

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

In this chapter the prophet opens the subject respecting the restoration of the Church with great force and elegance; declaring God's command to his messengers the prophets to comfort his people in their captivity, and to impart to them the glad tidings that the time of favor and deliverance was at hand, Isaiah 40:1, Isaiah 40:2. Immediately a harbinger is introduced giving orders, as usual in the march of eastern monarchs, to remove every obstacle, and to prepare the way for their return to their own land, Isaiah 40:3-5. The same words, however, the New Testament Scriptures authorize us to refer to the opening of the Gospel dispensation. Accordingly, this subject, coming once in view, is principally attended to in the sequel. Of this the prophet gives us sufficient notice by introducing a voice commanding another proclamation, which calls of our attention from all temporary, fading things to the spiritual and eternal things of the Gospel, Isaiah 40:6-11. And to remove every obstacle in the way of the prophecy in either sense, or perhaps to give a farther display of the character of the Redeemer, he enlarges on the power and wisdom of God, as the Creator and Disposer of all things. It is impossible to read this description of God, the most sublime that ever was penned, without being struck with inexpressible reverence and self-abasement. The contrast between the great Jehovah and every thing reputed great in this world, how admirably imagined, how exquisitely finished! What atoms and inanities are they all before Him who sitteth on the circle of the immense heavens, and views the potentates of the earth in the light of grasshoppers, - those poor insects that wander over the barren heath for sustenance, spend the day in continual chirpings, and take up their humble lodging at night on a blade of grass! Isaiah 40:12-26. The prophet concludes with a most comfortable application of the whole, by showing that all this infinite power and unsearchable wisdom is unweariedly and everlastingly engaged in strengthening, comforting, and saving his people, Isaiah 40:27-31.

The course of prophecies which follow, from hence to the end of the book, and which taken together constitute the most elegant part of the sacred writings of the Old Testament, interspersed also with many passages of the highest sublimity, was probably delivered in the latter part of the reign of Hezekiah. The prophet in the foregoing chapter had delivered a very explicit declaration of the impending dissolution of the kingdom, and of the captivity of the royal house of David, and of the people, under the kings of Babylon. As the subject of his subsequent prophecies was to be chiefly of the consolatory kind, he opens them with giving a promise of the restoration of the kingdom, and the return of the people from that captivity, by the merciful interposition of God in their favor. But the views of the prophet are not confined to this event. As the restoration of the royal family, and of the tribe of Judah, which would otherwise have soon become undistinguished, and have been irrecoverably lost, was necessary, in the design and order of Providence, for the fulfilling of God's promises of establishing a more glorious and an everlasting kingdom, under the Messiah to be born of the tribe of Judah, and of the family of David, the prophet connects these two events together, and hardly ever treats of the former without throwing in some intimations of the latter; and sometimes is so fully possessed with the glories of the future and more remote kingdom, that he seems to leave the more immediate subject of his commission almost out of the question.

Indeed this evangelical sense of the prophecy is so apparent, and stands forth in so strong a light, that some interpreters cannot see that it has any other; and will not allow the prophecy to have any relation at all to the return from the captivity of Babylon. It may therefore be useful to examine more attentively the train of the prophet's ideas, and to consider carefully the images under which he displays his subject. He hears a crier giving orders, by solemn proclamation, to Prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness; to remove all obstructions before Jehovah marching through the desert; through the wild, uninhabited, impassable country. The deliverance of God's people from the Babylonish captivity is considered by him as parallel to the former deliverance of them from the Egyptian bondage. God was then represented as their king leading them in person through the vast deserts which lay in their way to the promised land of Canaan. It is not merely for Jehovah himself that in both cases the way was to be prepared, and all obstructions to be removed; but for Jehovah marching in person at the head of his people. Let us first see how this idea is pursued by the sacred poets who treat of the exodus, which is a favourite subject with them, and affords great choice of examples: -

“When Israel came out of Egypt,
The house of Jacob from the barbarous people;
Judah was his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.”
Psalm 114:1, Psalm 114:2.

“Jehovah his God is with him;
And the shout of a king is among them:
God brought them out of Egypt” -
Numbers 23:21, Numbers 23:22.

“Make a highway for him that rideth through the deserts:
O God, when thou wentest forth before thy people.

When thou marchedst through the wilderness,
The heavens droppedâ€• -
Psalm 68:4, Psalm 68:7.

Let us now see how Isaiah treats the subject of the return of the people from Babylon. They were to march through the wilderness with Jehovah at their head, who was to lead them, to smoothe the way before them, and to supply them with water in the thirsty desert; with perpetual allusion to the exodus: -

â€œCome ye forth from Babylon, flee ye from the land of the Chaldeans with the voice of joy: Publish ye this, and make it heard; utter it forth even to the end of the earth; Say ye, Jehovah hath redeemed his servant Jacob: They thirsted not in the deserts, through which he made them go; Waters from the rock he caused to flow for them; Yea, he clave the rock, and forth gushed the waters.â€• Isaiah 48:20, Isaiah 48:21.

â€œRemember not the former things;
And the things of ancient times regard not:â€•

(That is, the deliverance from Egypt):

â€œBehold, I make a new thing;
Even now shall it spring forth; will ye not regard it?
Yea, I will make in the wilderness a way;
In the desert streams of water.â€•
Isaiah 43:18, Isaiah 43:19.

â€œBut he that trusteth in me shall inherit the land,
And shall possess my holy mountain.
Then will I say: Cast up, cast up the causeway; make clear the way;
Remove every obstruction from the road of my people.â€•
Isaiah 57:13, Isaiah 57:14.

â€œHow beautiful appear on the mountains
The feet of the joyful messenger, of him that announceth peace;
Of the joyful messenger of good tidings, of him that announceth salvation;
Of him that saith to Sion, Thy God reigneth!
All thy watchmen lift up their voice, they shout together;
For face to face shall they see, when Jehovah returneth to Sion.
Verily not in haste shall ye go forth,
And not by flight shall ye march along:
For Jehovah shall march in your front;
And the God of Israel shall bring up your rear.â€•
Isaiah 52:7, Isaiah 52:8, Isaiah 52:12.

Babylon was separated from Judea by an immense tract of country which was one continued desert; that large part of Arabia called very properly Deserta. It is mentioned in history as a remarkable occurrence, that Nebuchadnezzar, having received the news of the death of his father, in order to make the utmost expedition in his journey to Babylon from Egypt and Phoenicia, set out with a few attendants, and passed through this desert. Berosus apud Joseph., Antiq. Isaiah 10:11. This was the nearest way homewards for the Jews; and whether they actually returned by this way or not, the first thing that would occur on the proposal or thought of their return would be the difficulty of this almost impracticable passage. Accordingly the proclamation for the preparation of the way is the most natural idea, and the most obvious circumstance, by which the prophet could have opened his subject.

These things considered, I have not the least doubt that the return at the Jews from the captivity of Babylon is the first, though not the principal, thing in the prophet's view. The redemption from Babylon is clearly foretold and at the same time is employed as an image to shadow out a redemption of an infinitely higher and more important nature. I should not have thought it necessary to employ so many words in endeavoring to establish what is called the literal sense of this prophecy, which I think cannot be rightly understood without it, had I not observed that many interpreters of the first authority, in particular the very learned Vitringa, have excluded it entirely.

Yet obvious and plain as I think this literal sense is, we have nevertheless the irrefragable authority of John the Baptist, and of our blessed Savior himself, as recorded by all the Evangelists, for explaining this exordium of the prophecy of the opening of the Gospel by the preaching of John, and of the introduction of the kingdom of Messiah; who was to effect a much greater deliverance of the people of God, Gentiles as well as Jews, from the captivity of sin and the dominion of death. And this we shall find to be the case in many subsequent parts also of this prophecy, where passages manifestly relating to the deliverance of the Jewish nation, effected by Cyrus, are, with good reason, and upon undoubted authority, to be understood of the redemption wrought for mankind by Christ.

If the literal sense of this prophecy, as above explained, cannot be questioned, much less surely can the

spiritual; which, I think, is allowed on all hands, even by Grotius himself. If both are to be admitted, here is a plain example of the mystical allegory, or double sense, as it is commonly called, of prophecy; which the sacred writers of the New Testament clearly suppose, and according to which they frequently frame their interpretation of passages from the Old Testament. Of the foundation and properties of this sort of allegory, see De S. Poes. Hebr. Praelect. xi.

Verse 1

Comfort ye, comfort ye - "The whole of this prophecy," says Kimchi, "belongs to the days of the Messiah."

Verse 2

Double for all her sins "Blessings double to the punishment" - It does not seem reconcilable to our notions of the Divine justice, which always punishes less than our iniquities deserve, to suppose that God had punished the sins of the Jews in double proportion; and it is more agreeable to the tenor of this consolatory message to understand it as a promise of ample recompense for the effects of past displeasure, on the reconciliation of God to his returning people. To express this sense of the passage, which the words of the original will very well bear, it was necessary to add a word or two in the version to supply the elliptical expression of the Hebrew. Compare Isaiah 61:7; Job 42:10; Zechariah 9:12. $x-x^x$ (chattaah) signifies punishment for sin, Lamentations 3:39; Zechariah 14:19. But Kimchi says, "Double here means the two captivities and emigrations suffered by the Israelites. The first, the Babylonish captivity; the second, that which they now endure." This is not a bad conjecture.

Verse 3

The voice of him that crieth to the wilderness "A voice crieth, In the wilderness" - The idea is taken from the practice of eastern monarchs, who, whenever they entered upon an expedition or took a journey, especially through desert and unpractised countries, sent harbingers before them to prepare all things for their passage, and pioneers to open the passes, to level the ways, and to remove all impediments. The officers appointed to superintend such preparations the Latins call stratores. Ipse (Johannes Baptista) se stratorem vocat Messiae, cujus esset alta et elata voce homines in desertis locis habitantes ad itinera et vias Regi mox venturo sternendas et reficiendas hortari. - Mosheim, Instituta, Majora, p. 96. "He (John the Baptist) calls himself the pioneer of the Messiah, whose business it was with a loud voice to call upon the people dwelling in the deserts to level and prepare the roads by which the King was about to march."

Diodorus's account of the marches of Semiramis into Media and Persia will give us a clear notion of the preparation of the way for a royal expedition: "In her march to Ecbatana she came to the Zarcean mountain, which, extending many furlongs, and being full of craggy precipices and deep hollows, could not be passed without taking a great compass about. Being therefore desirous of leaving an everlasting memorial of herself, as well as of shortening the way, she ordered the precipices to be digged down, and the hollows to be filled up; and at a great expense she made a shorter and more expeditious road, which to this day is called from her the road of Semiramis. Afterward she went into Persia, and all the other countries of Asia subject to her dominion; and wherever she went, she ordered the mountains and precipices to be levelled, raised causeways in the plain country, and at a great expense made the ways passable." - Diod. Sic. lib. ii.

The writer of the apocryphal book called Baruch expresses the same subject by the same images, either taking them from this place of Isaiah, or from the common notions of his countrymen: "For God hath appointed that every high hill, and banks of long continuance, should be cast down, and valleys filled up, to make even the ground, that Israel may go safely in the glory of God." Baruch 5:7.

The Jewish Church, to which John was sent to announce the coming of Messiah, was at that time in a barren and desert condition, unfit, without reformation, for the reception of her King. It was in this desert country, destitute at that time of all religious cultivation, in true piety and good works unfruitful, that John was sent to prepare the way of the Lord by preaching repentance. I have distinguished the parts of the sentence according to the punctuation of the Masoretes, which agrees best both with the literal and the spiritual sense; which the construction and parallelism of the distich in the Hebrew plainly favors, and of which the Greek of the Septuagint and of the evangelists is equally susceptible. John was born in the desert of Judea, and passed his whole life in it, till the time of his being manifested to Israel. He preached in the same desert: it was a mountainous country; however not entirely and properly a desert; for though less cultivated than other parts of Judea, yet it was not uninhabited. Joshua (Joshua 15:61, Joshua 15:62) reckons six cities in it. We are so prepossessed with the idea of John's living and preaching in the desert, that we are apt to consider this particular scene of his preaching as a very important and essential part of history: whereas I apprehend this circumstance to be no otherwise important, than as giving us a strong idea of the rough character of the man, which was answerable to the place of his education; and as affording a proper emblem of the rude state of the Jewish Church at that time, which was the true wilderness meant by the prophet, in which John was to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Verse 4

Crooked - The word כָּסָב (*akob*) is very generally rendered crooked: but this sense of the word seems not to be supported by any good authority. Ludolphus, Comment. ad Hist. Aethiop. p. 206, says that in the Ethiopia language it signifies clivus, locus editus: and so the Syriac Version renders it in this place, כָּסָב (*arama*): Hebrew, כָּסָב (*aramah*), tumulus, acervus. Thus the parallelism would be more perfect: the hilly country shall be made level, and the precipices a smooth plain.

Verse 5

The salvation of our God - These words are added here by the Septuagint: $\text{ἡ σωτηρία τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν}$ (*eth yesuath Eloheynu*), as it is in the parallel place, Isaiah 52:10. The sentence is abrupt without it, the verb wanting its object; and I think it is genuine. Our English translation has supplied the word it, which is equivalent to this addition, from the Septuagint.

This omission in the Hebrew text is ancient, being prior to the Chaldee, Syriac, and Vulgate Versions: but the words stand in all the copies of the Septuagint, and they are acknowledged by Luke, Luke 3:6. The whole of this verse is wanting in one of my oldest MSS.

Verse 6

The voice saint Cry - A voice saith Proclaim - To understand rightly this passage is a matter of importance; for it seems designed to give us the true key to the remaining part of Isaiah's prophecies, the general subject of which is the restoration of the people and Church of God. The prophet opens the subject with great clearness and elegance: he declares at once God's command to his messengers, (his prophets, as the Chaldee rightly explains it), to comfort his people in captivity, to impart to them the joyful tidings, that their punishment has now satisfied the Divine justice, and the time of reconciliation and favor is at hand. He then introduces a harbinger giving orders to prepare the way for God, leading his people from Babylon, as he did formerly from Egypt, through the wilderness, to remove all obstacles, and to clear the way for their passage. Thus far nothing more appears to be intended than a return from the Babylonish captivity; but the next words seem to intimate something much greater: -

And the glory of Jehovah shall be revealed;

And all flesh shall see together the salvation of our God.

He then introduces a voice commanding him to make a solemn proclamation. And what is the import of it? that the people - the flesh, is of a vain temporary nature; that all its glory fadeth, and is soon gone; but that the word of God endureth for ever. What is this, but a plain opposition of the flesh to the spirit; of the carnal Israel to the spiritual; of the temporary Mosaic economy to the eternal Christian dispensation? You may be ready to conclude, (the prophet may be disposed to say), by this introduction to my discourse, that my commission is only to comfort you with a promise of the restoration of your religion and polity, of Jerusalem, of the temple, and its services and worship in all its ancient splendor. These are earthly, temporary, shadowy, fading things, which shall soon pass away, and be destroyed for ever; these are not worthy to engage your attention in comparison of the greater blessings, the spiritual redemption, the eternal inheritance, covered under the veil of the former, which I have it in charge to unfold unto you. The law has only a shadow of good things; the substance is the Gospel. I promise you a restoration of the former, which, however, is only for a time, and shall be done away, according to God's original appointment: but under that image I give you a view of the latter, which shall never be done away, but shall endure for ever. This I take to be agreeable to St. Peter's interpretation of this passage of the prophet, quoted by him, 1 Peter 1:24, 1 Peter 1:25: All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away; but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you. This is the same word of the Lord of which Isaiah speaks, which hath now been preached unto you by the Gospel. The law and the Gospel are frequently opposed to one another by St. Paul, under the images of flesh and spirit: Having begun in the spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? Galatians 3:3. - L.

All the Godliness thereof - All its glory - For כָּסָב (*chasdo*) read כָּסָב (*chadu*); the Septuagint and Vulgate, and 1 Peter 1:24.

Verse 7

The grass withereth - The whole of this verse is wanting in three of Kennicott's and five of De Rossi's MSS., and in a very correct and ancient MS. of my own, and also in the Septuagint and Arabic.

Surely the people - Verily this people - So the Syriac; who perhaps read כָּסָב (*haam hazzeh*).

Because the spirit of the Lord - When the wind of Jehovah - רוּחַ יְהוָה (*ruach Jehovah*), a wind of

Jehovah, is a Hebraism, meaning no more than a strong wind. It is well known that a hot wind in the east destroys every green thing. Compare Psalm 103:16. Two MSS. omit the word $\text{x}^{\text{TM}}\text{x}''\text{x}\cdot\text{x}''$ (Yehovah), Jehovah.

Verse 9

O Zion, that bringest good tidings $\hat{\text{œ}}$ daughter, that bringest glad tidings to Zion $\hat{\text{œ}}$ - That the true construction of the sentence is this, which makes Zion the receiver, not the publisher, of the glad tidings, which latter has been the most prevailing interpretation, will, I think, very clearly appear, if we rightly consider the image itself, and the custom and common practice from which it is taken. I have added the word daughter to express the feminine gender of the Hebrew participle, which I know not how to do otherwise in our language; and this is absolutely necessary in order to ascertain the image. For the office of announcing and celebrating such glad tidings as are here spoken of, belongs peculiarly to the women. On occasion of any great public success, a signal victory, or any other joyful event, it was usual for the women to gather together, and with music, dances, and songs, to publish and celebrate the happy news. Thus after the passage of the Red Sea, Miriam, and all the women, with timbrels in their hands, formed a chorus, and joined the men in their triumphant song, dancing, and throwing in alternately the refrain or burden of the song: -

$\hat{\text{œ}}$ Sing ye to Jehovah, for he is greatly exalted;
The horse and his rider hath he cast into the sea. $\hat{\text{œ}}$
Exodus 15:20, Exodus 15:21.

So Jephthah $\hat{\text{œ}}$ s daughter collected a chorus or virgins, and with dances and songs came out to meet her father, and to celebrate his victory, Judges 11:34. After David $\hat{\text{œ}}$ s conquest of Goliath, $\hat{\text{œ}}$ all the women came out of the cities of Israel singing and dancing to meet Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music; $\hat{\text{œ}}$ and, forming themselves into two choruses, they sang alternately: -

$\hat{\text{œ}}$ Saul has slain his thousands:
And David his ten thousands. $\hat{\text{œ}}$
1 Samuel 18:6, 1 Samuel 18:7.

And this gives us the true sense of a passage in the sixty-eighth Psalm, which has frequently been misunderstood: -

$\hat{\text{œ}}$ Jehovah gave the word, (that is, the joyful news),
The women, who published the glad tidings, were a great company;
The kings of mighty armies did flee, did flee:
And even the matron, who stayed at home, shared the spoil. $\hat{\text{œ}}$

The word signifying the publishers of glad tidings is the same, and expressed in the same form by the feminine participle, as in this place, and the last distich is the song which they sang. So in this place, Jehovah having given the word by his prophet, the joyful tidings of the restoration of Zion, and of God $\hat{\text{œ}}$ s returning to Jerusalem, (see Isaiah 52:8), the women are exhorted by the prophet to publish the joyful news with a loud voice from eminences, whence they might best be heard all over the country; and the matter and burden of their song was to be, $\hat{\text{œ}}$ Behold your God! $\hat{\text{œ}}$ See on Psalm 68:11 (note).

Verse 10

His reward is with him, and his work before him. $\hat{\text{œ}}$ His reward is with him, and the recompense of his work before him $\hat{\text{œ}}$ - That is, the reward and the recompense which he bestows, and which he will pay to his faithful servants; this he has ready at hand with him, and holds it out before him, to encourage those who trust in him and wait for him.

Verse 11

Shall gently lead those that are with young $\hat{\text{œ}}$ The nursing ewes shall he gently lead $\hat{\text{œ}}$ - A beautiful image, expressing, with the utmost propriety as well as elegance, the tender attention of the shepherd to his flock. That the greatest care in driving the cattle in regard to the dams and their young was necessary, appears clearly from Jacob $\hat{\text{œ}}$ s apology to his brother Esau, Genesis 33:13: $\hat{\text{œ}}$ The flocks and the herds giving suck to their young are with me; and if they should be overdriven, all the flock will die. $\hat{\text{œ}}$ Which is set in a still stronger light by the following remark of Sir John Chardin: $\hat{\text{œ}}$ Their flocks, $\hat{\text{œ}}$ says he, speaking of those who now live in the east after the patriarchal manner, $\hat{\text{œ}}$ feed down the places of their encampments so quick, by the great numbers that they have, that they are obliged to remove them too often, which is very destructive to their flocks, on account of the young ones, who have not strength enough to follow. $\hat{\text{œ}}$ Harmer $\hat{\text{œ}}$ s Observ. i., p. 126.

Verse 16

And Lebanon is not sufficient - The image is beautiful and uncommon. It has been imitated by an apocryphal writer, who however comes far short of the original: -

For all sacrifice is too little for a sweet savor unto thee:
And all the fat is not sufficient for thy burnt-offering.
Judith 16:16.

Does not the prophet mean here that all the burnt-offerings and sacrifices that could be offered were insufficient to atone for sin? That the nations were as nothing before him, not merely because of his immensity, but because of their insufficiency to make any atonement by their oblations for the iniquities which they had committed? Therefore the Redeemer was to come to Zion, etc.

Verse 19

And casteth silver chains And forgeth for it chains of silver - For tsoreph (tsoreph), the participle, twenty-seven MSS., five ancient, and three editions, read tsaraph (tsaraph), pret. third person.

Verse 20

Chooseth a tree that will not rot - For what? To make a god out of it! The rich we find made theirs of gold and silver; the poor man was obliged to put up with a wooden god! From the words $\text{he that hath no oblation chooseth a tree}$, we may learn that the gold and silver necessary to make the graven image was first dedicated, and then formed into a god! How stupid is idolatry! Strange that these people did not perceive that there could be no help in these molten and wooden idols!

Verse 21

Have ye not known - On this verse Kimchi has a very interesting comment, an extract of which I subjoin. $\text{The whole world may be considered as a house built up; heaven its roof; the stars its lamps; and the fruits of the earth its table spread. The Master of the house is God, blessed for ever; and man is the steward into whose hand all the business of the house is given. If he always consider in his heart that the Master of the house is continually over him, and that he keeps his eye upon his work, and if in consequence he acts wisely, he shall find favor in the eyes of the Master of the house. But if he find wickedness in the house, then will he remove him from his stewardship. The foolish steward does not think of this; for as his eyes do not see the Master of the house, he saith in his heart, I will eat and drink what I find in this house, and will take my pleasure in it; nor shall I be careful whether there be a master over this house or not. When the Lord of the house marks this, he comes and expels him from the house speedily, and with great anger; therefore it is said, Isaiah 40:23, He bringeth the princes to nothing. It seems that this parable had been long in use among the Jews, as our blessed Lord alludes to it in his parable of the unjust steward. Or did the rabbin, finding it to his purpose, steal the parable from the Gospel? In both places it has great and peculiar beauties.}$

Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth Have ye not understood it from the foundations of the earth? - The true reading seems to be mimmosedoth , to answer to merosh in the foregoing line. It follows a word ending with mem , and out of three (mems) concurring, it was an easy mistake to drop the middle one.

Verse 22

As a curtain As a thin veil - It is usual in the summer season, and upon all occasions when a large company is to be received, to have the court sheltered from heat or inclemency of the weather by a velum, umbrella, or veil, as I shall call it; which being expanded on ropes from one side of the parapet wall to the other, may be folded or unfolded at pleasure. The psalmist seems to allude to some covering of this kind in that beautiful expression of spreading out the heavens like a curtain. - Shaw's Travels, p. 274.

Verse 24

And he shall also blow upon them And if he but blow upon them - The Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate, and MS. Bodl., with another, have gam (gam), only, without the conjunction vau (vau), and.

Verse 26

Left up your eyes on high - The rabbins say, He who is capable of meditating on the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, and does not meditate on them, is not worthy to have his name mentioned among men.

Verse 28

There is no searching of his understanding And that his understanding is unsearchable - Twenty-four MSS., two editions, the Septuagint and Vulgate, read veein (veein), with the conjunction vau (vau).

Verse 31

