

## The Motif of the Word of God in the Prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and Epilogue (Isa 55:6-11) of Deutero-Isaiah

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### Introduction

Almost every passage of the Holy Scriptures attest to the efficacy, durability and the infallibility of the Word of God which is often manifested in God's fidelity. The importance of the Word of God to Deutero-Isaiah (DI) cannot be overemphasized. It is not surprising that it is found in the prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and the epilogue (Isa 55:6-11). This motif forms an *inclusio* to Deutero-Isaiah. The epilogue has a strict connection with the prologue especially Isa 40,6ff. Thus the prophecy of DI is solely anchored on the Word of God. The prophet received his call or vocation through the Word of God and served as its mouth piece. This prophet prophesied in Babylon during the exile and among the exiles. His main aim was to give hope and reassurance to the fallen house of Israel, encouraging them not to despair. This hope is based entirely on the infallibility of the word of God. The backdrop of the hopelessness among the people was the trauma of the loss of the Land, the Temple and their liberty through the deportation of the elites of Judah to Babylon. The people thought either that God has forsaken them or that he was not powerful enough<sup>1</sup> to deliver them. By implication, they thought that the covenant and all the promises that God made to their forefathers no longer hold.

The prophet then came with the message of comfort and hope in the prologue that "the grass withers, the flower fades but the word of God will stand forever" (40:8). This promise and assurance of salvation reaches its climax in the epilogue of DI. Isa 55:10-11 portrays an image of the vitality, dynamics, purposefulness and supremacy of the word of God. In this way, the Word of God serves as the *terminus ad quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the whole prophecy of DI.

Contrary to the majority of the prophetic books, DI is without any superscription or literary introduction (Compare with the beginnings of other prophetic books). The lack of superscription concurs with the prophet's way of withdrawing entirely into the background of his message. Again, most of the prophetic books begin with an account of the call of the prophet. Most scholars regard Isa 40:6-8 as the equivalent of this. In that light, the two passages which precede and follow verses 6ff. (3ff. and 9ff.) are two cries which form a framework for the prophet's call: the one an order given to unspecified listeners to prepare a way in the wilderness, the other a call on Zion to get up onto a high mountain and proclaim to the cities of Judah, behold your God! All three sections are in turn introduced by the cry, Comfort my people (v 1ff). The call in verse 1 determines and sets the pattern for all that follows. For God's people to be comforted, a way has to be prepared in the wilderness. A voice is heard announcing to the people that although the nation is ruined as it is, the WORD of GOD STILL remains IMMUTABLE. Therefore, jubilant proclamation should be made to the cities of Judah that the coming of Yahweh is around the corner. There is an indication that the new event, the New Exodus is already on the way. It should be noted that the real order to "depart, move out of Babylon" does not occur at the prologue but at the end of the last Servant song (Isa 52:11). The cry "comfort my people" leads eventually to the cry "go out". The proclamation of DI lies between the two. The prophet's duty was to lead the people from the first cry to the second. Right from the prologue, the message of DI is shown as seriously linked with the Exodus tradition which forms

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<sup>1</sup> They thought the gods of the Babylonians are more powerful than Yahweh. That was the general idea among the people of the Ancient Near East (ANE), the gods of those who defeat in any battle are considered stronger than those of the defeated people.

the heart of the historical *credo*. Just as the first Exodus – there is a voice crying to depart from bondage; a decisive move of this was the making of the way in the wilderness.

### Background Introduction to Deutero-Isaiah

The works of J.C. Doederlein (1775) and J.G. Eichhorn (1778-1783) gave the theory of dual authorship of the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah were assigned to a sixth century author for the following reasons:<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the historical setting of chaps. 40ff seem to reflect an exilic period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the deportation of the Jews to exile. Secondly, there are striking differences in language, style, and concepts between the first and second parts of the book which can be understood by positing two different authors. Lastly, if Isa 40ff were spoken by an eighth century prophet to the needs of an exiled people in anticipation (about 150 years later) it will be a totally isolated case in the entire OT. In his commentary of 1892 Duhm made a major contribution to this discussion. He distinguishes Isaiah 40-55 from chaps. 56-66. Modern scholarship of in DI is inclined towards emphasizing intertextual references within the Isaianic *corpus* as a key to its interpretations. Beuken made a very significant contribution in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Duhm, in his commentary of 1892, distinguishes passages designated as the Servant Songs (Isa 42:1-2; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) from the rest in DI. He thus provided the basis for subsequent relational analysis which sought to interpret a portion of the book independently of the entire *corpus*. The question regarding the servant songs is still debated and there is no consensus among scholars yet. Some have also questioned the authorial unity of Isa 40-55. Materials like the polemics against the making of idols (44:9ff) and the Cyrus oracles (44:24; 45:1) have been interpreted redactionally as belonging to once independent layers, which at times are extended well beyond the scope of DI.<sup>4</sup>

### Problems of the Text

In Isa 40:6 there is problem of translation of the phrase, *w<sup>e</sup>kol-hasdo* which is the reading of the Massoretic Text (MT). The different translations of the word *hasdo* include "beauty", splendour, fidelity, glory grace, constancy etc. It is a word derived from the noun *hesed*. Among the most important meanings of this word in the OT are: grace, loving kindness, truth etc. The word implies mutual obligations and relationships which unite kinships or social groups. Based on this we are tended towards translating it as constancy. Again in the same verse there is the problem of person: The Septuagint (LXX); Vulgate (Vg) and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> read "And I said" while the MT has *w<sup>e</sup>amar* meaning "and he said". The LXX reading is in harmony with the context. If it is accepted that this section depicts the call of the prophet, then it is the prophet who asks the question "and I said, what shall I cry?"

In Verse 9 there is a problem of syntax in the words and *m<sup>e</sup>basseret Siyyion* and *m<sup>e</sup>basseret Y<sup>e</sup>rusalaim*. While the MT reads O Zion herald of good tidings, the LXX, Targum and Vg translate it as accusative object: good tidings to Zion (cf. Isa 41:27; 52:7). The reading of the MT and some others who take it in apposition (cf. Isa 41:14) seem more plausible. This denotes the use of a noun phrase immediately after another noun phrase which refers to the same person or thing. For instance "Abuja, the capital of Nigeria", "the capital of Nigeria" is in apposition to "Abuja". In verse 10, the MT reads *b<sup>e</sup>hazak* meaning, "as a strong one". But the LXX and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> read *b<sup>e</sup>hozek* meaning "in or with strength". The latter is more acceptable in the context.

### The Question of Structure and Context

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<sup>2</sup> B. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL; (London 2001), 289-290.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja*, II (POT, Nijkerk 1979), 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 291.

The prologue (Isa 40:1-11) has the following subdivisions: verses 1-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-11. While scholars agree that the first eight verses of the prologue of DI constitute a unit, there is a debate whether verses 9-11 are also part of the prologue. We think that the controversial verses are not only a part of the prologue but constitute its climax. The lack of superscription which usually introduces a new prophetic collection in DI has created the problem of establishing the context for the interpretation of the prologue. This could not have been lost in transmission. The LXX and the Targums recognized this problem and supplied an alleged addressee (priests, prophets). The prologue is usually considered a call narrative once it is accepted that Isa 40ff is the work of an anonymous prophet of the sixth century. However, it is important to note that some of the features that mark a traditional call are lacking in the passage. For Cross, Isa 40:1-8 is a “divine directives to angelic heralds” having its setting in the divine council.<sup>5</sup> He finds parallels of this genre in 1 Kgs 22:19ff; Isa 6:1ff; Job 1:6ff and also in some extra-biblical literature. Nevertheless, he spoke of a mixed genre containing elements from a call narrative and a divine council which goes back to the prior hypothesis of the call of the prophet in verses 6-8.

Based on the analysis of Cross, Seitz changed his trend.<sup>6</sup> He discarded the widely assumed call narrative context with all its accompanying biographical and psychological features. On the contrary, he sees the exegetical key to lie in an intertextual relation between Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 6. In his opinion, both share the language of the heavenly court. For him, Isaiah 40 does not provide a new call narrative but is a reapplication of Isaiah’s call in Isaiah 6. It signifies then that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 fulfils the commission (prophecy) of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isa 40:6b-7 summarizes the prophetic message of judgment by an intertextual reference to Isa 28:2b-4: “the fading flower of his glorious beauty”. On the other hand, the prologue announces a divine decision that now reverses the commission of judgment which was given to Isaiah: “speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over” (40:2). There is an indication from the prologue that the old era of historic Isaiah is passing away and a new day is dawning. This is possible only because the word of God extends into the future since it endures forever.

The interpretation of the various voices that are involved in the prologue brings out his (Seitz’s) point of view more clearly. God speaks to the divine court in verses 1-2. A divine attendant delivers his command in verses 3-5. In 6a heavenly voices address someone individually with the imperative to “cry”. This author considers verses 6b-7 as an objection “what shall I cry? All flesh is grass; it withers when the breath of Yahweh blows on it”. He sees an intertextual reference to Isa 28:1-4 in the objection. This passage summarizes Isaiah’s judgment on Israel which comprises the “former things” of Isaiah 1-39. Isa 40:8 however, supersedes the objection and a charge of “new things” is delivered in verses 9-11.

The conventional interpretation of the different voices in the prologue, particularly in verses 6-8 sees the answer to the question of verse 6a starting immediately with verses 6b. In this view, it is rather a clarification of content rather than an objection. In the face of the ephemeral nature of every other thing expressed in verses 6b-7, the Word of God persists forever (verse 8). Asserting that this traditional interpretation does not adequately respond to the tension between verses 7 and 8 in the passage Beuken<sup>7</sup> has a similar division of the voices as Seitz.

We agree with other scholars (Childs, Seitz), that the key to the prologue lies in its intertextual reinterpretation of Isaiah 6 and thus serves as a crucial bridge between the first and second Isaiah. It indicates the change from the “old things” of chapters 1-39 to the “new things” of chapters 40ff. While the former is a reference to the judgment associated with Assyria, the latter refers to the redemption from Babylon. According to Childs, Isaiah of Jerusalem is the one who proclaims both the “old things of judgment” and the “new things” of salvation. Thus the message of the prologue is that although the

<sup>5</sup> F. M. Cross, “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah”, *JNES* 12, 1952, 274-277.

<sup>6</sup> C.R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah”, *JBL* 109 (1990) 229-247.

<sup>7</sup> Beuken, *Jesaja*, IIA, 23.

prophetic judgment has been fulfilled, Isaiah's word of future salvation is now about to be accomplished in the new things. The continuity between Isaiah 1-39 and 40ff does not lie in the historical *persona* of Isaiah.<sup>8</sup>

## Exegetical Analysis of Isa 40:1-11

### Isa 40:1-2

In verse 1, God confirms his relationship with his people with the words, "...my people...says your God". This sounds like an echo from the ancient covenant tradition.<sup>9</sup> Three announcements of change in divine purpose follow the amplification of the message of comfort each introduced with a *ki*. That Israel has received a "double for her sins" does not mean that Israel received more punishment than deserved, but rather the author makes use of the legal image already found in Exod 22:3(4), which entails that a guilty person restores double for an offence. The cry to comfort in these verses forms the fundament of the prologue. The verb *naham* occurs frequently in DI and also in *Trito* Isaiah (cf. 49:13; 51:3; 12:19; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13). This verb hints at the divine restoration which is the nucleus of the second part of DI. Westermann<sup>10</sup> suggests the possibility that DI invented the verb *naham* used in this passage on the basis of the lament common in Lamentations, "there is no helper". The cry turns away from the question "who helps you and comforts you?" (Lam 2:13; Isa 51:19), to the exultant cry, the anticipated answer of those delivered "for Yahweh has comforted his people" (Isa 49:13). The comfort therefore, lies on the fact that God has forgiven and resolved upon the deliverance of his people. It is a word spoken with authority, because the cry "comfort" advances to the cry "prepare". Duplication is an important stylistic feature in DI's preaching which indicates urgency.<sup>11</sup> It occurs also with imperatives (in Isa 51:9 awake, awake; 51:17 rouse yourself, rouse yourself; 52:1). And differently in 48:15 I even I, have spoken; cf. 43:11; 48:11. The need for this urgency is the fact that at that time the people were gradually turning away from God, gradually closing their minds to him, and gradually letting their faith grow cold. Therefore Israel must be motivated for action. Any waste of time would spoil and worsen things. The opening words of the book, attributes the urgency to God himself, who in his cry is bent on bringing comfort to his people. The echo of the glad tidings that Israel's physical hardships in enforced exile are now at an end is to recur on almost every page of the chapters of DI. This is better understood by considering the parallel clause: "her iniquity is pardoned". The basis of the change in Israel's fortune is the divine forgiveness. This implies that for DI the fundamental and determining factor in that period of Israel's history which led to the service was iniquity and involvement in guilt.

Childs made a strong intertextual connection between Isa 40:1 and 12:1: *You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.* According to him, Isaiah 12 looks forward in anticipation to the day when God's anger has abated, and he comforts her. And Isaiah 40 announces the beginning of God's comfort to his people, who have already experienced judgment. Again, Isaiah 12 is understood as a song of deliverance from Assyria, but chap 40 following 39,7 *Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon* suggests that the assurance of comfort is for those being freed from Babylonian oppression. Childs argues that "by the technique of intertextual exegesis the radically new word of deliverance announced by second Isaiah has been already adumbrated in chapter 12".<sup>12</sup> Thus the word of comfort in 40:1 was already a part of the prophetic word of first Isaiah. Rather than being a voice of the past, this word of promise is "the word of our God [that] stands forever". Childs finds another important link between first Isaiah and Isa 40 in the reference to Israel's 'won (iniquity) being forgiven (v.2).

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<sup>8</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 296-297.

<sup>9</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 297.

<sup>10</sup> C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, OTL (Philadelphia 1969), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 297-298.

## Isa 40:3-5

There is a new dynamics in verse 3: a voice that cries. Probably it was intentionally left unsaid whose voice it is. Some scholars believe that the one who called and those that are called are invisible powers or an allusion to the heavenly court. The important thing however is that the subject of verses 3ff is the carrying out of the order given by Yahweh in verse 1ff. Therefore, God's orders *to comfort*, *to speak*, and *to cry* have been heard. The voice that cries the words of vv. 3ff introduces the fulfillment of the divine order by giving a new one, an operation order "prepare the way". The act of comfort begins with the preparation of a way. The mode in which verses 3ff follow upon verses 1f gives credibility to the truth expressed in the epilogue namely: "*my words shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish....*" (Isa 55:6ff). His words are effective and efficacious. This means that once Yahweh says, "comfort my people", something must happen. His words are creative and thus cannot return to him empty. Comfort is to start with the preparation of the way! The word *naham* in this context therefore implies the *turning away of sufferings, which in certain circumstances mean helping, and so, an active intervention to turn the suffering away*. The comforting of this people starts with the preparation of the way, conducting them home via the desert.

The phrase, "in the wilderness" is to be taken along with the verb "to prepare" and not with the preceding clause, "a voice cries..." – in spite of the traditions represented by the LXX and the citations of this passage in the Synoptics (Matt 3:3; //s.) and John 1:23. Accentuation, parallelism and rhythm all testify to the proper connection.

The attention is not on the ringing out of the voice in the wilderness, but that in the wilderness – which separates the people of Israel from their homeland – the way should be prepared. There is nothing at all in the whole DI which answers to or picks up a "voice in the wilderness", while the book is full of the proclamation of the way through the wilderness. Thus this passage as applied to John the Baptist in the NT does not correspond exactly to the Isaian text which it cites. It is a very common trend in most of the OT citations in the NT. The NT writers often reformulated the OT writings in order to adapt them to the new situation (The Christ Event). The Idea of preparing a way is a special feature in DI. Certainly, there is a sort of influence of the Babylonian culture and religion here.<sup>13</sup> The highway for Yahweh is indicated by the fact that "the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed". In the Babylonian culture, the primary function of the processional highways was to allow the great processions to display the power and majesty of the gods in visible form. While the impression of majesty is created in the Babylonian processions by the images of the gods, the glory (*kabod*) of Yahweh is revealed in his action in history. Therefore, the highway which is to be made through the desert is the way on which Yahweh now gives proof of himself, in a new and quite serendipitous historical act. It is the way leading his people home. Divine intervention is required: it presumes release from Babylon. Making straight the way in the desert is figurative rather than literal. This motif is expanded in those sections or complexes of DI's proclamation which portray divine intervention in history, particularly in the commission of Cyrus to carry out the work which liberates Israel. The jussives in verse 4 continue the imperatives of verse 3. They give a hint that there are obstacles in the preparation of the way and these should be removed. Moreover, they suggest the historical reality of the proclamation.

In verse 5b the phrase, "And all flesh see it together" implies that when Yahweh's glory is revealed, it is for the whole world to see. At the revelation of the glory of God, the world and all its peoples cannot but realize that the Yahweh the God of Israel who apparently seemed defeated fulfills his word and restores his chosen people to live in the land of their ancestors. This motif too is often taken up again in the rest of

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 38-39. The "high way" has a peculiar place in the Babylonian hymns. The layout of the city of Babylon is itself a proof of the importance of the great processional highways. The highways of the gods and of the kings meet. This forms the background of this passage and many others in DI. For the Israelites in exile, these imposing highways were symbols of Babylonian might that had brought about Israel's downfall. This is the circumstances in which they heard the cry to "make straight in the desert a highway, a highway for Yahweh.... Our God" – a highway which will enable Israel to make her way homeward via the desert. It is to contrast the highway for the Babylonian gods.

the book. The message is given a divine authenticity with the phrase, “for the Mouth of Yahweh has spoken” (v 5c). Yahweh’s involvement is thus rooted in his words and this sets the stage for the next section.

### **Isaiah 40:6-8**

The similarity between these verses and v.3ff seems to prove that the sections of the prologue are skillfully merged parts of a single unit. The implementation of the command in verse 1 goes a step further. The voices in verses 3ff and verses 6ff seem to have the same function. They aim at comforting Israel. Most scholars particularly those who take this section as a call narrative, interpret the phrase “what shall I cry?” as an opposition to the command. This is a common phenomenon in the OT in most call narratives. In a way it summarizes perfectly the people’s complaint and frustration. The prophet in solidarity with his people spoke like a member of an outdone nation that no longer believes that a new beginning was possible. The objection of the prophet is expounded in verse 7. The statement in the first part of verse 8 *the grass withers, flowers fade* confirms and agrees with the objection of the prophet and his people. This is just to carry their negative state of mind to its climax in order to counter it with the positivity of the word of God in the second part of the verse. It gives a positive and optimistic response to their pessimism and objection.

Verse 8 constitutes the climax of the whole prologue. It can rightly be considered as the answer given to the prophet when he objected. While verse 8a agrees to the truth from the human perspective that there is nothing more to be done: crying or preaching to the dying remnant was pointless, verse 8b confronts the apparent hopelessness of the situation with the reality, durability, stability and permanence of the WORD of God - It is not part of decay: it stands, it persists forever.<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the promises which Israel once received. The objection of the prophet is thus counteracted. The word which he was required to cry (v 6a) does not belong to the realm of transitory things, but to that which is lasting, permanent and enduring. Nothing in existence has the power to make it invalid (cf. Matt 5:17-20) not even Israel’s desperate predicament. The word of God rather brings things from non-existence to existence. The word is determinant in this discourse. It is basic to and crucial for the proclamation of DI. Isaiah 55:10ff is a proof of this and develops its thoughts. Both passages (Isa 55:10ff and 40:8) form the frame within which DI’s proclamation is set and mounted. Israel has lost everything except the WORD of God committed to her keeping which at once took on a significance never thus far seen or even dreamt of. Therefore, we can rightly say that the word of God constitutes the starting point, the focus and the climax of DI’s proclamation.

### **Isa 55:6-13: The Epilogue of Deutero-Isaiah**

This passage has a simple structure: present in verse 6 are the imperatives; these are the last of the many which have been addressed to Israel. There is the substantiation in two parts that rounds off and gathers up all the rest. Verses 8-9 counter the questions asked by Israel full of doubt. This verse substantiates the promise by reference to the loftiness of the thoughts and ways of God, while verses 10f. do the same by saying that there can be no doubt that the saving word which God speaks to Israel will prosper. As in Isa 40:12-31, the reason why this final substantiation of the call to partake in God’s salvation is divided into two parts is that descriptive praise is similarly divided – God is praised in respect of his sovereign power and of his condescension. That Isa 55:6-11 are in the nature of a conclusion and summary also comes out in the fact that the terms used are those of a summary. In verses 8-9, God’s thoughts and ways are grouped together and contrasted with those of the human beings, and in verses 10-11, the words of God spoken to Israel, his promises and proclamations of salvation are subsumed under the term, the word of God, a synthesis found only in the prologue precisely in Isa 40:8.

### **Exegetical Analysis**

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 42.

### ***“To seek Yahweh”***

In the final section of DI, this expression has essentially the same meaning as in Amos 5:6 or Jer 29:12f. It is basically a cultic summon, a call to approach God and to seek him with sacrifice and prayer in the Temple. But even at the time of Amos it has lost its connection with the Temple, and taken on the broader meaning of turning towards God. The summons here continues the invitation in 55:1-3a (cf. Jer 29:12-13, also accompanied by the promise, "so will you live"). Since Isa 55:6ff. form a conclusion and summary of DI, the verses do not seem to intend a general invitation to seek God and invoke him. Rather, probably, they are to be taken in exactly the same way as the invitation in 55:1-3a – now, at this present moment, you, Israel, are given the offer of salvation, God's turning towards you, the return home, and the new life! There is an indication that he can be found *at the moment*, he is present at *this very instant*! It was of set purpose that DI clothed this offer in a form associated with the solemnities of Israel's worship. He wanted to make her see what was now at stake. Verse 6 itself gives a hint about the substantiation of the summons, to be developed in verses 8-11; he may be found he is near.

The rightful position of verse 7 is being contested among scholars. Most of them (for instance, Duhm) regard it as an addition made by a reader, either suggested by the words “thoughts and ways” in verse 6, or as an expansion of verse 6 which he took as a general exhortation. The “thoughts and ways” of mankind in verse 7 mean something entirely different from what they mean in verse 8. In verse 7 they are the transgressors' thoughts and ways, but in verse 8 they are those of Israel, whose doubting and lack of faith are contrasted with the thoughts and ways of God. The preposition “for” in verse 8 may substantiate verse 6, but not verse 7.

In verses 8-9 “thoughts” does not have the meaning, “reflections”, but, as often in the OT, it means plan or design. The ways are appropriate to the execution of these plans or designs. The subject is what God purposes and how he carries it out. The general terms, “thoughts and ways”, give a very suitable parallel between God and human beings, which brings out the contrast in a wonderful manner. This is typical of the way in which the Bible speaks about God and human beings. Usually, God is spoken of with terms and concepts related to humans – anthropomorphic language. Thus, God thinks his thoughts as men think theirs, and he goes his way as they go theirs. The author uses the phrase, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” to express the contrast between God and the humans. The bible rarely speaks of God without reference to the humans.

Even though the contrast between God's thoughts and ways and those of humans may seem general, they specifically refer to the one thing which God is planning and its implementation, as against this, Israel's indolence and acquiescence due to the situation in which she found herself. This is demonstrated by the way in which Isa 55:10-11 re-echoes Isa 40:6-7. That God's thoughts are higher above the heavens than the thoughts of the humans, recalls Isa 40:12-31. In order to counter Israel's resignation and weariness (40:27), DI extols God and magnifies him as creator and lord of history. DI does a similar thing in this last chapter. With reference to the boundless horizons of God's designs and ways, greater than humans can imagine the prophet inculcates confidence to his audience. Even though their actual state of mind militates against this, all things are possible with God.

Verses 10-11 can rightly be regarded as the core of the whole epilogue with the motif of the word of God. These verses introduce another important factor: the dependability of the word of God. Strictly speaking, the general statement made about God's words alludes to the word of salvation now being spoken to Israel. It shall certainly be accomplished. What is here said is given its force by the comparison in which it is formulated. Two processes are set side by side and compared; they are *per se* not of the same nature. The word expressly spoken to the needs of a particular situation and meeting with faith or lack of faith in it, understanding or lack of understanding is an entirely different matter from rain or snow in the world of nature. Just as with the parables of Jesus, it is precisely this difference in kind that makes the comparison possible, for it tries to say that these two very different matters have, at least, one thing in common: with both something is effected and thus it achieves its purpose. This factor which links the two must then be something that DI regards as characteristic of the word and of its understanding – through the word something takes place between an I and a you, a speaker and a hearer. According to this line of thought therefore, the word is not necessarily something with a content, but the instrument through which something

is effected. God's word is a word that does things. When God speaks, something comes about. This view of the word dominates the whole of OT prophecy – before DI it finds expression in Jeremiah. Moreover, it is the basic view in both Testaments. The special feature in the word of God as the prophets proclaimed it was that it had nothing to safeguard it. The word might be doubted, disdained, even silenced but that will not prevent it from accomplishing its purpose. The other side of the coin is the certainty that what it proclaims will be fulfilled. This motif of the word of salvation runs through the whole of DI's proclamation and forms its nucleus. However, listening and acceptance on the part of Israel is necessary for the message of salvation to be effective on them.

### **Theology and Relevance of the Prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and Epilogue (Isa 55:6-11) of DI**

In these passages of DI Yahweh is shown as the God of History. He rules over Israel and over all the nations (the whole world). He is a God who is able and willing to deliver his people from bondage. Just as in the first Exodus from Egypt, he hears his people's cry and stooped down to deliver them, thus he does once again at this second Exodus. This time around it is deliverance from oppression and slavery in Babylonian exile. God is therefore shown as a God of fidelity who is faithful to his words. The expression of the infallibility of the word of God in these passages cannot be overemphasized. His words endure forever: *Verbum Domini Maneat in Aeternum*. Everything must pass away but his word remains forever (Isa 40:8; cf. Matt 5:17-20). His word took flesh in a definitive way in the person of Jesus Christ. It was through his words that God made the world (cf. Genesis 1-2), maintains and sustains history.

It is the Word of God which made revival and restoration of the "dead" Israel possible. Thus God's words create and recreate. His word is not part of the "decay". Just as he called from non-existence into being the things that are (exist) in the first creation, he is able to recreate in this new situation of apparent chaos. Israel is called from none existence as a nation, submerged and swallowed up by the Babylonian power, to being a liberated, blessed nation. This is also an indication that "death", suffering, hardship and situations of apparent death do not have the last word on those whose God is the Lord, those who believe, trust and hope in God. Since God's thoughts and ways are different from those of the humans, it implies that even Israel's situation in exile considered as "death in its fullness" can be reversed contrary to Israel's expectation. In like manner, Nigerians should not give up hope in the present situation of things in the country. Just as death did not have the last word for Israel, in exile, there is every reason to hope that it will not have the last word for Nigeria. It was a message of hope given to Israel in exile and also good news for Nigeria in the present state of chaos in the nation.

God is shown also as a good shepherd who cares for his flock with tenderness, love and compassion. In the NT, Jesus is depicted as the good shepherd who cares for his flock with the qualities attributed to Yahweh in the OT. Just as in our passage of DI Yahweh goes out in search of his people in exile, so does Christ for all his followers especially those who have strayed (John 10:7-21). He loved his sheep to the point of laying down his life for them.

One of our tasks as Christians, and particularly as catholic theologians is to allow the Holy Scriptures to speak to us in our different life situations. The Second Vatican Council highlighted the normative character of the Holy Scriptures in *Dei Verbum*.<sup>15</sup> It is also with the same frame of mind that B. Childs asserts that "it is constitutive of Biblical theology that it be normative and not merely descriptive, and that it be responsive to the imperatives of the present and not just past".<sup>16</sup> With this frame of mind we acknowledge that these passages of DI although addressed to desperate Israel in exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. are still relevant to us today. There is no doubt for instance that the task to comfort or to console is given to all Christians but in a special way to Seminarians, Deacons, Priests and Religious. They are specially called to be "bearers" or "heralds of good tidings". It implies that they have the obligation to preach the

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<sup>15</sup> A. Flannery, *Vatican Council 11: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin 1981, 762.

<sup>16</sup> B. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*, Minneapolis 2002, 68.



message of hope and salvation to people. There is need therefore that they be in solidarity with the people. The people should be identified with particularly in their difficulties. The good news is to be given to the people according to their different life situations. The message has to be contextualized, putting the different concrete life situations into consideration. It should not be left just "hanging in the air" worse still handling it as something that is obsolete. There is no other option for Christians than to be bearers of good tidings in today's world where injustice, violence, restlessness, hatred and sufferings of different kinds bemoan us in the face.

A very important point to note is that one is not called to be a messenger or a "herald of good tidings" because the person is a perfect being. Rather, God chooses whomsoever he wishes from wherever he wishes and in a manner that he wishes. Most often, he chooses weak instruments and shapes them in such a way that they will be fitting for his work. He chooses weak vessels and reshapes them to suit his purpose. This is evident in almost all the call narratives and choice of God in the Scriptures ranging from Moses, Aaron, the judges, David, Solomon, the prophets etc. This awareness therefore, guards against pride and "holier than thou" attitude. God chooses the weak in order to shame the proud. God's criteria of choice are completely different from human criteria (cf. the choice of David from among his brothers; also 1 Sam 16:1-23 esp. vv 6-13). So the weakness demonstrated by DI in Isa 40;6b-8a should not scandalize anybody. It is surprising to most readers that rather than living above his compatriots, he was in solidarity with them in thinking that restoration was impossible. He too was a weak instrument of God. In spite of that, God used him to convey the message of salvation across to Israel in exile.

The section of the prologue of DI regarding the preparation of the way for Yahweh in the wilderness is repeated many times during the Advent and Lenten seasons. Thus the focus shifts from the literal sense of preparation and the wilderness to a transferred sense is spiritual. This means preparing the hearts/souls to be fitting places for the Lord who comes at Christmas or the risen Lord at Easter as the case may be. It implies making the hearts fitting places where God can dwell. It entails that the very lives of Christians should be a true manifestation of God's glory. In order words, Christians are called upon to be true Ambassadors for Christ in deeds not just in words. It is a spur that those who encounter the Christians in their ministries or apostolates may see and feel the glory of God, his presence, love and comfort.

Ministers of the word should therefore see it as one of their main duties to inculcate into God's people the fact that God is faithful. This is demonstrated by the stability and permanence of his Word as demonstrated by these two passages of DI. He keeps his promises. Thus one does not have to despair when one prays and does not get instant response to the prayers. These qualities of God are also for imitation. Christians are thus motivated to be reliable people too. The word of God is alive and active. It does not return empty without accomplishing what it was meant to do. God's word is creative not destructive. Christians should learn to speak creative words, words that build up rather than those that tear down.

The word of God is to be proclaimed without fear, with one's strength and whole being. It should be noted that the content of the message to be proclaimed is the "good tidings" and not "bad tidings". "The good tidings" as presented by this passage is the presence of God and his might - "Behold your God comes..." (vv 9-10). He comes to save. He is faithful to his promises since his word endures forever. Christians particularly the priest and religious should be people those who bring people close to God - not those who scare them away from God. Worse still, they should not through their attitudes cause others to loose faith. Even though they should not be prophets of doom, it is necessary to warn sinners to abandon their evil ways and return to God. Christians should always be ready to pardon offenses just as Yahweh pardoned Israel.

The need to be a true shepherd over God's flock entrusted to ones care cannot be overemphasized. Yahweh in this passage of Isaiah has given an indication of what it means to be a good shepherd. This implies knowing how to handle the "weak" and the "strong". It requires a differentiated treatment of the flock which entails paying attention to the individual not just handling them *en bloc*. In doing this, more attention should be given to the weak and the less privileged. It is not simply material or physical weakness. Spiritual weakness even calls for more attention. The good Shepherd knows how to make the way easy for every single sheep. In the words of St. Paul, this implies "being all things for all people". The Christians especially those in leadership positions should guard against being counted among those false shepherds

spoken about in Ezek 34:1-10 who rather than "feeding" and caring for God's flock, lazily "got very fat" by "feeding" and caring for themselves (cf. Ezekiel 34). This passage of DI is a call to imitate Yahweh (cf. Isa 40:11; Ezek 34:11-31), made manifest in Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd *par excellence*. He is the incarnate word of God. Thanks to him people are privileged to experience in a concrete way the permanent nature and the purposefulness of the word of God spoken in the prologue and Epilogue of DI.

## Conclusion

The word spoken by God is very important in the whole of Scripture and in a particular way in DI. The importance is clearly shown by the way DI carefully utilized the motif at the introduction and the conclusion of his message. The image of the word of God forms an *inclusion* to the whole message of the prophet. Two main qualities of the word of God are expressed at the beginning (Isa 40:8) and the end (Isa 55:11) of the book: *Verbum Domini Maneat in Aeternum* (durability) and alive and active (efficacy). His word endures forever and it does not go back to him without accomplishing that for which it was meant. These qualities of the word of God were employed by God through the prophet in order to assure Israel that God's promise of salvation was possible in spite of the apparent frustration and hopelessness. It was God's word that sustained Israel during the exile thus saving her from total despair. And it was through the efficacious word of God that the return of Israel from exile was possible. Thus there is no need to despair no matter how hopeless any situation may seem. There is still hope for even the distressed Nigeria nation.