion is anticipated. The good news he carries is powerful: 'Your God reigns!' Zion's watchmen respond with joy and remark that Yahweh has indeed accomplished what he promised; he has bared his beautiful arm before the eyes of the nations. The image of a tidings-bearer who mounts a hill, found in 40:9, is paralleled by the image of a tidings-bearer approaching from a distance, found in 52:7. But if this is so, *mebaššeret* and Zion must be understood as separate entities. In both cases, the good news refers concretely to the return of exiles from Babylon.²⁶

(3) In 40:6, it was suggested above, a commission is received. Given the tenor of the pericope up to that point, one might expect a message of encouragement for Jerusalem to be vouchsafed to the one who is commissioned. 40:9 fits the description. On form-critical grounds, the one commissioned in 40:6 and the one who is deliver a message in 40:9 ought to be one and the same. Other commission reports, though they differ in various ways, are unanimous on this point (Exod 3:1-4:17; 1 Kgs 22:19-23; Isa 6:5-9; Jer 1:4-10; Ezek 1:1-3:15).

(4) **בשר** occurs elsewhere with the recipients of the news indicated by a direct object: 2 Sam 18:19; Isa 60:1; Jer 20:15. The construal proposed is syntactically unobjectionable.

Isa 40:10a

וְזָרְעוּ מִשְׁלָה לּוֹ בְּחֶזֶק יְבוּא הִנֵּה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

My Lord Yahweh is near as a hero he comes his arm rules on his behalf

²⁵ Sean McEvenue, "Who Was Second Isaiah?" in *Studies in the Book of Isaiah* (FS Willem A.M. Beuken, ed. J. Van Ruiten & M. Vervenne, BETL 132; Leuven: Peeters, 1997) 113-122.

²⁶ Another proponent of a non-appositional rendering of the phrases in question is Robert W. Fisher, "The Herald of Good News in Second Isaiah," in *Rhetorical Criticism. Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (FS Muilenburg; ed. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler; Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 1; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974) 117-32. Fisher also identifies the *'mebaššeret Zion'* with the author of Isa 40-55.

The compound יהוה אֲדֹנָי ‘Lord Yahweh’ occurs in two loci elsewhere in MT Isa 40-66 (48:16; 50:4, 5, 7, 9). In both contexts, a narrating “I” is obtrusive. It is logical to suggest that אֲדֹנָי in these contexts might better be vocalized אֲדֹנָי ‘my Lord.’ אֲדֹנָי in Isa 40:10a is better vocalized אֲדֹנָי ‘my Lord’ as well. The expression signals that the narrating “I” of the prophecy concludes the unit with words of her own.²⁷

Given the change in speaker with 40:10, it is logical to treat 40:10-11 as a distinct stanza on a par with 40:8-9 preceding. To be noted is the recapitulation of the end of 40:9 at the beginning of 40:10. The same device was observed in the transition between the third and fourth stanzas of the pericope to mark the change in speaker there (40:7, 8).

Summary

In terms of poetic structure, Isa 40:1-11 is a 22 line unit of ancient Hebrew verse. It conforms in all details to prosodic rules attested in ancient Hebrew verse more generally.

The discourse structure of Isa 40:1-11 that emerges from the above analysis is the following. As becomes clear as the plot progresses, a narrating “I” responds to a call to ‘cry out’ and is tasked with heralding God’s coming to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. It is she who conveys God’s instruction to those God calls ‘my people’ at the beginning of the unit. They are tasked with carrying a message of pardon to Jerusalem. In a powerful image, a crier is described as summoning them to prepare Yahweh’s way ahead of him. In a new reprise, the narrator quotes a voice’s command to cry out, and her reply asking what to cry out. She takes exception to the command. A counter-reply follows, along with the summons to announce Yahweh’s coming to Jerusalem and Judah. In her own voice, and with powerfully poetic images, the narrator concludes the unit with a prediction that Yahweh will return like a shepherd with a flock in train.

The claim that the “I” of Isa 40:6, 10; 48:16; 50:4-9; 61:1-9; 61:10-62:3; and 63:7-64:11 is, on the evidence of 40:9 correctly understood, a female figure, follows naturally enough from the analysis I have offered. The claim, of course, is a blockbuster thesis, and represents a challenge to ingrained certitudes of various origin. Perhaps this essay will encourage others to pore over Isa 40:1-11 once again, and attempt to elucidate its poetry and discourse structure with more success than I have.

²⁷ G lacks an equivalent to the compound formula in every case. It cannot be used to support the deletion of אֲדֹנָי here or elsewhere in Second Isaiah.