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THE KING IS COMING: THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF ISAIAH 40:1–5 IN LIGHT OF THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 40

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All four Gospel writers cite Isa 40:3 as fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isa 40:3).[1] In order to better understand the implications of this fulfillment, it is important to know the context and intended implications of the Isaiah passage itself. After discussing the composition and authorship of Isaiah, this paper will exegete Isa 40:1–5 in light of its historical, literary, and canonical contexts before applying this exegesis to the NT use of Isa 40:3. We will conclude that the Gospel writers cited Isa 40:3 not so much to make a statement about John the Baptist but to identify Jesus as the coming divine King prophesied by Isaiah.

Composition of Isaiah

For most of church history, Christian theologians and biblical interpreters have agreed that the book of Isaiah contains the prophetic utterances of a single prophet—Isaiah son of Amoz, living in eighth century Jerusalem. Recently, however, due especially to the teaching and writing of Bernhard Duhm, scholars have come to an almost complete consensus that the book of Isaiah is a multifaceted work that must be attributed to prophetic voices of at least three different eras and that was finally unified in the sixth or fifth century BC by a particularly erudite editor who drew all the material together to form a unified whole.

This consensus has been formed on the basis of entirely internal evidence, without support from any manuscript evidence to show that the book of Isaiah ever existed in anything but its current form. Nevertheless, that internal evidence does tend to sound convincing even to evangelical ears.[2] The position one takes on the authorship of Isaiah also may significantly affect

[1] All Scripture citations are from the ESV, unless otherwise noted.
[2] For example, Kenton Sparks, with an evangelical audience in mind, argues that no one can read the Bible "seriously" and "soberly" without seeing that much of Isaiah is not written by the eighth century Isaiah son of Amoz. Richard L. Schultz, "Isaiah, Isaiahs, and Current Scholarship," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A*

one's interpretation and view of the book. It would be wise, therefore, to give due consideration to the usually cited evidence.

A Cacophony of Contexts

One reason for this assumption of multiple authors is that the book of Isaiah seems to deal with multiple historical contexts. The predominant tone of judgment in chapters 1–39 fits with Isaiah's historical context, in which the prophet's primary role was to warn the people of a coming exile and call the people to repentance. Chapters 40–55, however, with their predominant tone of comfort to exiles, seem to better fit the historical context of the Babylonian exile (586 BC). Chapters 56–66, with their predominant tone of final redemption and victory for God's people, sound like a message most fitting for the postexilic community that looked forward to the final restoration promised by the prophets.[3] Moreover, when Cyrus is mentioned in Isa 44 and 45, it sounds like he is already on the scene.

These contextual concerns, however, do not necessarily mean three different prophets from three different time periods must have been responsible for the book of Isaiah. Prophecy often sounds present tense even when it is speaking of a future event. A prime example of this is Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given." Concerning the apparent discrepancies in historical context between the three sections of Isaiah, we will see below that, due to the nature of biblical prophecy, there is no need to deny these shifts in emphasis in order to affirm single

Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture, edited by James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012): 254. For examples of recent evangelical views of Isaiah as composed by multiple authors, see Richard L. Schultz, "How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter? Prophetic Inspiration in Recent Evangelical Scholarship," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, edited by Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 155–58.

[3] Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 249, 253. Christopher Seitz, however, points out that the shift between geographical and chronological contexts is not clear cut in Isaiah. Christopher R. Seitz, "Isaiah 1–66: Making Sense of the Whole," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1988), 112–16.

authorship.[4] Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite these definite shifts in tone, the book itself is remarkably unified, as even many critical scholars have begun to recognize.[5]

Rhetoric and Vocabulary

Related to the issue of different historical contexts is the argument that the differences in rhetoric and vocabulary between the three major sections of Isaiah reflect at least three different writers. There are many answers to this argument. One response here will suffice. The assumption of this argument is "that a prophet/editor would not use the same concept or theme in more than one way (e.g., both literally and figuratively)" and "that a prophet would not reuse, allude to, or elaborate upon his own (earlier) oracles (i.e., that any such action must be the work of another)."[6] However, this can easily be attributed to the different focuses of the messages. If a message has a different overall tone, that will entail a difference in vocabulary and rhetoric. Also, Isaiah, like anyone, surely would not have spoken or written exactly the same way across his entire 40-plus year ministry, just as a preacher usually does not use quite the same rhetoric and vocabulary at 70 as they do at 30.

The Devil's in the Details

Perhaps the most commonly cited reason for rejecting single authorship of Isaiah has to do with the detailed future predictions that come in "Deutero-Isaiah" (Isa 40–55). The most important example of this is the mention of Cyrus king of Persia by name (Isa 44:28; 45:1). If Isaiah son of Amoz prophesied this in the eighth or early seventh century BC, then he named a king who would

[4] R. Reed Lessing is one scholar who holds to this position. See Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011), 20.
[5] Schultz, "How Many Isaiahs?" 153–54.
[6] Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 256.

not come into play for at least another 150 years. The specificity of this prediction poses a problem to the single authorship view because, it is argued, there do not seem to be many biblical parallels to such a specific prediction of events that are so far (150–200 years) away. Critical scholars say these prophecies were written down contemporaneous with the events they depict but *as if* they were first spoken some time earlier for rhetorical effect, an idea known as *vaticinium ex eventu*.[7]

Another issue is that such specificity does not seem to be relevant to the original audience, since, for example, none of the eighth or early seventh century Judahites would be exiled in their lifetime, let alone be looking for a savior named Cyrus to free them from that exile.[8] This view does not necessarily assume that God *cannot* predict the future with great specificity, but it does assume that He *would not* do so, since the prophecy would not mean anything to the original audience.[9] In other words, "A prophet would not proclaim anything that was not clearly relevant and perspicuous for his contemporaries (i.e., that any such texts must be dated to a later date when they would be pertinent and clear)."[10]

Are these assumptions true, though? Does the Bible always speak generally rather than specifically when talking about the distant future? Does the view that God would never reveal something through a prophet that is unintelligible to its original audience accord with the biblical witness? Does the *vaticinium ex eventu* argument impact one's theological understanding of Isaiah? These questions may be answered from three angles.

First, it is true that many prophecies of the distant future in the Bible tend to be general in nature. For example, the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 that "he shall bruise your head, and you shall

[7] G. K. Beale, "A Specific Problem Confronting the Authority of the Bible: Should the New Testament's Claim That the Prophet Isaiah Wrote the Whole Book of Isaiah Be Taken at Face Value?" in *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 147.
[8] Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 250.
[9] Many proponents of multiple authorship of Isaiah, such as John Halsey Wood, have been eager to make this important distinction. See Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 244.
[10] Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 256.

bruise his heel" does not give details as to how this prophecy will be fulfilled, but simply that a descendant of the woman will put the serpent to death at some point in the future. However, this general nature of far future prophecies does not apply in every case. There are in fact many biblical parallels to the specificity of the Isa 44 prophecy about Cyrus, even within Isaiah itself.[11]

Isaiah 1–39 prophesies not only the coming exile of Judah by Babylon (e.g., 39:5–7), but also the destruction of Babylon (e.g., 13:1–14:23) by the Medes (13:7; 21:2), and the deliverance of Judah from Babylonian captivity (14:1–23).[12] The most compelling instances of specific far-future predictions in Isaiah, however, come in the messianic prophecies.

> But he was pierced for our transgressions;
> he was crushed for our iniquities;
> upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
> and with his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:5)
>
> And they made his grave with the wicked
> And with a rich man in his death,
> Although he had done no violence,
> And there was no deceit in his mouth. (Isa 53:9)
>
> He was numbered with transgressors;
> Yet he bore the sin of many,
> And makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa 53:12b)

The New Testament writers' free application of these verses (and many others in Isa 52:13–53:12) to Jesus show that they assumed that Isaiah (including the prophecies of Isa 40–66) made specific long-range predictions about the Messiah.[13] The specific predictions about Cyrus and other events

[11] An example of such a prophecy outside of Isaiah is Genesis 15:13–16, in which the Lord tells Abraham beforehand that his descendants will be enslaved for 400 years by another nation, but then will be rescued through God's judgment on that people and be brought back to the Promised Land. The Lord not only tells Abraham the duration of this enslavement (v. 13) well over 100 years before it begins, but He even tells Abraham of the "great possessions" his descendants will take with them when they are rescued (v. 14) well over 500 years before the Exodus.

[12] Beale, "A Specific Problem," 147–50.

[13] Beale, "A Specific Problem," 153.

of the Babylonian exile do not, therefore, rule out a late-eighth or early-seventh century dating of Isa 40–66.

Second, the assumption that God would not make known far-future events in specificity goes against the Bible's own witness about the nature of prophecy and the theological purpose of Isa 40–48. Deuteronomy 13 and 18 lay down two basic rules for how to distinguish a true from a false prophet. A true prophet will be known, because 1) they speak in the name of the LORD (Deut 13:1–3; 18:20), and 2) all of their predictions of the future come true (Deut 18:21–22). For this reason, biblical prophets often give specific near-future predictions that can be verified by their hearers so that the people will know that they are legitimate prophets and can be trusted in their far-future predictions.[14] For example, when Hananiah opposes Jeremiah, claiming that the exile will end within two years instead of Jeremiah's predicted 70 years, Jeremiah proves himself the true prophet by predicting that within *one* year Hananiah will die. And, of course, Hananiah dies (Jer 28).[15] Since many of Isaiah's prophecies clearly involved an eschatological dimension, it is conceivable that one reason God gave such a specific prophecy as the name of Cyrus through Isaiah was so that his predictions of the full restoration after the exile would be seen as all the more trustworthy.

Likewise, the theological purpose of Isa 40–48 precludes the possibility that these prophecies could have been written *vaticinium ex eventu* without completely undermining its own claims about God.[16] These chapters include a long polemic against idols, mocking the idols of the nations precisely because they are unable to make accurate predictions of the future like the Lord

[14] Peter J. Gentry, *How to Read & Understand the Biblical Prophets* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 74.
[15] Because of this principle, it is common for Isaiah to "place his predictions concerning the near future next to his predictions of the distant future so that when the more immediate predictions came to pass, his hearers would be encouraged or instructed by his predictions concerning the distant future." Gentry, *How to Read the Biblical Prophets*, 74.
[16] Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 246.

does. The Lord, in contrast, not only is able to predict the future, but is able to predict events far in advance (Isa 41:21–29; 45:20–21; 46:10).[17] This theological context shows that the specific mention of Cyrus has a purpose—to prove the Lord's ability to predict specific events far in the future, since He is the one who sovereignly ordains those events.[18] The issue of the authorship of Isaiah is "not what *could have* been the case, but what … the present form of the text claim[s] to have been the case. Does the text invite us to read it as the end-product of two or three hundred years of theological reflection and editing?"[19] It is clear from Isa 40–48 that the text does *not* invite us to read it as prophecy after-the-fact or even immediately before its occurrence in history.

Third, the prophets did sometimes speak prophecies that neither they nor their original hearers could understand. A case in point is Daniel, who says concerning the vision he saw of the last days, "I heard, but I did not understand" (Dan 12:8). The Lord does not explain it to him further, but instead replies, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end" (Dan 12:9). Why would the Lord give such prophecies? We have the answer in 1 Peter 1:12: "It was revealed to them [i.e., the prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you."[20] Isaiah's prophecies in chapters 40–66 (as well as 1–39) certainly had a bearing on the people of his own historical context, but upon this principle of 1 Peter he knew that he was also serving a future people—the exiles, the postexilic community, and ultimately those to whom the Messiah would be revealed.

[17] See Beale, "A Specific Problem," 151–52.
[18] John N. Oswalt, "The Implications of an Evangelical View of Scripture for the Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," in *Bind Up the Testimony: Explorations in the Genesis of the Book of Isaiah*, edited by Daniel I. Block and Richard L. Schultz (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), 288. The immediate context of the allusions to Cyrus in Isa 44:28 and 45:1 also uphold this interpretation, as Cyrus is presented as a proof of God's sovereignty over events in world history (Isa 44:24–45:7).
[19] Oswalt, "Implications of an Evangelical View," 284. Italics mine.
[20] Beale, "A Specific Problem," 153.

A Final Note on the Composition of Isaiah

If we are to take the text of the Bible at face value, we must deal with the fact that the only ascriptions of authorship in the book of Isaiah attribute the prophecies to eighth century Isaiah son of Amoz (Isa 1:1; 2:1; 13:1). Since no biblical prophet is a true prophet unless explicitly called by the Lord (Deut 18:20; cf. Numbers 12:6), a "second Isaiah" could not just be an upright, theologically astute student of Isaiah; he would have to be called by God. It is one thing to claim that editorial scribes added the historical sections of Isaiah. It is quite another thing to claim that some or most of the prophecies written down that are ascribed to Isaiah were really spoken or written by someone else.[21] If something is claimed to be a prophecy from the mouth of God, it can only be delivered by a true prophet, which means that prophet must be called by God.[22] Since no other prophet is named in the whole book of Isaiah, we must have very good evidence in order to conclude that another prophet was responsible for some of the material in the book. That evidence is lacking.

Exposition of Isaiah 40:1–5

Historical Context

Isaiah 40 comes in the context of the Assyrian exile of the northern kingdom of Israel, King Sennacherib's weakening of Judah and failed siege on Jerusalem (chs. 36–37), and Hezekiah's prideful flaunting of his riches to Babylonian envoys that leads to Isaiah's prediction of Judah's future exile under Babylon (ch. 39). Thus, when proponents of the multiple authorship of Isaiah

[21] On the importance of genre in the question of authorship, see Schultz, "Isaiah and Current Scholarship," 244–45.
[22] This is why if one holds to a second Isaiah, it is very tempting and almost essential to say that Isaiah 40:1–8 is the call narrative of second Isaiah. See Christopher R. Seitz, "The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah," *JBL* 109 (1990): 230–31. This view will be addressed below.

claim that Isa 40–55 assumes a context of exile,[23] they are exactly right. This assumed context of Isa 40–55, however, does not require a historical setting of the Babylonian exile of Judah.[24]

As is typical of prophetical literature, Isaiah has multiple horizons in view. The message of Isa 40–55 applies to eighth century Isaiah's own historical context, because exile is very much on their mind at the time. Their northern counterpart has already gone into exile, they have nearly been taken into exile themselves, and now Isaiah has prophesied that it is only a matter of time before that exile does come. At the same time, however, Isaiah's prophecies were not written down for his own generation only (cf. 1 Pet 1:12). His prophecies are intended to give comfort to the future exiles in Babylon, who will find confidence in the sure prophecies of Isaiah that the exile is neither an accident nor an injustice done by God, but rather God's sovereign plan that will end with a restoration.

Literary Context

Isaiah 40 is the beginning of what most scholars call "Deutero-Isaiah." Based on the shift in theological emphasis, vocabulary, rhetoric, and style, they see Isa 40–55 as the product of someone other than Isaiah son of Amoz. These shifts and their implications for the purpose of the book of Isaiah should be noted. Isaiah 40:1 clearly marks a new section in the text. In relation to chapter 39, there is a change in genre, from narrative to poetry, marked especially by the presence of the *waw*-consecutive in 39:8, and its absence in 40:1 on the same verb (אמר). There is a change in speaker, from the narrator of Hezekiah's story in chapter 39, in which Hezekiah is referred to in the third person (38:21; 39:3, 5), to an unidentified prophetic voice in chapter 40. Finally, there is

[23] E.g. John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 68.
[24] As in the view of Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 20.

a change in topic and characters, from the predominant tone of judgment and Hezekiah's recovery from sickness and subsequent pride, to God's words of comfort to Jerusalem.

At the same time, however, the literary context of Isa 40 shows the organic unity between "First" and "Second" Isaiah. The literary cohesiveness is seen, for example, in the *leitphrase* "For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isa 1:20; 40:5; 58:14). This cohesiveness can also be seen in the continuation and development of certain themes throughout the whole of Isaiah—for example, the theme of the desert and wilderness becoming a new Eden.[25] Besides this literary cohesion, the transition from Isa 39 to Isa 40 has a logical coherence and organic connection of content. When the Lord makes known His plans of judgment, He usually follows this with a word of hope or a call for repentance.[26] In the wake of Jerusalem's near defeat by Assyria (Isa 36–37), the imminent exile of her people to Babylon (Isa 39:5–7), and the foolish pride of her current king (Isa 39), what could be more needed than a message of comfort from the Lord?

Related to the Deutero-Isaiah stance, many scholars see Isa 40:1–8 as the call narrative of the second Isaiah, parallel to that of first Isaiah in chapter 6.[27] If there is a second Isaiah, then he would need to be authorized by the Lord to deliver his message as a true prophet, so it is logical, perhaps even necessary, for Deutero-Isaiah proponents to interpret this as his call narrative.[28] This interpretation, however, is not necessarily borne out by the text. Many commentators opt to interpret the scene in Isa 40:1–8 as a glimpse into the divine council, at which God's prophet is present (similar to the scene depicted by Micaiah in 1 Kings 22).[29] There are multiple "voices" that call out in these verses (vv. 1, 3, 6), apparently various heavenly beings according to this

[25] Isa 34–35; 40:3–4; 41:18–20; 43:18–21
[26] E.g., Isa 1–3 followed by Isa 4; Isa 8 followed by Isa 9:1–7; Hos 1:1–2:13 followed by Hos 2:14–23.
[27] Cf. Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, translated by Margaret Kohl, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 51.
[28] Seitz, "The Divine Council," 230–31.
[29] Seitz, "The Divine Council," 235.

interpretation, and finally the prophet's voice in v. 9. However, there is no identification of any of these voices, except that verses 1–5 come from the "mouth of the LORD" (v. 5). Therefore, it would not be wise to speculate too much as to the identity of the speakers. It seems that the message is more important than the messenger.

Finally, there are two noteworthy things about the placement of Isa 40 that are significant for understanding its theology. First, Isa 39 ends with the uncompassionate response of Hezekiah to Isaiah's prophecy about the Babylonian exile. "'The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days'" (Isa 39:8). This makes evident the need for Judah to have a king that cares for them to lead them through exile. This need is immediately met as Isa 40 opens with the proclamation that God Himself is coming to be their King (see esp. vv. 9–11).

Second, Isa 40 in many ways contains the seed form of the rest of Isaiah.[30] The first five verses in particular introduce the "new theme and direction" that center on a message of comfort rather than judgment (v. 1).[31] Likewise, these verses introduce the specific themes of the coming King, the call to prepare a way for the coming King by building up a road or a highway on which He may enter Jerusalem (vv. 3–4),[32] the glory of the LORD returning to Zion, and the revelation of that glory to the nations (v. 5).[33] Since chapter 40 also specifically introduces the section of Isaiah (40–55) that focuses on the sovereignty of God in world events and the Suffering Servant, these themes should be kept in mind for the implications of Isa 40:1–5.

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[30] Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 527; Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III, vol. 1: Isaiah 40–48*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Kampen, Netherlands: Pharos, 1997), 49; Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 103; John L. Mackay, *A Study Commentary on Isaiah, vol. 2: chapters 40–66* (Darlington, UK: EP, 2009), 12.
[31] Hess, *Old Testament*, 518.
[32] Cf. Isa 42:16; 45:19; 57:14–21; 62:10–12
[33] Cf. Isa 58:8; 60:1; 66:18

Exposition[34]

Comfort for God's People: verses 1–2

There is a decided shift in tone from Isa 39 to Isa 40. This begins with verse 1, which transitions the book from predominantly a message of warning and judgment to a message of comfort. In place of the devastating prediction of exile from Isa 39, God gives the command to "comfort" His people and to "speak upon the heart of" (or "speak tenderly to") Jerusalem. "No sooner the message of disaster (39:5–7) than the message of comfort (40:1–2)!"[35] This message of comfort would become a much needed source of hope for the exiles, to whom it often seemed that there was "no comforter" (Lam 1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21).[36] This shift in tone introduces in seed form the ministry of the Suffering Servant, who would come in meekness rather than in judgment.[37]

The command to "comfort" is in the plural, thus raising the question: Who are these commands addressed to? This ambiguity caused the LXX translators to insert a vocative, "O priests," and the targums to insert, "O prophets."[38] Those who see Isa 40:1–8 as taking place in the divine council usually say the commands are addressed to the heavenly beings.[39] Others see it as addressed to the exiles[40] or to anyone who hears the command.[41] Ultimately, because the Bible does not identify the speaker or the audience, it is clear that the content of the message matters most, not the identity of the messenger.[42]

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[34] The translations of Isa 40:1–5 throughout this section are my own (see Appendix A).
[35] J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 1993), 298.
[36] Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 129.
[37] "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa 42:3).
[38] Seitz, "The Divine Council," 250.
[39] Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 51; Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 299.
[40] Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 68, 80.
[41] Thus B. Duhm, cited in Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 51.
[42] John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 50; Willem A. VanGemeren, "Isaiah," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, edited by Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 264.

The message of comfort is bolstered by the language of God's covenant faithfulness. Unlike early in the book of Isaiah, when God called Judah "this people" (Isa 6:9; 8:6), here He uses the language of the covenant: *my people* and *your God* (cf. Exod 6:7; 19:5; etc.).[43] He then lays out two blessings for Jerusalem that bring comfort, and the basis for those blessings, with three parallel כִּי phrases. He commands to call out "that her hard service is complete, that her iniquity is pardoned, for she has received from the hand of the LORD a double amount for all her sins." Although many translate the last phrase as another "that," it makes logical sense and is grammatically plausible that the "double amount" received for her sins has led to the end of her hard service and the pardon of her iniquity (see Appendix A).[44] This logic is comparable to that of 2 Sam 24, in which the Lord sends a pestilence on Israel for David's sin, but when the angel of death seeks to destroy Jerusalem, the Lord says, "It is enough; now stay your hand" (2 Sam 24:16).

The phrase "a double amount for all her sins" has caused some to doubt the justice of God.[45] Does this mean that God required twice the amount of punishment that their sins deserved? There are two reasons to think this is not the case. First, other passages in Isaiah make it clear that Judah did not receive all the punishment she deserved (e.g., Isa 48:8–11).[46] Second, the lack of a subject on the stative and niphal verbs of verse 2 ("is fulfilled" (מָלְאָה) and "is pardoned" (נִרְצָה)) make it ambiguous who is responsible for the pardoning and fulfilling.[47] This should therefore be interpreted as the seed form of the substitutionary sacrifice of the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13–53:12). Jerusalem has indeed received punishment from the hand of the Lord in the form of exile, but this punishment (like the pestilence of 2 Sam 24), is not what pardoned their iniquity. The

[43] Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 49. Many commentators have noticed the connection to covenantal language, including Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 49; VanGemeren, "Isaiah," 263.
[44] Those who agree with this interpretation of a causal כִּי include Hess, *Old Testament*, 518.
[45] E.g., Mark Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 207–214.
[46] Koole, *Isaiah III*, 55.
[47] Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 52.

substitution of an atoning sacrifice would be the basis for the proclamation of pardon and comfort given in Isa 40:1–2 (cf. 2 Sam 24:25).[48]

Prepare the Way for the King! verses 3–4

In verse 3, another unidentified voice comes on the scene. Again, some posit this is another heavenly being from the divine council.[49] The text does not say who this voice belongs to, however, only that "someone" is calling out, and that this someone is ultimately identified with "the mouth of the LORD" (v. 5). Since the prophets are sometimes referred to as God's "mouth" (e.g., Jer 1:9; 15:19; cf. Exod 4:16),[50] it may be Isaiah himself (or a future prophet) calling out. The one thing that is clear is that this message comes from the mouth of God, and so the messenger, again, is not as important as the message.

So what is the voice's message? "In the wilderness, clear the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The location of the preparation of the Lord's road is "the wilderness" (מִדְבָּר) and "the desert" (עֲרָבָה). These are not merely physical locations, but metaphorically refer to the people's physical and spiritual condition.[51] This becomes evident in the context of the use of these words elsewhere in Isaiah. The only three times עֲרָבָה appears in Isaiah, it is paired with מִדְבָּר (35:6; 40:3; 41:19). In 35:6, the two words are used metaphorically to refer to the place where "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Likewise, in 41:19,

[48] Thus Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 133. This interpretation is even more likely if one concurs with Keil and Delitzsch, who, based on the parallel use of רצה in Leviticus 26:41, 43, argue that the pardoning of sin here refers to "pay[ing] off the debt of sin by enduring the punishment of sin." C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah, vol. 2*, vol. 7 of *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, translated by James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 140. So also Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 299.
[49] E.g., Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 53; Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995), 21.
[50] Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 53.
[51] Mackay, *Isaiah 40–66*, 19.

it refers metaphorically to the place where the Lord will answer "the poor and needy" (41:17). Thus, the location of the wilderness and the desert (or, if one treats it as a hendiadys, the "waterless wilderness"), refers to the physical and spiritual neediness of God's people.

What should be done in this waterless wilderness? A road should be cleared and a highway set up. In an ANE context, such a clear, smooth highway would be significant either for trade or, as is more likely in this case, "for a king's military advance."[52] Although some interpret this exclusively as a literal road leading from Babylon to Jerusalem for the returning exiles,[53] the physical return from exile was certainly not the complete fulfillment of this passage. While this coming of the LORD historically included the return of the exiles, other passages in Isaiah show that this language refers typologically to the future restoration of God's people from all over the earth. God's "highways" in Isa 49:11 refer in context to the ways by which people from all directions will come to Jerusalem to be comforted. In Isa 57:14, once again the highways being built up refer to the comfort for those "far and near" (vv. 18–19).[54] It would also not be too much of a stretch to see a legitimate spiritual interpretation of this passage as referring to the "highways of the heart," so that what needs to be prepared for the Lord's coming is first and foremost the hearts of His people (cf. Psalm 84:5). This interpretation is supported by the use of the verb יָשַׁר ("make straight"), the root of which often has an ethical meaning of "righteous." This also finds confirmation in the language of verse 4.

Verse 4 describes *how* the way of the Lord will be prepared. "Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will sink down, and the uneven will become level, and the rugged

[52] David W. Baker, "Isaiah," in *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 of *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, edited by John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 131.
[53] Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, 80.
[54] Paul cites this passage to refer to the grafting in of the Gentiles (Eph 2:17).

a plain." Grammatically, the verbs of verse 4 could be either indicative or jussive.[55] If the latter, it is describing what the voice is exhorting people to do in order to prepare the way for the Lord. If the former, it is describing what the Lord will do when He comes. Since the two ideas are theologically intertwined, it is not easy to judge which is intended.

What is clear, however, is that the rich imagery of this verse gives further explanation for the metaphors used in verse 3. The lifting up of valleys and sinking down of mountains enables the road or highway of verse 3 to be clear and straight. These once again are being used both literally about God's restoration of His people from the Babylonian exile and figuratively about the spiritual obstacles (unrighteousness of all kinds) that lay between the Lord and His people.[56] The words for "uneven" and "rugged" are rare in the Hebrew Bible, so there is some uncertainty as to their precise meaning, but their counterparts, "level" (מִישׁוֹר) and "a plain" (בִּקְעָה), imply an ethical dimension.[57] מִישׁוֹר ("level") in particular has a clear ethical meaning in Isa 11:4; 26:7; 33:15, and an implied ethical meaning in its other two uses in Isaiah (42:16; 45:19). Its relationship to ישׁר makes it clear that the leveling going on in verse 4 involves acting in righteousness. Since the previous terrain is uneven and rugged, this leveling would involve an act of repentance by the people to whom the Lord is coming. This is the way people are to prepare for the coming of their king: by repenting from their former ways and walking uprightly.

The King Comes to Dwell with His People: verse 5

Finally, in verse 5, we come to the climax of this passage. Once the way has been prepared, the King, who is the LORD Himself, will come and reveal His glory not only to the exiles returning

[55] Most major translations take these verbs as indicative. On the other hand, Keil and Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 142, and others opt for the jussive.
[56] Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 54; Keil and Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, 142.
[57] Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, 55.

from Babylon, but to "all flesh." The phrase "the glory of the LORD" (כְּבוֹד יהוה) appears almost exclusively in the Bible in the context of the tabernacle or temple.[58] The significance of this verse, then, is that the glory of the LORD will no longer be visible only in the Jerusalem temple but to "all flesh." Paired with Isa 35:2; 58:8; 60:1, this verse depicts the central promise to be fulfilled in the last days: God will dwell with His people from all nations. There is also a possible polemic against Sennacherib, who claimed after his siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC that "As for Hezekiah, the fear of the awe-inspiring radiance of my lordship overwhelmed him." This "awesome radiance," according to David Baker, is similar to the Hebrew כָּבוֹד ("glory").[59] In this case, God is responding that it is not Sennacherib's glory that will overwhelm just one king, but *my* glory that will be revealed, not just to one person or nation, but to *all flesh*. This will surely happen, because "the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

New Testament Fulfillment

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all cite Isa 40:3 as fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist (see Appendix B). Only Luke continues the quotation to include verses 4–5. Let us look first at the reasons why the Gospel writers would have cited Isa 40:3 to refer to John the Baptist's ministry before examining their purpose in citing this verse.

Why the Gospel Writers Cite Isaiah 40:3

First, Isa 40 introduces the theme that the LORD is coming to His people as their King. This is expressed especially in the depiction of the "glory of the LORD" being revealed to "all

[58] Exod 40:34, 35; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron 5:14; 7:1, 2, 3; 9x in Ezekiel in the context of the temple.
[59] Baker, "Isaiah," 62.

flesh" (Isa 40:5). As noted above, the "glory of the LORD" is almost exclusively used to describe God's manifest presence in the tabernacle or temple.

The Gospel writers clearly view Jesus as the true temple who came to dwell with his people. John states this most explicitly when he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt [or 'tabernacled'] among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). John sees this identification of Jesus as connected with John the Baptist's proclamation that "He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me" (v. 15). The Gospel writers, therefore, have good reason to cite Isa 40:3 as referring to John the Baptist, because he is the one declaring the coming of King Jesus.

Second, the content of the message of John the Baptist accords very well with the message of Isa 40:3–4. Taken metaphorically, Isaiah's message seems to be that God's people must prepare their hearts for the coming of the King by repentance and walking in righteousness. John the Baptist says the very same thing: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2), and "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8). Likewise, he tells certain groups of people the kinds of righteous deeds they ought to do in keeping with their repentance. To the crowds he says, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise" (Luke 3:11). To tax collectors he says, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do" (Luke 3:13). To soldiers he says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14). This accords well with the OT understanding of righteousness coming in the form of acts of justice and equity. The content of John the Baptist's message, therefore, likely played a significant role in the Gospel writers' application of Isa 40:3 to his ministry.

Finally, the clearest reason why the Gospel writers chose Isa 40:3 in particular to refer to John the Baptist is that John the Baptist used this verse to refer to himself (John 1:23). It might be

helpful, therefore, to go one step further and ask why John the Baptist might have chosen this verse to refer to himself. The obvious answer is that, as a prophet, he understood best what God's calling was for his ministry, and the Lord gave him the understanding that his ministry was to fulfill what Isaiah prophesied. There is, however, another likely reason. John the Baptist believed that he as a messenger was insignificant except as a signpost to Jesus. This view of himself is clear when he states, "He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Luke 3:15; cf. Matt 3:11; Mark 1:7; John 1:15); and likewise, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Given this view of himself, Isa 40:3, with the anonymity of the "voice" and consequent emphasis on the message rather than the messenger, is one of the most logical verses he could apply to himself. He does not accept the title of Elijah (John 1:21), even though Jesus later confirms that John the Baptist was the second Elijah spoken of in Malachi 3:5 (Matt 17:12–13), but he does accept the humble title of "a voice crying out in the wilderness."

John the Baptist's quotation of this passage also implies that he viewed Jesus as divine, since the role of the voice in Isa 40:3–4 is to prepare the way for the LORD. The kinds of things he said about Jesus confirm such a high view: "He who is mightier than I is coming, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. … His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:11, 12).

The Purpose of the Gospel Writers' Citations

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all have the same primary purpose in quoting Isa 40:3: to show that Jesus is the King foretold by Isaiah, the very presence of the Lord come to dwell in the midst of His people. By citing Isa 40:3 as fulfilled in John the Baptist, they are not primarily

making a statement about John the Baptist, but about Jesus. *He* is the one for whom the way was to be prepared. This purpose is confirmed by Mark, who clarifies the quotation from Isaiah with a quote from Malachi: "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way" (Mark 1:2).[60] The point is clear: If John the Baptist is the voice from Isa 40:3, then Jesus must be the LORD incarnate who has come to bring comfort to his people.[61]

The Gospel writers also may be using this quotation because of its context in the book of Isaiah. The voice of Isa 40:3 is the beginning of the introduction of the "new thing" God is about to do (Isa 43:19). The Gospel writers, then, would certainly have good reason to use this passage to describe John's message as introducing Jesus as the "new thing."[62]

Luke appears to have an additional purpose as well, since he is the only Gospel writer who cites all the way through verse 5. The most likely purpose of Luke in addition to proving the identity of Jesus is to introduce Jesus' ministry as opening up the way for Gentiles.[63] Isaiah 40:5 has a clear eschatological vision of "all flesh" seeing the glory of God revealed.[64] Luke, with his characteristic emphasis on the outsider, wants his readers to know that in Jesus this prophecy is fulfilled. Jesus is the divine King not only of the Jews, but of "all flesh."

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[60] As Morna Hooker points out, the fact that Mark first identifies John simply as "my messenger" rather than by name highlights the fact that John the Baptist's sole purpose is to point us to someone else. Morna D. Hooker, "Isaiah in Mark's Gospel," in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, edited by Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 37.

[61] B. B. Warfield makes this very point in his classic defense of the deity of Christ. Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Lord of Glory: A Study of the Designations of Our Lord in the New Testament with Especial Reference to His Deity* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian, 2003), 143.

[62] David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 278.

[63] Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55*, 138.

[64] Luke actually quotes the LXX: "All flesh shall see the *salvation* of God," thus equivalating the glory of God with "salvation."

APPENDIX A: TRANSLATION OF ISAIAH 40:1–5

Isa 40:1 "Comfort, comfort[65] my people," says your[66] God.[67]

2 "Speak[68] upon the heart[69] of Jerusalem, and cry out unto her
"that her hard service[70] is complete,[71]
"that her iniquity is pardoned,[72]
"for[73] she has received from the hand of the LORD a double amount[74] for all her sins."[75]

3 Listen! Someone [is] crying out:[76]

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[65] **Comfort, comfort** (v. 1): The two imperatives to "comfort" (נַחֲמוּ) are masculine plural, indicating that the prophet is calling those who belong to God (cf. "*your* (pl.) God" in v. 1) to comfort Jerusalem with the reasons about to be given. This is one of many places in which this word is used to speak comfort specifically to those in exile (cf. Isa 49:13; Jer 31:13; Lam 1:2, 16–17; Zech 1:17). NIDOTTE, 3:82.
The two imperatives beginning this passage also mark a transition in style from the previous passage, which is written in narrative.

[66] **your** (v. 1) is plural here.

[67] **says your God** (v. 1): This specific phrase (יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם) is a hapax legomena. Nevertheless, it is clearly similar to other prophetic formulas, and thus can be translated as present tense (*GCK*, §107*f*).

[68] **Speak** and **call** (v. 2): These two commands (דַּבְּרוּ and קִרְאוּ), like those in verse 1, are masculine plural.

[69] **Speak upon the heart** (v. 1): Most translations render this Hebrew idiom as "speak tenderly."

[70] **hard service** (v. 2): This term (צָבָא) often refers either to warfare or military service. Here, however, the context points to the experience of exiled Judah, and so more likely refers to hard labor than to warfare. NIDOTTE 3:735.

[71] **is complete** (v. 2): 1QIs[a] reads מלא (the nominal form: "full") instead of the Masoretic מלאה (the verbal form: "is/has been filled"). The difference is of very little consequence. Completion of a period of time appears to be the idea conveyed by this fullness. NIDOTTE, 2:940; cf. Holladay, 195.

[72] **pardoned** (v. 2): Literally, "paid off." Holladay, 345; NIDOTTE, 3:1188.

[73] **for** (v. 2): Many translations render the כִּי here as "that" (the same as the other two instances of כִּי immediately preceding it). A translation of "that," would make this clause parallel to the two before it. In this case, there would be three things people are urged to cry out to Jerusalem: 1) that her warfare is complete, 2) that her iniquity is pardoned, and 3) that she has received punishment from the LORD. This third clause, however, does not seem to fit as a parallel to the other two (the other two are obviously very good things, and the third seems to be a bad thing). Therefore, I am taking the last of these three clauses as an explanation for why Jerusalem's warfare is now ending and iniquity is now being pardoned. The reason is that Jerusalem has received double punishment from the LORD for her sins, so that now the LORD is declaring that there has been enough punishment; it will not continue. Cf. NIDOTTE, 3:1187–88.

[74] **a double amount** (v. 2): Joüon suggests a translation of adverbial numbers such as this one as "x-fold," so in this case "twofold" (§100*o*). "A double amount" captures the same adverbial force with perhaps slightly more modern English.

[75] **for all her sins** (v. 2): The בְּ preposition, translated here as "for," might be taken either as an adversative בְּ ("against all her sins") or as a בְּ of price ("in exchange for all her sins"). See Arnold/Choi, 4.1.5. I have left it somewhat ambiguous with the translation "for," but I lean towards the בְּ of price based on the context of the language of payment (see footnote 8).

[76] **Listen! Someone [is] crying out** (v. 3): Admittedly, this is not a very literal translation. However, it seems to best capture the meaning of the clause. This phrase (קוֹל קוֹרֵא), literally translated, could be taken either as a construct: "a voice/sound of one crying out" or as a verbless clause ("A voice is crying out"). Most grammars opt for the former. The use of קוֹל here, however, serves to call the hearer's attention to what is about to be said. It is in construct, and thus can take on exclamatory force (Joüon §163*e*). Two options for conveying this in a translation are "Hark!..." (thus *GCK*, §146*b*) or "I hear…" or "Listen…" (Joüon §163*e*).

"In the wilderness,[77] clear[78] the way of the LORD,
"make straight[79] in the desert[80] a highway for our God.[81]

4 "Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will sink down,[82]
"and the uneven[83] will become[84] level,[85] and the rugged[86] a plain,[87]

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[77] **In the wilderness** (v. 3): This word (בַּמִּדְבָּר) is clearly the beginning of the content of what the voice is crying out, and not a description of where the voice is crying out. This is clear because: 1) the MT sets it on the beginning of the next line; 2) בַּמִּדְבָּר, as will be seen, is set in parallel with בָּעֲרָבָה ("in the desert") of the following clause; and 3) as Joüon notes, the accent pattern indicates it is the beginning of a new clause and not the conclusion of the preceding one (§15*k*).

[78] **clear** (v. 3): This imperative (פַּנּוּ), like the others in this passage, is masculine plural. I have not used the usual translation "prepare" to translate this word, because "clear" gives more of the imagery of a road being cleared off for someone's travel on it. Cf. Holladay, 293.

[79] **Make straight** (v. 3): Also a masculine plural imperative (יַשְּׁרוּ). This verb and the verb in the previous clause (פַּנּוּ) are both Piel masculine plural imperatives, showing the parallelism of these two lines.

[80] **desert** (v. 3): This is not the same term used earlier in the verse, which is translated as "wilderness" (מִדְבָּר), but the term עֲרָבָה, which specifically refers to a waterless place (Holladay, 282). The presence of these two similar words, both taking the ב preposition and definite article, adds to the parallelism of these two lines. It is possible that these two terms, placed parallel to each other on subsequent lines, form a hendiadys, thus describing the spiritual terrain of Israel as a "waterless wilderness" to which news of comfort and peace is finally coming.

[81] **for our God** (v. 3): The ל preposition could be translated "to" or "for" here. Without context, both "to our God" and "for our God" make sense. The highway could be one that leads *to God*, or one that is intended to bring God *to Jerusalem*. The context, however, makes it clear that the highway is intended for God Himself to travel on to visit Zion. "A highway for our God" is paralleled in the immediately preceding clause by דֶּרֶךְ יהוה ("the way of the LORD"), which clearly refers to a road (דֶּרֶךְ) either belonging to the Lord or on which the Lord will travel. A "highway" (מְסִלָּה) is a specific kind of road (NIDOTTE, 3:265), indicating once again that these two clauses are intended to be read as a parallel. This, combined with the culmination of this passage with the revelation of God's glory (v. 5), indicates that the highway is to be built *for* the Lord to travel on when He comes to Zion to reveal His glory.

[82] **sink down** (v. 4): The common translation "be made low" implies a passive verb, but יִשָּׁפְלוּ is an active or stative verb, with the possible translations "be low," "be humble," or "sink (down)" (Holladay, 381). The imagery of sinking seems to fit well with the subject of mountains and hills.

[83] **the uneven** (v. 4): Although there is some uncertainty as to the range of meaning of this term (עָקֹב), the intended contrast with the following word "level" (מִישׁוֹר) provides the contextual meaning of "uneven." It can elsewhere mean "treacherous" or "deceitful," when referring to someone's character. Here, it refers to uneven [implied] ground, but the possibility of its use as a double meaning or metaphor should not be counted out, especially since the parallel term "level" (מִישׁוֹר) can also refer metaphorically to righteousness (see note below). NIDOTTE, 3:506.

[84] **And … will become** (v. 4): This starts a string of 3 perfect waw-consecutives (one in v. 4 and two in v. 5), a construction which has not yet occurred in this passage. This shows that the prophet has moved from commanding how God's people are to prepare for His coming to describing the sequence of events when He comes. The use of this construction seems to give the passage a culminating effect, pointing to the climax in v. 5: "And it will [come to pass]" (וְהָיָה, v. 4) → "And it will be revealed" (וְנִגְלָה, v. 5) → "And they will see" (וְרָאוּ, v. 5). The presence of the perfect waw-consecutives add the idea of succession that would not otherwise be there (Arnold/Choi, 3.5.2).

[85] **the level** (v. 4): This term (מִישׁוֹר) is used in Isaiah 11:4 as a metaphor for righteousness (Holladay, 193). Although here it should be translated literally, this metaphorical meaning may have some bearing on the meaning of the text. Here, it is being used as a substantive adjective, with the implied meaning of level *ground*. However, to retain the possibility of a double or metaphorical meaning, I have simply translated it "the level."

[86] **the rugged** (v. 4): This term (רָכָס) is a hapax legomena, so the meaning is somewhat uncertain. However, the context provides a clue, since רָכָס here is supposed to be the opposite of its counterpart בִּקְעָה ("valley-plain"). Thus, "rugged [ground]" seems to be a good translation. NIDOTTE, 3:1120. For the sake of consistency with the previous clause, I have translated it as a simple substantive, not with the implied "ground."

[87] **plain** (v. 4): בִּקְעָה can refer to either a valley or a plain (NIDOTTE, 1:704), or perhaps a combination of the two, i.e., "valley-plain" (Holladay, 46). In context, "plain" seems the most likely option, given its parallel with מִישׁוֹר ("level") in the previous clause and the purpose of this imagery to picture the clearing of a road for the Lord (v. 2).

5 “and the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
“and all flesh will see together.
“For[88] the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

[88] **for** (v. 5): The כִּי here could also be translated in an asseverative sense (“*Surely* the mouth of the LORD has spoken”), but the context seems to point to the more common causal use (“*For* the mouth of the LORD has spoken”), since the purpose of the clause is to give reason to believe that what has just been prophesied will really come to pass. The reason is that the LORD Himself has prophesied it. Arnold/Choi, 4.3.4.

APPENDIX B: NEW TESTAMENT CITATIONS OF ISAIAH 40:1–5 (ESV)

Matthew 3:1–3

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, **2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." **3** For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

> "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
> 'Prepare the way of the Lord;
> make his paths straight.'"

Mark 1:1–5

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

> "Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
> who will prepare your way,
> 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
> 'Prepare[c] the way of the Lord,
> make his paths straight,'"

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Luke 3:2–8

The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **4** As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

> "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
> 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
> make his paths straight.
> **5** Every valley shall be filled,
> and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
> and the crooked shall become straight,
> and the rough places shall become level ways,
> **6** and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

John 1:19–23

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” **20** He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” **21** And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” **22** So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” **23** He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

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