

## **ISAIAH 40-48**

## Introduction

Most scholars agree that the bulk of the material in Isaiah 40-55 was composed in Babylon during the years of the Babylonian exile. As noted in the Introduction (page 11), it is often assumed to be the work of an unnamed individual prophet, called for convenience 'Deutero-Isaiah' because his writing is found in the Isaiah scroll. In this commentary I am following those who attribute it to a 'School' of prophet-preachers. These prophet-preachers show familiarity with the Isaiah tradition, as they do with other prophetic and Deuteronomic material, but their writing has its own distinct character, which has most in common with the temple singers responsible for the psalms.

Scholars point out the many links between Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 40-55, but most agree that this is because Isaiah 35 was composed in post-exilic Judah precisely to bind chapters 40-55 to the Isaiah material in 2-39. For the same reason the historical appendix (Isaiah 36-39) was added as a bridge between these two blocks of prophetic writing. The key link is that the exilic writers of the Isaiah School offer an assurance that the sins of Jerusalem, so prominent in the criticisms made by Isaiah ben Amoz, have been pardoned, and a new beginning is being offered.

It is likely that the oratorical nature of the material in Isaiah 40-55 is because it was composed for the preaching that took place in the synagogue. For this reason I will at times refer to the authors of this material as 'prophet-preachers', even if the words were written to be read and may never have actually been preached. Some of the content, too, is better understood when we realise the pressure the deported Judeans were under in this multicultural environment with its powerful imperial deities. This helps account for the polemic against idols, but more importantly for the stress throughout that YHWH, the God is Israel, is the lord of creation and the lord of history.

In the Introduction we noted the rise to power of the Persian king, Cyrus (see page 14). This provides essential background especially for chapters 40-48. Further background is provided by knowledge of the Babylonian New Year festival that celebrated the power of their god, Marduk. As we examine the Isaiah text it will appear that it sets out to parody the Babylonian liturgy and to contrast the real power of YHWH with the supposed power of Marduk. A highlight of the Marduk festival was the dramatic presentation of the creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. Blenkinsopp sums it up in the following words (page 106):

In the beginning there was nothing but the divine pair Apsū and Tiamat. From these primordial deities several generations of gods were begotten, but the repose of Apsū was disturbed by the secondary gods, whom he therefore decided to destroy, a proposal rejected by his consort, Tiamat. The wise god Ea then discovers the plan and takes pre-emptive action by killing Apsū with the help of magic. The birth of Marduk follows, and his many attributes are described. Meanwhile, Tiamat prepares for battle to avenge the death of her consort and appoints Kingu as head of the divine assembly, leader of her army, and keeper of the tablets of destiny. Since the gods are afraid to take on Tiamat, Marduk, also known as Bēl, agrees to do so with the condition that he is appointed supreme god in the divine assembly. The gods accept with the acclamation "Marduk is king!" (*Enuma Elish* IV 28) and equip him with a sceptre, royal robe, throne and magical weapons. In the contest that follows, Tiamat is defeated and killed, and out of her body are created the sky, the stars, constellations, sun and moon, the earth and the circumfluent waters. The human being, a lowly creature (lullu), is created by the god Ea out of the blood of the slaughtered Kingu, mixed with slime.

To humanity is assigned the task of relieving the secondary gods of the duty of serving the high gods. In gratitude, the gods erect the esagila sanctuary for Marduk, Enlil, and Ea. A banquet follows, and the destinies are fixed. The poem ends with the recital of a litany of the fifty names of Marduk and the praise of his incomparable greatness: “none among the gods can equal him” (*Enuma Elish* VII 14).

Once the creation myth is presented, the statues of Marduk (Bēl) and his son, Nabū (Nebo), were led in procession to the akitu house (*bit akiti*), outside the city. Isaiah 46:1-2 parodies this procession. It will not be long before the Babylonians will be packing up their gods in an effort to save them and processing out of the city – into exile! Isaiah 51:9-10 portrays YHWH (not Marduk) as slaying the beast of chaos. YHWH is presented as the cosmic creator throughout, and, against the Babylonian story of many gods, it is declared “Before me no god was formed, and there will be none after me” (Isaiah 43:10). YHWH has no need of a counsellor such as Ea (Isaiah 40:13-14; 41:28). YHWH alone (not Marduk) controls the heavens (Isaiah 40:26; 45:12). YHWH (not Marduk) ‘reigns as king’ (Isaiah 52:7). The Babylonians shout: ‘None among the gods can equal Marduk!’. Again and again the prophet-scribes proclaim that nothing can compare to YHWH: ‘I am YHWH and there is no other’ (Isaiah 45:5, 6, 18, 22; 46:9).

The hopes of the exiles were realised when Cyrus entered Babylon in triumph in 539. However, Cyrus did not live up to the expectations of this School of writers. In any case Cyrus was killed in battle in 530.

The preaching of the prophet-preachers fell, for the most part, on deaf ears. We notice a shift in direction in Isaiah 49-55. We will have more to say on this when introducing these chapters (see page 182). The prophet-preachers, experiencing indifference and rejection, realise that it is up to them to keep the prophetic word alive. It is these ‘servants’ of YHWH and their followers, who, back in Judah, compose Isaiah 56-66, continue to update the sayings of Isaiah in Isaiah 2-39, include the exilic reflections of Isaiah 40-55, and then prefaced the book with Isaiah chapter 1. These three blocks of prophetic writing combine to produce what we know as the Isaiah scroll.

# Babylonian Exile



**<sup>1</sup>Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from YHWH's hand  
double for all her sins.**

We will grasp the message of Isaiah 40-55 best if we place ourselves among the exiles in Babylon, join them in the synagogue, and listen to the words of these prophet-preachers sharing with us what they have heard in prayer. They have been told by YHWH to comfort us, to assure us that we are, indeed, his people. Through their prophetic words YHWH is calling us to share the good tidings with others. Back in Jerusalem we heard so many disturbing words, and the terror of the siege, the occupation of the city by the Babylonian army, and the deportation that we experienced proved that those disturbing words were, indeed, from YHWH. When we hear the preacher use the expression 'says your God' we know we are listening to a claim that it is YHWH who is, once again, speaking to us through his prophets.

For thirty, forty, some of us nearly fifty years, we have been struggling to make sense of the disasters that overtook Judah in 597 and again in 586. Many of our parents have died in this godforsaken Babylon, and our children have known nothing but exile. Though living in Babylon, our hearts are in Jerusalem, as is the heart of the preacher. Rumour has come through of a Persian army that is having victory after victory over our hated captors. It is, indeed, comforting to hear the man of God tell us that YHWH has not forgotten us, and that, at last, he wants to speak tenderly to us, and assure us that we are forgiven (see Isaiah 33:24). We are like soldiers who have been engaged in battle, and now, at last, we have served our term. It is time to go home.

Through the repetition of the word 'comfort' (nāḥam), we are being assured that the promise heard in Isaiah 12:1 ('Your anger turned away and you comforted me') is being fulfilled. We will hear it again:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For YHWH has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

– Isaiah 49:13

For YHWH will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places,  
and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of YHWH;  
joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

– Isaiah 51:3

I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die,  
a human being who fades like grass?

– Isaiah 51:12

Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem;  
for YHWH has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

– Isaiah 52:9

Our God comes

<sup>3</sup>**A voice cries out:**

**“In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

<sup>4</sup>**Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.**

We have been thinking of YHWH as being somehow back there in Judah from where we have been exiled. Could it be true that he is going to appear among us, here in this foreign land, victorious over the gods of Babylon? We have seen the locals levelling the road in preparation for the procession of their gods. Now the preacher is telling us that we must make preparations for the coming of our God, YHWH.

In introducing this section we noted that later editors composed Isaiah 35 to help link this material with the words of the prophet Isaiah. Here we have a good example.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people ...  
The redeemed shall walk there and the ransomed of YHWH shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

– Isaiah 35:8-10

They use the same image in their post-exilic writings:

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people;  
build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.  
YHWH has proclaimed to the end of the earth:  
Say to daughter Zion, “See, your salvation comes;  
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”  
They shall be called, “The Holy People, The Redeemed of YHWH”;  
and you shall be called, “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.”

– Isaiah 62:10-12 (also 57:14)

In the New Testament Mark begins his Gospel with John the Baptist quoting 40:3-4 to announce what the preacher here in Isaiah is about to announce: that ‘the glory of YHWH is about to be revealed’. Jesus’ disciples believed that in him God’s word is fully realised.

<sup>5</sup>**Then the glory of YHWH shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of YHWH has spoken.”**

It is too much for us to expect YHWH himself to be revealed. We know that the transcendent God cannot be seen, for God is beyond the created world and cannot be contained within it. Yet we know, too, that our God fills the whole universe. We are being assured that, while we cannot see YHWH, his glory (*kābôd*) will be revealed (see Isaiah 6:3) through what he is going to do among us. Others, too, will see it and marvel at the presence and action of ‘our God’ (40:3). In case this proves too much for us to believe, the preacher adds: ‘the mouth of YHWH has spoken’, once again insisting that he is not speaking for himself, but is moved to speak by God.

**<sup>6</sup>A voice says, "Cry out!"**

*But someone says, "What shall I cry?"*

We are being challenged to share with others this amazing news that YHWH's glory is about to be revealed. But we hesitate. We are not sure we believe it ourselves, and, even if we did, who is going to believe us? When we voice our concern, the preacher responds:

**<sup>6</sup>All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.**

**<sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of YHWH blows upon it.  
[surely the people are grass.]**

**<sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.**

The mission we are being given does not depend on us. We are fragile, it is true; but then so is Babylon. Borrowing an image from the great prophet, Isaiah ben Amoz (see 28:1-6), the preacher assures us that all human power and pretension is no more permanent than the grass or flower in the field. What matters is the will of YHWH. His word, coming to us through his prophets, will not wither or fade. It will 'stand forever'. Three times in this opening oration stress has been laid on the reliability of God's prophetic word. This assurance given here at the beginning is repeated at the end. It is a central theme.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

– Isaiah 55:10-11

Isaiah 40:6-8 is quoted in the New Testament by Peter (see 1Peter 1:24)..

**<sup>9</sup>Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"**

**<sup>10</sup>See, the Lord YHWH comes with might,  
and his strong arm asserts his rule;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.**

Jerusalem – called Zion when the focus is on the city as the seat of the Davidic dynasty and the temple – is being summoned to break the good news (bāšar; LXX euangelizō) to the villages and settlements of Judah that their God has not abandoned them, but is coming in triumph (see 35:4).

## Herald of Good News

They will speak again of ‘heralding good news’(52:7), and the term is picked up in post-exilic Judah.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,  
who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

– Isaiah 52:7

A multitude of camels shall cover you ... bringing gold and frankincense,  
and proclaiming the good news of YHWH.

– Isaiah 60:6

The spirit of the Lord YHWH is upon me, because YHWH has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

– Isaiah 61:1

The good news heralded in Isaiah 40:9 is that YHWH is coming to reward those who have waited in trust to be redeemed (repeated in 62:11). YHWH will redeem his people just as he redeemed their ancestors from Egypt:

Declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it forth to the end of the earth;  
say, “YHWH has redeemed his servant Jacob!”

– Isaiah 48:20

YHWH’s ‘strong arm’ features in the Deuteronomic account of the Exodus:

Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of  
another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an out-  
stretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as YHWH your God did for you in  
Egypt before your very eyes?

– Deuteronomy 4:34

He is coming to assert his rule (see 52:7 above). YHWH is king, not Marduk!

I am YHWH, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.

– Isaiah 43:15

Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, YHWH of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

– Isaiah 44:6

This truth will be celebrated in the liturgy of the Second Temple. This is just one of many connections between this School of prophets and the song-writers responsible for many of the psalms.

YHWH of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

– Psalm 46:7, 11

YHWH is a great God, and a great King above all gods ...

He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

– Psalm 95:3, 7

The idea of a Shepherd-King is traditional (David was a shepherd). It is picked up now.

**<sup>11</sup>He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.**

The Good Shepherd cares for his sheep (see John 10).



Using all their rhetorical skill the prophet-preachers challenge those in exile, and those back in Jerusalem who will receive their prophetic message, to reflect on their faith in YHWH. If YHWH has the power to create the universe, surely he has the power to bring about the redemption that has just been promised.

**<sup>12</sup>Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,  
and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?**

We are reminded of the following from Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?  
On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone  
when the morning stars sang together  
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

– Job 38:4-7

**<sup>13</sup>Who has directed the spirit of YHWH,  
or as his counsellor has instructed him?  
<sup>14</sup>Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,  
and who taught him the path of justice?  
Who taught him knowledge,  
and showed him the way of understanding?**

On the need for humility in acknowledging the limitations of human understanding before the magnificence of God's creation see Job 28:1-28. Verse 13 is quoted by Paul in 1Corinthians 2:16 and Romans 11:34. As noted in introducing this section, the preacher is contrasting YHWH with the Babylonian creator god, Marduk. Marduk needed the counsel of Ea. Not so YHWH. Proverbs reminds us that YHWH created wisdom. He was not counselled by it! Wisdom is speaking:

YHWH created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—  
when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

– Proverbs 8:22-31

What are the nations and their idols?

**<sup>15</sup>Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,  
and are accounted as dust on the scales;  
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.**

**<sup>16</sup>Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,  
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.**

**<sup>17</sup>All the nations are as nothing before him;  
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.**

YHWH took the ‘formless void’ (tōhû wa bōhû, Genesis 1:2) and brought forth the universe. If he can create and rule creation, surely the nations who are accounted by him as ‘less than nothing and emptiness’ (tōhû, 40:17) cannot thwart his will.

**<sup>18</sup>To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him?**

The preacher is challenging the claim made by the Babylonians for their god, Marduk: “none among the gods can equal him” (*Enuma Elish* VII 14). He goes on to satirise the manufacture of idols:

**<sup>19</sup>An idol? —A workman casts it,  
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,  
and casts for it silver chains.**

**<sup>20</sup>As a gift one chooses mulberry wood  
—wood that will not rot—  
then seeks out a skilled artisan  
to set up an image that will not topple.**

This critique recurs throughout this section of the Isaiah scroll. The following verses do not appear to fit in chapter 41 and may be meant to follow on here:

Each one helps the other, saying to one another, “Take courage!”

The artisan encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, “It is good”; and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved.

– Isaiah 41:6-7

We will examine this theme more fully when we come to reflect on Isaiah 44:9-20.

**<sup>21</sup>Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood the foundations of the earth?**

**<sup>22</sup>It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;**

**<sup>23</sup>who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.**

**<sup>24</sup>Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.**

The preacher returns to the question asked in verse eighteen:

**<sup>25</sup>To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.**

The theme recurs:

There is no one besides me; I am YHWH, and there is no other ... They will say:  
“God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him.” ...  
Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

– Isaiah 45:6, 14, 22

Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like me.

– Isaiah 46:9

**<sup>26</sup>Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
Who created these?  
He who brings out their host and numbers them,  
calling them all by name;  
because he is great in strength,  
mighty in power,  
not one is missing.**

The significance of these words is clearer when we recall how important astronomy was in Babylon. The heavenly bodies were considered to be alive. They were composed of the finest element, fire, and were considered gods and worshipped as such (see Deuteronomy 4:19). We are reminded of the fact that they belong to YHWH (he names them), and that they journey through the heavens at his command.

The orator now addresses the kinds of questions people are asking, the kinds of doubts that are arising in their minds because of what they have been through.

**<sup>27</sup>Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from YHWH,  
and my right is disregarded by my God”?**

This is a cry often repeated in the psalms:

How long, YHWH? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?

– Psalm 13:1

Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

– Psalm 44:24

YHWH, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

– Psalm 88:14

Surely the upright will live in your presence!

– Psalm 140:3

Again and again in Isaiah 40-55 Israel is addressed as ‘Jacob’. This must surely call to mind the one who, like his descendants, lived in exile in Mesopotamia, where he reared his family. His name evokes the hope that, like him, they will return to their own land. YHWH is hearing their cry.

Waiting in hope

<sup>28</sup>**Have you not known? Have you not heard?**  
YHWH is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding *cannot be fathomed*.  
<sup>29</sup>**He gives power to the faint,**  
and strengthens the powerless.  
<sup>30</sup>**Even youths will faint and be weary,**  
and the young will fall exhausted;  
<sup>31</sup>**but those who wait for YHWH shall renew their strength,**  
they shall *fly with renewed wings* like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

Waiting in hope is a theme often repeated in the prophecies of Isaiah:

I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob,  
and I will hope in him.

– Isaiah 8:17

It will be said on that day, This is our God;  
we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is YHWH for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

– Isaiah 25:9

In the path of your judgments, YHWH, we wait for you;  
your name and your renown are the soul's desire.

– Isaiah 26:8

YHWH waits to be gracious to you; he will rise up to show mercy to you.  
For YHWH is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

– Isaiah 30:18

YHWH, be gracious to us; we wait for you.  
Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble.

– Isaiah 33:2

\* \* \* \* \*

In language borrowed from the court, the preacher now summons the whole inhabited world to examine the evidence and to draw the right conclusions. Cyrus, the 'victor from the east', is sweeping all before him (see the Introduction page 14). Some god is responsible for 'delivering up nations to him'. Who do they think is organising all this?

<sup>1</sup>**Listen to me in silence, O coastlands;**  
let the peoples renew their strength;  
let them approach, then let them speak;  
let us together draw near for judgment.  
<sup>2</sup>**Who has roused a victor from the east,**  
summoned him to his service?  
He delivers up nations to him,  
and tramples kings under foot.

**<sup>2</sup>He scatters them with his sword like dust,  
like wind-driven stubble with his bow.**  
**<sup>3</sup>He pursues them and passes on safely,  
scarcely touching the path with his feet.**  
**<sup>4</sup>Who has performed and done this?  
The one who summons the generations from the beginning.  
I, YHWH, I am He, the first and the last.**

YHWH himself gives the answer. It is He who is behind Cyrus. YHWH is the first and the last. No time, no place, no person, no event is outside his control. (On this idea see the Introduction, pages 16-17.) The words ‘I am He’ (‘anî hû’; Greek egō eimi) continue to ring out throughout this section:

You are my witnesses, says YHWH, and my servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.  
Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me ...  
I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand;  
I work and who can hinder it? ...  
I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,  
and I will not remember your sins.

– Isaiah 43:10, 13, 25

Even to your old age I am He, even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

– Isaiah 46:4

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called:  
I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.

– Isaiah 48:12

In the New Testament John constantly place the words ‘I am He’ on the lips of Jesus (John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 8:28; 13:9; 18:5). This takes us to the heart of the Christian faith which sees Jesus as the human incarnation of God, God’s Word-made-flesh’ (John 1:14).

**<sup>5</sup>The coastlands have seen and are afraid,  
the ends of the earth tremble.  
They draw near. They are here!**

The preacher concludes by assuring his listeners that the whole world is witnessing what YHWH is doing through Cyrus. Peoples everywhere tremble with fear as they see Cyrus’s army approaching.

The following two verses return to the topic of idol making (see 40:18-20). They may even belong there and have accidentally been misplaced.

**<sup>6</sup>Each one helps the other, saying to one another, “Take courage!”  
<sup>7</sup>The artisan encourages the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the  
hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering,  
“It is good”; and they fasten it with nails so that it cannot be moved.**

**<sup>8</sup>But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;  
<sup>9</sup>you whom I took from the ends of the earth,  
and called from its farthest corners,  
saying to you, "You are my servant,  
I have chosen you and not cast you off."**

For the first time we meet the term 'servant' ('ebed). The authors seem to have picked this term up from the Deuteronomistic School, which coined it to speak of those whom YHWH has chosen for a special mission. The word highlights YHWH as 'lord', and the 'servant', as the one committed to carry out the mission given by his lord. In Isaiah 1-39 Isaiah is described by YHWH as 'my servant' (Isaiah 20:3), as is Eliakim (Isaiah 22:20), and David (37:35). The last text is copied from the Second Book of Kings 20:6, and the other two texts appear to be late texts also influenced by the Deuteronomistic School.

Of special significance for the use of the term here is the fact that the Deuteronomists portray Moses as the model prophet, and that when they speak of Moses' death in the final chapter of Deuteronomy, they speak of him as 'the servant of YHWH' (Deuteronomy 34:5). This is picked up in the opening verse of Joshua, and repeated 16 times throughout the Joshua scroll. Note also the following from the Priestly School when they have YHWH address Aaron and Miriam in a text that highlights the special role of their brother, Moses:

YHWH said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I YHWH make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of YHWH. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

– Numbers 12:6-8

In the account of the crossing of the Red Sea we read:

Israel saw the great work that YHWH did against the Egyptians. So the people feared YHWH and believed in YHWH and in his servant Moses.

– Exodus 14:31

When the Deuteronomistic School speaks of prophecy, it is in close association with the calling and the mission of Moses. They see one of the key functions of the prophet as being to intercede. On one such occasion, when Moses, the model prophet, was interceding for the people, included in his prayer are the words: 'Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' (Deuteronomy 9:27).

Abraham is referred to as YHWH's servant also in Genesis 26:24 and Psalm 105:42. Abraham is called 'friend of God' in 2Chronicles 20:7 and in the New Testament in James 2:23. The connection with Abraham, servant and friend of God is particularly important for our present text in which YHWH is speaking of Israel 'the offspring of Abraham, my friend' as 'my servant'. Israel is being called by YHWH to carry on the prophetic mission entrusted to Abraham, and then to Moses.

YHWH chose Abraham for a special communion with him and a special mission, and called him to leave Mesopotamia ‘for a land that I will show you’. He promised him that ‘in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’ (Genesis 12:1-3). Later he called Jacob to come back to this land from his place of exile. Now Israel, the offspring of Abraham and Jacob, is being called to follow in the footsteps of the patriarchs, for the exiles too are chosen for a special communion with YHWH; they too must leave exile, return home and carry on the mission given to YHWH’s servants, Abraham and Jacob. In this first section of Isaiah 40-55, Israel will be referred to as YHWH’s servant a number of times:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

– Isaiah 42:1

Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send?  
Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of YHWH?

– Isaiah 42:19

You are my witnesses, says YHWH, and my servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.  
Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

– Isaiah 43:10

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!  
Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

– Isaiah 44:1-2

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name, I *entitle* you, though you do not know me.

– Isaiah 45:4

A number of these passages interchange ‘Israel and ‘Jacob’ as does 41:8 (see also 40:27). It is not surprising that those who had been through the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem and the experience of exile would be reluctant to go back, and fear antagonising their Babylonian captors. The text goes on to encourage them not to fear:

**<sup>10</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.**

This, too, is a key theme of this part of the Isaiah scroll:

Thus says YHWH, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ...  
Do not fear, for I am with you.

– Isaiah 43:1, 5

Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen ...  
Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
You are my witnesses!

– Isaiah 44:2, 8

## YHWH as helper and redeemer

Listen to me, you who know righteousness,  
you people who have my teaching in your hearts;  
do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you.

– Isaiah 51:7

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;  
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more.

– Isaiah 54:4

- <sup>11</sup>Yes, all who are incensed against you  
shall be ashamed and disgraced;  
those who strive against you  
shall be as nothing and shall perish.**
- <sup>12</sup>You shall seek those who contend with you,  
but you shall not find them;  
those who war against you  
shall be as nothing at all.**
- <sup>13</sup>For I, YHWH your God,  
hold your right hand;  
it is I who say to you, “Do not fear,  
I am here to help you.”**

Israel has nothing to fear because YHWH, their God is holding them, is there to help them, as he was with Moses (see Exodus 3:12). He is about to do for them what he did for their ancestors who experienced a much greater servitude in Egypt.

I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

– Deuteronomy 5:6

- <sup>14</sup>Do not fear, you worm Jacob,  
you insect Israel!  
I will help you, says YHWH;  
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.**

The people feel weak. The preacher seems to have in mind the metamorphosis from the worm to the butterfly. They are weak, but YHWH is about to change all that. For the first time we hear YHWH described as a ‘redeemer’ (gō’ēl). In tribal Israel, the gō’ēl was a person’s closest relative, whose responsibility it was to buy an Israelite back from slavery, and to see that his land was restored to his kin. In calling YHWH a redeemer, the prophet-preachers are claiming that the all-powerful Creator has taken on the responsibility to free Israel from slavery and to restore the exiles to their land. Not surprisingly in view of the promise to bring the exiles back to the Promised Land, this is another of their key themes.

Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars,  
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.

– Isaiah 43:14



Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, YHWH of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god ...  
Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:  
I am YHWH, who made all things.

– Isaiah 44:6, 24

Our Redeemer—YHWH of hosts is his name— is the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 47:4

Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:  
I am YHWH your God, who teaches you for your own good,  
who leads you in the way you should go.

– Isaiah 48:17

Thus says YHWH, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,  
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers,  
“Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,  
because of YHWH, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”...  
I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,  
and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.  
Then all flesh shall know that I am YHWH your Saviour,  
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

– Isaiah 49:7, 26

For your Maker is your husband, YHWH of hosts is his name;  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called ...  
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says YHWH, your Redeemer.

– Isaiah 54:5, 8

He will come to Zion as Redeemer,  
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says YHWH.

– Isaiah 59:20

You shall suck the milk of nations,  
you shall *be suckled at the breast of royalty*;  
and you shall know that I, YHWH, am your Saviour  
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

– Isaiah 60:16

For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us  
and Israel does not acknowledge us;  
you, YHWH, are our father;  
our Redeemer from of old is your name.

– Isaiah 63:16

**<sup>15</sup>Now, I will make of you a threshing sledge,  
sharp, new, and with teeth;  
you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,  
and you shall make the hills like chaff.**

**<sup>16</sup>You shall winnow them and the wind shall carry them away,  
and the tempest shall scatter them.**

**Then you shall rejoice in YHWH;  
in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.**

On YHWH as ‘the Holy One of Israel’ see the commentary on 43:14 (page 163).

Poor and needy

**<sup>17</sup>When the poor and needy seek water,  
and there is none,  
and their tongue is parched with thirst,  
I YHWH will answer them,  
I the God of Israel will not forsake them.**

The prophet-preacher assures them that YHWH will restore Judah after the terrible devastation brought about by the Babylonian army. YHWH hears the cry of the poor (‘ānî) and needy (‘ebyôn). This is a key theme of the preaching of Isaiah ben Amoz:

YHWH enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:  
It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.  
What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?  
says the Lord YHWH of hosts.

– Isaiah 3:14-15

You turn aside the needy from justice and rob the poor of my people of their right,  
that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

– Isaiah 10:2

The firstborn of the poor will graze, and the needy lie down in safety ...  
YHWH has founded Zion, and the needy among his people will find refuge in her.

– Isaiah 14:30, 32

You have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress.

– Isaiah 25:4

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in YHWH,  
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 29:19

They devise wicked devices to ruin the poor with lying words,  
even when the plea of the needy is right.

– Isaiah 32:7

**<sup>18</sup>I will open rivers on the bare heights,  
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;  
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,  
and the dry land springs of water.  
<sup>19</sup>I will put in the wilderness the cedar,  
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;  
I will set in the desert the cypress,  
the plane and the pine together,  
<sup>20</sup>so that all may see and know,  
all may consider and understand,  
that the hand of YHWH has done this,  
the Holy One of Israel has created it.**

The word ‘create’(bāra’), used only of YHWH, occurs once only in Isaiah (4:5). In the exilic writing of this School (Isaiah 40-55) it occurs thirteen times, and a further three times in the last section of the Isaiah scroll (chapters 56-66).

The prophet-preachers continue to address their fellow exiles. They asks them to imagine YHWH challenging the gods of the foreign nations to come forward and demonstrate that they can foretell the future and control the affairs of the world. They make fun of the gods, who fail the test. As they say in verse 29, these gods are nothing (*'āyin*), their works are inexistent (*'epes*), their images are but a passing wind (*rûaḥ*), and empty chaos (*tōhû*).

**<sup>21</sup>Set forth your case, says YHWH;  
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.**

Once again this is in contrast to Marduk, Babylon's god-king.

**<sup>22</sup>Let them bring them, and tell us  
what is to happen.  
Tell us *things before they happen*,  
so that we may take note,  
and that we may know their outcome;  
or declare to us the things to come.**

**<sup>23</sup>Tell us what is to come hereafter,  
that we may know that you are gods;  
do good, or do harm,  
that we may be afraid and terrified.**

There is heavy sarcasm here. The gods don't know what is going on. All right, then let them work a miracle – anything to show their power!

**<sup>24</sup>You, indeed, are nothing  
and your work is nothing at all;  
whoever chooses you is an abomination.**

**<sup>25</sup>I stirred up one from the north, and he has come,  
from the rising of the sun he was summoned by name.**

Like 41:2, this is a reference to Cyrus.

**He shall trample on rulers as on mortar,  
as the potter treads clay.**

**<sup>26</sup>Who declared it from the beginning, so that we might know,  
and beforehand, so that we might say, "He is right"?  
There was no one who declared it, none who proclaimed,  
none who heard your words.**

**<sup>27</sup>I, *the First*, declared it to Zion,  
and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings.**

Through the prophet-preachers, YHWH is declaring the complete victory of Cyrus and all that will follow upon his victory, including the good tiding for Jerusalem (see 40:9). The gods of Babylon, on the other hand, have nothing to say.

**<sup>28</sup>But when I looked there was no one;  
among these there was no counsellor  
who, when I asked, could give an answer.**

**<sup>29</sup>No, they are all nothing;  
their works are inexistent;  
their images but a passing wind, empty chaos.**

**<sup>1</sup>Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one, in whom my soul delights.**

For the second time (see 41:8-9), Israel is referred to by YHWH as ‘my servant’ (the Septuagint Greek Version has ‘Here is my servant, Israel’), the one whom YHWH has chosen. In 41:8-10, Israel was assured that there was nothing to fear, for YHWH was with them. They would be able to do what they were being summoned to do, not by their own strength, but by the victorious power of YHWH. Here the focus is on the mission that YHWH is confiding to them.

**<sup>1</sup>I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will establish for the nations *an order based on justice.***

**<sup>2</sup>He will not *shout* or raise his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;**

**<sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.  
He will establish *an order based on justice.***

**<sup>4</sup>He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established in the earth *an order based on justice;*  
and the coastlands wait for his law.**

Abraham had been told: ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Genesis 12:3). Now Abraham’s offspring (41:8) is being told that they are to establish for the nations an ‘order based on justice’ (mišpāt), an order based on YHWH’s ‘law’ (tôrâ, 41:4). They will do this, not in the manner of the empires of the day (by violence), but by teaching the world the ways of YHWH.

**<sup>5</sup>Thus says God, YHWH, who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:**

**<sup>6</sup>I, YHWH, have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations, <sup>7</sup>to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.**

**<sup>8</sup>I, YHWH, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.**

**<sup>9</sup>See, the *events predicted* have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.**

It is by being faithful to their covenant with God that Israel will reveal YHWH to the world, and teach the nations how to live. It is this that will enlighten the nations and redeem the world. No other god can do this, only YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, who has chosen Israel as his instrument. They can trust this word for, unlike the gods of the nations, YHWH knows what will happen and has the power to carry out his will.

In the New Testament, Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 as he presents Jesus as the one who faithfully carried out the mission entrusted to Israel (see Matthew 12:18-21). He quotes the opening verse also when, at Jesus' baptism, he states: 'a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I delight"' (Matthew 3:17). Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public mission, which was to reach out to the whole world through his disciples (Matthew 28:19). On Jesus as the 'light to the nations' see Luke 2:30-32. On God's gift of his spirit see Acts 17:25-28.

The 'new things' declared by YHWH (42:9) call for a 'new song' (42:10).

- <sup>10</sup>**Sing to YHWH a new song,  
his praise from the ends of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands and their inhabitants.**
- <sup>11</sup>**Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,  
the villages that Kedar inhabits;  
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,  
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.**
- <sup>12</sup>**Let them give glory to YHWH,  
and declare his praise in the coastlands.**

The inhabitants of the countries bordering the Mediterranean to the west, the Bedouin of Kedar in the Arabian desert to the east, and those from Sela in Edom to the south, are invited to join Judah in a song of praise, thanking YHWH for restoring Judah as his instrument in bringing to the world the good news of salvation (compare Isaiah 24:14-16).

- <sup>13</sup>**YHWH goes forth like a *hero*,  
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;  
he cries out, he shouts aloud,  
he shows himself mighty against his foes.**

The 'new things' declared by YHWH (42:9) involve the defeat of the tyrant Babylon. Hence the following two verses that are echoed in Isaiah 13:9-13.

- <sup>14</sup>**For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labour,  
I will gasp and pant.**
- <sup>15</sup>**I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their herbage;  
I will turn the rivers into islands,  
and dry up the pools.**

The fall of Babylon will open the way for the exiles to return home to restore Judah and to carry on the mission entrusted to them. For many years those in exile and those back home in Jerusalem could see no way out of their situation. The prophet-preachers began by exhorting them to prepare a way because YHWH, their God, was coming to them (see Isaiah 40:1-11). Now they tell them that YHWH has prepared a way for them.

- <sup>16</sup>**I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,  
by paths they have not known I will guide them.**

Could this be true?

**<sup>16</sup>I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will do,  
and I will not forsake them.**

**<sup>17</sup>They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—  
those who trust in carved images,  
who say to cast images,  
“You are our gods.”**

This is yet another assertion of the folly of trusting in carved images. It is a criticism of Babylon, but it is also a warning to the people of Judah, whether in exile or at home, not to compromise their faith, but to place their trust in YHWH alone.

The following passage shows that the prophet-preachers are aware of the fact that what they are promising from YHWH is scarcely believable, especially since (as they and their audience believed) YHWH has shown his anger with them by having their city destroyed and having them banished from the land. What is more, how can they expect the people to listen? They were blind and deaf to God’s prophetic word before. Why should they be expected to see and hear now? The prophet-preachers begin by highlighting the chronic blindness and deafness of the people whom YHWH has chosen as his ‘servant’ to carry out his will in the world.

**<sup>18</sup>Listen, you that are deaf;  
and you that are blind, look up and see!  
<sup>19</sup>Who is as blind as my servant,  
or as deaf as my messenger whom I send?  
Who is as blind as my dedicated one,  
or as blind as the servant of YHWH?  
<sup>20</sup>He sees many things, but does not observe them;  
his ears are open, but he does not hear.**

The preacher now goes on to read the mind of his audience. How can they possibly believe the prophetic word and carry out YHWH’s desire, powerless as they are in a land of exile, especially since they are being punished by YHWH for their sins?

**<sup>21</sup>YHWH *desired to show him as being righteous,  
to demonstrate how great and glorious was his law.*  
<sup>22</sup>But this is a people robbed and plundered,  
all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons;  
they have become a prey with no one to rescue,  
a spoil with no one to say, “Restore!”  
<sup>23</sup>Who among you will give heed to this,  
who will attend and listen *to what is to come?*  
<sup>24</sup>Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler,  
and Israel to the robbers?  
Was it not YHWH, against whom we have sinned,  
in whose ways they would not walk,  
and whose law they would not obey?**

**<sup>25</sup>So he poured upon him the heat of his anger  
and the fury of war;  
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;  
it burned him, but he did not take it to heart.**

**<sup>43:1</sup>But now thus says YHWH,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
<sup>3</sup>For I am YHWH your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.**

It is true that YHWH saw fit to punish Judah, but it was in view of purifying the people. Now, however, ‘she has served her term’ (40:2). YHWH, the lord of creation (see 40:12-31, pages 147-150), and the lord of history, is their redeemer (see 41:14, pages 154-155). The preacher encourages his audience with allusions to Jacob, whom YHWH called back home and to whom he gave the name ‘Israel’ (see Genesis 32:28). They could not listen to these encouraging words without thinking of YHWH’s exhortation to Moses not to be afraid, for he would be with Moses as he leads Israel out of the exile and servitude of Egypt (see Exodus 3:12). Though Cyrus has not yet been named, we have already heard of the ‘victor from the east’ whom YHWH has raised up as his instrument to carry out his designs (see 41:2, 25).

**<sup>3</sup>I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
<sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.**

Judah means so much to YHWH that (as the Isaiah School sees it) He is willing to see Egypt (including Upper Egypt: Ethiopia and Seba) conquered if that is necessary to liberate Judah. (In fact it was not Cyrus but his successor, Cambyses, who conquered Egypt in 525.)

**<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;  
<sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, “Give them up,”  
and to the south, “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth –**

I am He

**<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."**

**<sup>8</sup>Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,  
who are deaf, yet have ears!**

**<sup>9</sup>Let all the nations gather together,  
and let the peoples assemble.**

**Who among them declared this,  
and foretold to us the former things?**

**Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,  
and let them hear and say, "It is true."**

Israel can be blind and deaf, but they can also witness to the nations of the world that YHWH is indeed God. He has proven it by announcing salvation beforehand through the prophetic word and by demonstrating his power to bring about what has been proclaimed, namely, the salvation of Israel, his servant (43:10; see 41:8; 42:1). The so-called 'gods' of the other nations have not been able to match this.

**<sup>10</sup>You are my witnesses, says YHWH,  
and my servant whom I have chosen,  
so that you may know and believe me  
and understand that I am he.**

We have already met the expression 'I am He' ('*a*nî hû'; see 41:4 and commentary page 151). Just as the expression 'ehyeh ('I am' or 'I will be') given in response to Moses (Exodus 3:14) was accompanied by 'ehyey 'immak ('I will be with you', Exodus 3:12), so '*a*nî hû' is accompanied by action that saves (*h*ôšîa'), announced beforehand and accomplished.

**<sup>10</sup>Before me no god was formed,  
nor shall there be any after me.**

The claims of the Babylonians for their god, Marduk, bear no comparison with Israel's claims, or with what YHWH does in history. Marduk belongs to a line of gods. Not so YHWH.

**<sup>11</sup>I, I am YHWH,  
and besides me there is no saviour.**

**<sup>12</sup>I declared and saved and proclaimed,  
when there was no strange god among you;  
and you are my witnesses, says YHWH.**

**<sup>13</sup>I am God, and also henceforth I am He;  
there is no one who can deliver from my hand;  
I work and who can hinder it?**



**<sup>14</sup>Thus says YHWH,  
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:**

On YHWH as 'Redeemer', see 41:14, pages 154-155. YHWH is referred to as 'the Holy of Israel' twelve times in Isaiah 1-39. This is already the fifth time we have met the expression in Isaiah 40-55 (see 41:14, 16, 20 and 43:3), and we will meet it another six times (see 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5 and 55:5). It identifies YHWH as Israel's God while highlighting God's transcendence as lord of creation and lord of history.

**For your sake I will send to Babylon  
and break down all the bars,  
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.**

**<sup>15</sup>I am YHWH, your Holy One,  
the Creator of Israel, your King.**

The prophet-preachers assure them that the sound issuing from the powerful nation that is keeping them as prisoners in Babylon is about to be turned from the triumphant shout of a victor to the lament of a conquered people.

**<sup>16</sup>Thus says YHWH, who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
<sup>17</sup>who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:**

The imminent redemption of the exiles from Babylon, and from all the other places to which they have been exiled, is compared to the redemption of Israel from Egypt (see the Song of Moses, Exodus 15).

**<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.  
<sup>20</sup>The wild animals will honour me,  
the jackals and the ostriches;  
for I give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
<sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.**

Great as was YHWH's action in Egypt, the preacher does not want the people to think of it as an event of the distant past, but rather to focus on what YHWH is about to do for them. God will give them water in the desert, just as he did for their ancestors. Their mission is to reveal to the world who God really is, so that all peoples will raise their voice to YHWH, the true God, in praise (t<sup>e</sup>hillâ, 43:21 - a word that occurs 30 times in the psalms, and is the title given to the Psalm Scroll)

I have chosen you

- 22** Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob;  
but you have been weary of me, O Israel!
- 23** You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings,  
or honoured me with your sacrifices.  
I have not burdened you with offerings,  
or wearied you with frankincense.
- 24** You have not bought me sweet cane with money,  
or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.  
But you have burdened me with your sins;  
you have wearied me with your iniquities.

Because of the strong lobby that forbade sacrificial cult outside the Jerusalem temple, we should probably assume that from the time of the destruction of the temple (586) till its reconstruction after the return from Babylon (516), no sacrifices were offered either in Babylon or back in Jerusalem. The authors of Isaiah 40-55 show little interest in the cult, so it is unlikely that this is a complaint by YHWH of the neglect of proper sacrifices in the period before the temple was destroyed. The point the preacher seems to be making is that it is not failure to offer sacrifices that is the problem (YHWH has not burdened them with the obligation to do this); it is sin (by which they have burdened YHWH). What has wearied YHWH is their failure to abide by the covenant and so their failure to carry out the mission entrusted to them.

- 25** I, I am He  
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,  
and I will not remember your sins.
- 26** Accuse me, let us go to trial;  
set forth your case, so that you may be proved right.
- 27** Your first ancestor sinned,  
and your *leaders* transgressed against me.
- 28** Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary,  
I delivered Jacob to utter destruction,  
and Israel to reviling.

YHWH is bigger than their sin. 'I, I am He' ('ānōkî 'ānōkî hû'). If they examine the evidence they will see that they sinned – it has been so from the beginning. That is why YHWH had to punish them, but He is YHWH, and he forgives. It is because of who YHWH is that things are now going to be different.

- 44:1** But now hear, O Jacob my servant,  
Israel whom I have chosen!
- 2** Thus says YHWH who made you,  
who formed you in the womb and will help you:  
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,  
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

For Jacob as servant see 41:8; 42:1, 19 and 43:10. On the call not to be afraid see 41:10, page 153-154. Jeshurun is used as an affectionate term for Israel in the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:15; also 33:5, 26). It may derive from the root yšr ('to be righteous').

**<sup>3</sup>For I will pour water on the thirsty land,  
and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,  
and my blessing on your offspring.**

The promise to pour out his blessing (b<sup>e</sup>rākâ) takes us back to the initial call of Abraham:

YHWH said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

– Genesis 12:1-3

**<sup>4</sup>They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,  
like willows by flowing streams.  
<sup>5</sup>This one will say, "I am YHWH's,"  
another will be called by the name of Jacob,  
yet another will write on the hand, "YHWH's,"  
and adopt the name of Israel.**

Their ancestors were unfaithful, but their children will be closely attached to YHWH and proud of it. Foreigners will want to belong to Israel to worship their God..

**<sup>6</sup>Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel,  
and his Redeemer, YHWH of hosts:  
I am the first and I am the last;**

We are already familiar with all these titles: for 'King' see 41:21; 43:15; for 'Redeemer' see 41:14 and commentary pages 154-155. For 'first and last' see 41:4, 27; 43:27. Though this is the first time we have met 'YHWH of hosts' (commander of the hosts of heaven) in Isaiah 40-55, we have met it 47 times in Isaiah 1-39, and it will appear another five times in this section (see Isaiah 45:13; 47:4; 48:2; 51:15; 54:5).

**besides me there is no god.**

**<sup>7</sup>Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,  
let them declare and set it forth before me.  
Who has announced from of old the things to come?  
Let them tell us what is yet to be.**

**<sup>8</sup>Do not fear, or be afraid;  
have I not told you from of old and declared it?  
You are my witnesses!  
Is there any god besides me?  
There is no other rock; I know not one.**

There is no god comparable to YHWH, so Israel has nothing to fear (see 41:10 and the commentary, pages 153-154). Once again YHWH challenges the gods of the nations to demonstrate that they can predict the future and have the power to bring about what they predict.

## Polemic against idolatry (44:9-20)

This theme has come up earlier (see 40:19-20; 41:6-7; 42:17). In light of the prohibition in Israel of making any images of YHWH, the exiles must have been shocked by the idols in Babylon. Of course, the Babylonians did not worship the idols (carved or molten images) any more than the Israelites worshipped the cherubim that guarded the ark in the temple, or a Christian worships the image that helps focus attention on Jesus' gift of himself in love on the cross. The idol functioned as a physical reminder of the presence of the deity. The positive value of this polemic is that it heightens awareness of God's transcendence and warns against limiting God to our human images or conceptions (compare Psalm 115:5-8). See the reflections in the Introduction, pages 15-18.

**<sup>9</sup>All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in *serve no purpose. Their devotees are without discernment; they know nothing. And so they will be put to shame.* <sup>10</sup>Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? <sup>11</sup>Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame. <sup>12</sup>The ironsmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. <sup>13</sup>The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. <sup>14</sup>He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. <sup>15</sup>Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. <sup>16</sup>Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" <sup>17</sup>The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!"**

**<sup>18</sup>They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand.**

It is significant that the prophets make the same criticism of the Israelites (see Isaiah 6:9-10). There are many ways of being 'blind', 'deaf' and lacking knowledge or discernment.

**<sup>19</sup>No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" <sup>20</sup>He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?"**

YHWH is inviting his people into an intimate communion (44:21-26)

The danger of images is that instead of helping to engage our senses in a way that directs our heart and mind to be open to the wonder of God, they can become substitutes; they can feed our desire for magic; they can encourage our felt need to be in control. The prophet-preachers have no doubt experienced this among their fellow exiles who were attracted by the communal festive celebrations of the people among whom they were living. They therefore go on to remind them that they are servants of YHWH who has forgiven them and now invites them into an intimacy far beyond anything that they fancy they are seeing in Babylon.

- <sup>21</sup>**Remember these things, O Jacob,  
and Israel, for you are my servant;  
I formed you, you are my servant;  
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.**
- <sup>22</sup>**I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,  
and your sins like mist;  
return to me, for I have redeemed you.**
- <sup>23</sup>**Sing, O heavens, for YHWH has done it;  
shout, O depths of the earth;  
break forth into singing, O mountains,  
O forest, and every tree in it!  
For YHWH has redeemed Jacob,  
and will be glorified in Israel.**
- <sup>24</sup>**Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer,  
who formed you in the womb:  
I am YHWH, who made all things,  
who alone stretched out the heavens,  
who by myself spread out the earth;**
- <sup>25</sup>**who frustrates the omens of liars,  
and makes fools of diviners;  
who overturns the wise,  
reducing to folly their knowledge;**
- <sup>26</sup>**who confirms the word of his servant,  
and fulfills the prediction of his messengers.**

The Babylonians attempted to know and exercise control over the future by all kinds of means. YHWH, who alone created the universe, sees to it that none of these attempts succeed. Those who claim to be able to predict and influence the future are charlatans and fools (see already 41:21-29, 44:7).

The ‘servant’ whose word YHWH confirms is the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz who predicted an end to the punishment. It is this word that YHWH’s ‘messengers’, are now conveying to the people, for YHWH has chosen the people to carry this prophetic word to Jerusalem and to the world. They are to be YHWH’s servant, his messengers and witnesses (see 42:1; 43:10; 44:8).

YHWH's predictions made through his chosen messengers

1. Prediction concerning Jerusalem and Judah

**<sup>26</sup>Of Jerusalem he says, "It shall be inhabited,"  
and of the cities of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt,  
and I will raise up their ruins".**

2. Prediction concerning the fall of Babylon, described in terms of YHWH's defeat of the primeval 'deep' (šûlâ): the waters of chaos, and the waters of the Red Sea (see Exodus 15:5).

**<sup>27</sup>To the deep he says, "Be dry – I will dry up your rivers";**

3. Prediction concerning Cyrus, YHWH's 'anointed' (māšîaḥ, 45:1), the shepherd-king (rā'â, 44:28) who will carry out YHWH's design (see 41:2, 25).

**<sup>28</sup>Of Cyrus he says, "He is my shepherd,  
and he shall carry out all my purpose";  
[and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt,"  
and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."]**

The second part of verse 28 appears to be a post-exilic addition. Isaiah 40-55 does not focus on the temple.

**<sup>1</sup>Thus says YHWH to his anointed, to Cyrus,  
whose right hand I have grasped  
to subdue nations before him  
and strip kings of their robes,  
to open doors before him—  
and the gates shall not be closed:**

**<sup>2</sup>I will go before you  
and level the mountains,  
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze  
and cut through the bars of iron,**

**<sup>3</sup>I will give you the treasures of darkness  
and riches hidden in secret places,  
so that you may know that it is I, YHWH,  
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.**

**<sup>4</sup>For the sake of my servant Jacob,  
and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name,  
I give you your title, though you do not know me.**

**<sup>5</sup>I am YHWH, and there is no other;  
besides me there is no god.  
I gird you with strength, though you do not know me,**

**<sup>6</sup>so that they may know, from the rising of the sun to its setting,  
that there is no one besides me;  
I am YHWH, and there is no other.**

The Persian record claims that Marduk chose Cyrus to capture Babylon. Not so, says the preacher. It is YHWH who chose him 'for the sake of Israel'.

**<sup>7</sup>I form light and create darkness,  
I make *well-being* and create woe;  
I YHWH do all these things.**

This extraordinary (and in the Bible, unique) statement stresses the all-embracing nature of YHWH's power. But it breaks the careful theological balance found in other texts, in which darkness and sin are not created by Yahweh, though they are not independent of God's lordship.

The prophet-preachers know that what the world needs most is that people recognise that YHWH is the only real God and that people learn to do God's will. What the world needs is 'righteousness' (šedeq; š'dāqâ). They burst into prayer, ending with an assurance that the prayer is being answered.

**<sup>8</sup>Drop down dew, O heavens, from above,  
and let the skies rain down righteousness;  
let the earth open, that salvation may spring up,  
and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also;  
I YHWH have created it.**

They experienced resistance to their claim that YHWH would choose a foreign king to be his anointed instrument. Here they make the point that God is free to do whatever God chooses. Who are we to question his choice?

**<sup>9</sup>Should one take issue with one's Maker,  
earthen vessels with the potter!  
Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making?"  
or his handiwork "You have no skill"?**

The image of God as a potter (yōšēr) and us as clay is found also in Isaiah 29:16, Jeremiah 18:1-6 (and in the Newer Testament in Romans 9:20-21).

**<sup>10</sup>Should one say to a father, "What are you begetting?"  
or to a woman, "With what are you in labour?"**

**<sup>11</sup>Thus says YHWH,  
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:  
Will you question me about my children,  
or command me concerning the work of my hands?**

**<sup>12</sup>I made the earth,  
and created humankind upon it;  
it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,  
and I commanded all their host.**

**<sup>13</sup>I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness,  
and I will make all his paths straight;  
he shall build my city  
and set my exiles free,  
not for *payment* or reward,  
says YHWH of hosts.**

YHWH of hosts commands the heavenly armies. Why would they question his decision to command an earthly army, even if it be a foreign one?

<sup>14</sup>Thus says YHWH:

**The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,  
and the Sabeans, tall of stature,  
shall come over to you and be yours,  
they shall follow you;  
they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.  
They will make supplication to you, saying,  
“God is with you alone, and there is no other;  
there is no god besides him.”**

YHWH has assured the exiles that he is going to liberate them through Cyrus. He goes on to say that not only will Jerusalem be free, but it will prosper through the trade that comes from Egypt (compare Isaiah 2:2-4 and 66:18-23). Egyptians, who, like the people of Judah, were once slaves of Babylon, will express their gratitude to Israel's God for their liberation, and acknowledge YHWH as the only real God (compare Zechariah 14:16).

<sup>15</sup>Truly, you are a God who hides himself,  
O God of Israel, the Saviour.

<sup>16</sup>All of them are put to shame and confounded,  
the makers of idols go in confusion together.

<sup>17</sup>But Israel is saved by YHWH  
with everlasting salvation;  
you shall not be put to shame or confounded  
to all eternity.

YHWH's decisions (including the decision to use Cyrus) are, indeed, mysterious, but this should not come as a surprise, for the prophet-preachers are speaking of YHWH, not one of the useless gods of the surrounding nations. As Isaiah himself said: they must learn to trust this mysterious God:

I will wait for YHWH, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him.

– Isaiah 8:17

<sup>18</sup>For thus says YHWH, who created the heavens (he is God!),  
who formed the earth and made it (he established it;  
he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!):  
'I am YHWH, and there is no other.

<sup>19</sup>I did not speak in secret,  
in a land of darkness;  
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,  
“Seek me in chaos.”  
I YHWH speak the truth,  
I declare what is right.'

YHWH is mysterious, but he does not act in a random way. He is a God of order. He always acts according to his nature, and his word stands. They can trust it, for it is the word of the one who brought order out of chaos, the lord of creation and the lord of history.



The New Testament, too, acknowledges that we cannot comprehend God's ways:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

– Romans 11:33

It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

– 1 Timothy 6:16

**<sup>20</sup>Assemble yourselves and come together,  
draw near, you survivors of the nations!  
They have no knowledge—  
those who carry about their wooden idols,  
and keep on praying to a god  
that cannot save.**

**<sup>21</sup>Declare and present your case;  
let them take counsel together!  
Who told this long ago?  
Who declared it of old?  
Was it not I, YHWH?  
There is no other god besides me,  
a righteous God and a Saviour;  
there is no one besides me.**

The 'survivors of the nations' who are being invited to assemble are all those who have survived the various military campaigns and deportations and are, as yet, unable to return to their land. Those responsible for Isaiah 40-55 want to assure them, once again, that their God, YHWH, is a Saviour. Once again they use successful prediction as a decisive criterion by which to eliminate the pagan 'gods' from divine status, and to recognise YHWH as the only true God. It is this successful prediction that shows that YHWH is the lord of history. They can put their hope in him. The fact that YHWH is the creator of the whole universe and of every nation makes him the lord of history. He has universal jurisdiction and dominion, and proceeds to declare that salvation is offered to everyone.

**<sup>22</sup>Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.**

There is a link here with texts that speak of Israel as YHWH's servant, with a mission to reveal YHWH to the world (see 41:8; 42:1-7). Compare also Isaiah 2:2-4 and 19:24-25.

**<sup>23</sup>By myself I have sworn,  
from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness  
a word that shall not return:  
"To me every knee shall bend,  
every tongue shall swear."**

This is quoted by Paul in Romans 14:11. See also Philippians 2:9-11.

Dominion belongs to YHWH, and he rules over the nations.

– Psalm 22:28

## The helpless gods of Babylon

When through Israel the nations come to recognise YHWH as lord, they will see how worthless are the gods they now worship.

YHWH, to you shall the nations come  
from the ends of the earth and say:  
Our ancestors have inherited nothing but lies,  
worthless things in which there is no profit.

– Jeremiah 16:19

**<sup>24</sup>Only in YHWH, it shall be said of me,  
are righteousness and strength;  
all who were incensed against him  
shall come to him and be ashamed.**  
**<sup>25</sup>In YHWH all the offspring of Israel  
shall triumph and glory.**

The Babylonian gods are packed off to exile (46:1-7)

To reinforce the message that YHWH is seeing to the defeat and humiliation of Babylon, the prophet-preachers paint a picture of the helpless Babylonian gods being packed up and trundled off into exile.

**<sup>46:1</sup>Bel bows down, Nebo stoops,  
their idols are loaded onto animals, beasts of burden;  
these things you *once bore aloft*  
are a load for weary animals.**  
**<sup>2</sup>They stoop, they bow down together;  
they cannot *rescue the load*,  
but themselves go into captivity.**

‘Bel’, meaning ‘lord’ (compare the Canaanite Ba‘al), is an honorific title for Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians. In the Babylonian hierarchy of gods, ‘Nebo’ is his son (three of the Babylonian kings, including Nebuchadrezzar, are named after him). Instead of the gods saving the Babylonians, the Babylonians are trying to save their gods, but to no avail. In stark contrast, YHWH is the one who has been bearing Israel, and will continue to carry them and save them. There is no comparison between the gods of Babylon and YHWH, the God of Israel who alone can say: ‘I am He’ (46:4; see 41:4).

**<sup>3</sup>Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb;**  
**<sup>4</sup>even to your old age I am He,  
even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save.**  
**<sup>5</sup>To whom will you liken me and make me equal,  
and compare me, as though we were alike?**

The prophet-preachers go on to mock, once again, the man-made ‘gods’ (see 40:19-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20). The Babylonian gods need saving, they cannot save (compare 45:20).

**<sup>6</sup>Those who lavish gold from the purse,  
and weigh out silver in the scales—  
they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god;  
then they fall down and worship!**  
**<sup>7</sup>They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it,  
they set it in its place, and it stands there;  
it cannot move from its place.**  
**If one cries out to it, it does not answer  
or save anyone from trouble.**

From the following passage we gather that the message of this exilic School is meeting resistance from those who cannot bring themselves to believe that they are speaking for YHWH. In their strongest terms yet they speaks of the people as ‘rebellious’, like their ancestors (see 43:27; also 1:2,28).

**<sup>8</sup>Remember this and consider,  
come to your senses, rebellious people,  
<sup>9</sup>remember the former things of old;**

YHWH has saved them before. Why do they doubt that he will save them this time?

**for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like me,  
<sup>10</sup>declaring the *outcome* from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done,  
saying, “My purpose shall stand,  
and I will fulfill my intention,”**  
**<sup>11</sup>calling a bird of prey from the east,  
the man for my purpose from a far country.**

Cyrus had an eagle on his emblem.

**<sup>11</sup>I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;  
I have planned, and I will do it.**  
**<sup>12</sup>Listen to me, you stubborn of heart,  
you who are far from deliverance:**  
**<sup>13</sup>I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off,  
and my salvation will not tarry;  
I will put salvation in Zion,  
for Israel my glory.**

The words ‘far from deliverance’, do not fit well the message conveyed in these chapters. Verses 11-13 appear to have been added after the return from exile. It is people’s sin, especially their lack of faith, that is the reason for delay in deliverance. YHWH is always prompt to save. Israel is YHWH’s glory in the sense that it is through Israel that the peoples will see YHWH revealed and be drawn to praise YHWH and to open themselves to welcome his liberating grace.

## The fall of Babylon

The prophet-preachers support their predictions with a taunting of Babylon, who, as they have asserted, is about to be vanquished by YHWH's instrument. They have already spoken of the impermanence of human power (see 40:6-8). They have already said that Cyrus will capture Babylon (see 43:14; 45:2-3; 46:11). They have already mocked the futile Babylonian superstitions (see 44:25; 46:1-2, 5-7).

**<sup>1</sup>Come down and sit in the dust,  
virgin daughter Babylon!  
Sit on the ground without a throne,  
daughter Chaldea!  
For you shall no more be called  
tender and delicate.**

**<sup>2</sup>Take the millstones and grind meal,  
remove your veil,  
strip off your robe, uncover your *thighs*,  
pass through the rivers.**

**<sup>3</sup>Your nakedness shall be uncovered,  
and your shame shall be seen.**

The neo-Babylonian Empire (626-539) was founded by the Chaldeans of southern Mesopotamia. Babylon is called a 'virgin' because she cannot give life, since her male gods are nowhere to be found. Babylon fancies herself as a 'tender and delicate' queen, but she will sit in the dust as a slave, and be treated as women of a vanquished city are treated.

**I will take vengeance,  
and no one *will intervene*.**

**<sup>4</sup>Our Redeemer—YHWH of hosts is his name—  
is the Holy One of Israel.**

On YHWH as 'redeemer' see 41:14, pages 154-155. On 'YHWH of hosts' see 6:3, page 50. On YHWH as 'the Holy One of Israel' see 43:14 page 163.

**<sup>5</sup>Sit in silence, and go into darkness,  
daughter Chaldea!  
For you shall no more be called  
the mistress of kingdoms.**

**<sup>6</sup>I was angry with my people,  
I profaned my heritage;  
I gave them into your hand,  
you showed them no mercy;  
on the aged you made your yoke  
exceedingly heavy.**

**<sup>7</sup>You said, "I shall be mistress forever,"  
so that you did not lay these things to heart  
or bear in mind their outcome.**

YHWH used Babylon to punish Judah and to bring about a change of behaviour in his people, but Babylon is responsible for its behaviour. It is Babylon's turn to be punished.

**<sup>8</sup>Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,  
 who sit securely,  
 who say in your heart,  
 "I am, and there is no one besides me;**

The word translated 'pleasures' is 'ēden (as in the garden of Eden, Genesis 2:8). It is associated with sexual pleasure (see Genesis 18:12), with enjoyment of food (see Jeremiah 51:34), and with wearing luxury clothing (see 2Samuel 1:24). The claim 'I am, and there is no one besides me', repeated in verse ten and made of Marduk in the New Year liturgy, can be made only by YHWH (see 45:5-6, 18, 22; 46:9).

**I shall not sit as a widow  
 or know the loss of children"—  
<sup>9</sup>both these things shall come upon you  
 in a moment, in one day:  
 the loss of children and widowhood  
 shall come upon you in full measure,  
 in spite of your many *incantations*  
 and the great power of your *spells*.**

We have already been told that Jerusalem will no longer be a widow (see 49:20-23), for she will experience again the love of her God. She will no longer be without children (see 54:1-8), for the exiles will return home. She will no longer lie unprotected (see 50:1). This is soon to be the lot of Babylon, though she is so sure it will never happen to her. Incantations (k<sup>š</sup>āpîm) and magical spells (ḥ<sup>a</sup>bārîm) were a common part of the religious practice of the ancient world. They were forbidden in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) – which in itself is a sign that they were practised. It is not easy for human beings to resist the desire to know and exercise some influence on the future.

**<sup>10</sup>You felt secure in your wickedness;  
 you said, "No one sees me."  
 Your wisdom and your knowledge  
 led you astray,  
 and you said in your heart,  
 "I am, and there is no one besides me."**

**<sup>11</sup>But evil shall come upon you,  
 which you cannot charm away;  
 ruin shall fall upon you,  
 which you will not be able to ward off;  
 and disaster shall come on you suddenly,  
 when you least expect it.**

The word translated 'disaster' (šô'â; also Psalm 35:8) has been used in recent times for the holocaust of the 1940's.

## Folly of superstitious practices

The prophet-preachers go on to scoff at what they see as the futility of Babylon's superstitious practices, which for them include the burgeoning astronomy (though this was to prove one of Babylon's lasting gifts to the scientific world).

<sup>12</sup>**Stand fast in your *incantations*  
and your many *spells*,  
with which you have laboured from your youth;  
perhaps you may be able to succeed,  
perhaps you may inspire terror.**

<sup>13</sup>**You are wearied with your many consultations;  
let those who study the heavens  
stand up and save you,  
those who gaze at the stars,  
and at each new moon predict  
what shall befall you.**

<sup>14</sup>**See, they are like stubble,  
the fire consumes them;  
they cannot deliver themselves  
from the power of the flame.  
No coal for warming oneself is this,  
no fire to sit before!**

<sup>15</sup>**Such to you are those with whom you have laboured,  
who have trafficked with you from your youth;  
they all wander about in their own paths;  
there is no one to save you.**

As in 46:8-13, the prophet-preachers are reacting against those in the community who are not accepting their prophecy. Though the people claim to ‘invoke the God of Israel’, they do not do so ‘in truth or right’ for when the God of Israel speaks to them they do not accept his word.

**<sup>1</sup>Hear this, O house of Jacob,  
 who are called by the name of Israel,  
 and who came forth from the loins of Judah;  
 who swear by the name of YHWH,  
 and invoke the God of Israel,  
 but not in truth or right.  
<sup>2</sup>For they call themselves after the holy city,  
 and lean on the God of Israel;  
 YHWH of hosts is his name.**

Note the expression ‘the holy city’ (‘*ir haqqodeš*’), which is found only here and in 52:1.

**<sup>3</sup>I declared long ago *what would happen*;  
 it came forth from my mouth and I made it known;  
 then suddenly I did it and it came to pass;  
<sup>4</sup>for I knew that you are obstinate,  
 and your neck is an iron sinew  
 and your forehead brass,  
<sup>5</sup>so I declared it to you a long time ago;  
 before it came to pass I announced it to you,  
 so that you would not say, “My idol did it,  
 my carved image and my cast image ordained it.”  
<sup>6</sup>You have heard; now see all this;  
 and will you not declare it?**

They have accused the community before of having a weak faith (see 40:27-30), of being unfaithful (42:18-25; 43:25-28), of being sceptical of the possibility of YHWH choosing Cyrus (see 45:9-13), even of being ‘rebellious’ (46:8). Here they go further, accusing them of being caught up the idolatry surrounding them. Also new is the idea that new prophecy was necessitated by Israel’s obduracy. The language of verse four is Deuteronomic (see Deuteronomy 9:6, 13; 31:27; see also Ezekiel 3:7-8). According to Childs (*Isaiah*, John Knox Press, 2001, page 373) Isaiah 48 witnesses to ‘the concern of its editors to reinterpret the prophetic text in the light of a deeper grasp of God’s purpose revealed in history’.

**<sup>6</sup>From this time forward I make you hear new things,  
 hidden things that you have not known.  
<sup>7</sup>They are created now, not long ago;  
 before today you have never heard of them,  
 so that you could not say, “I already knew them.”  
<sup>8</sup>You have never heard, you have never known,  
 from of old your ear has not been opened.  
 For I knew that you would deal very treacherously,  
 and that from birth you were called a rebel.**

<sup>9</sup>**For my name's sake I defer my anger,  
for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you,  
so that I may not cut you off.**

<sup>10</sup>**See, I have refined you, but not like silver;  
I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.**

<sup>11</sup>**For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,  
for why should my name be profaned?  
My glory I will not give to another.**

YHWH wants to be known, for people can experience true life only through communion with him – not by worshiping man-made gods in a cult that keeps people locked in the pursuit of their own need for security and control. He must punish his chosen instrument, Israel, but only to purify them that they may not lose their way and fail in the mission that he has entrusted to them to make his glory known. Some of the language in verses nine to eleven has parallels in Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 36:21-22 and 22:17-22).

<sup>12</sup>**Listen to me, O Jacob,  
and Israel, whom I called:  
I am He; I am the first,  
and I am the last.**

<sup>13</sup>**My hand laid the foundation of the earth,  
and my right hand spread out the heavens;  
when I summoned them,  
*at once they existed.***

In these closing verses of this first section of the exilic writings of this School of prophets we hear again of the incomparable, unique, YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history. On the expression 'I am He' (48:12) see 41:4.

<sup>14</sup>**Assemble, all of you, and hear!  
Who among them has declared these things?  
*The one YHWH loves shall perform his purpose on Babylon,  
and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans.***

<sup>15</sup>**I, even I, have spoken and called him,  
I have brought him *thus far; his mission will succeed.***

<sup>16</sup>**Draw near to me, hear this!  
From the beginning I have not spoken in secret,  
from the time it came to be I have been there.**

Once again, they assert that YHWH has chosen to liberate his people through Cyrus. We are told that 'YHWH loves him' (48:14, 'āhab); that is to say that YHWH has chosen him as his instrument and will faithfully see that the mission entrusted to him will succeed.



**16And now the Lord YHWH has sent me and his spirit.**

This is a rare example of the members of the School breaking across the words given them by YHWH to speak, and asserting their role as the ones whom YHWH has chosen to speak to the people. They see themselves as speaking through the gift and power of the spirit of God that has been given them. They are claiming that their words are inspired.

It is this claim that encouraged those responsible for Isaiah 56-66 to insert the following lament, for in fact, for the most part, those whom these exilic prophets were addressing did not listen. It is this repeated failure to listen to YHWH's servants, the prophets, that holds Israel back from enjoying the blessings that YHWH wants to shower upon them – the blessing promised from the beginning to Abraham and the patriarchs. As Blenkinsopp says of verses 17-19 in his *Isaiah 40-55* page 295:

The situation generating this kind of language is no longer that of the high expectations and euphoria preceding the fall of Babylon but the struggling for survival in Judah of the early Achaemenid [Persian] period.

**17Thus says YHWH,**

**your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:**

**I am YHWH your God,**

**who teaches you for your own good,**

**who leads you in the way you should go.**

**18O that you had paid attention to my commandments!**

**Then your prosperity would have been like a river,**

**and your success like the waves of the sea;**

**19your offspring would have been like the sand,**

**and your descendants like its grains;**

**their name would never be cut off**

**or destroyed from before me.**

The following verses round off the whole of chapters 40-48. It is a final plea for the exiles to trust that YHWH, who led their ancestors out of Egypt and cared for them during their desert journey to the Promised Land, will be with them as they leave Babylon and dare the journey back to rebuild Judah and Jerusalem. It would appear that most opted to stay, preferring the kind of prosperity they had built for themselves in Babylon to the risks of the journey and the task of putting down roots and struggling to make something of devastated Judah.

**20Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,**

**declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,**

**send it forth to the end of the earth;**

**say, "YHWH has redeemed his servant Jacob!"**

**21They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;**

**he made water flow for them from the rock;**

**he split open the rock and the water gushed out.**

Peace is YHWH's gift, but only those who put their trust in him can experience it.

**22"There is no peace," says YHWH, "for the wicked."**