

Haftarat Va'etchanan ואתחנן

Torah: Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11

Haftarah: Isaiah 40:1–26

The Announcement of Comfort

General Overview

This passage represents Isaiah at his best. Of course, that statement is a hyperbole; all of his writing is superb and demonstrates the same outstanding literary qualities. But this passage is perhaps, one of his most well known. It introduces the second half of his book and centers on comforting God's people, as the opening words indicate to us. The reason for the comfort, according to the text, is because God is coming! Therefore, Israel is to make the way ready for His arrival. The haftarah concludes with a great section comparing the follies of idolatry with the blessings of knowing the one true God, the One who is coming.

Connection to the Parasha

This haftarah, like most of the ones assigned to the book of Deuteronomy are not necessarily designed to be running commentaries on the text of the Torah. (This is basically the purpose of most of the other haftarot, but not necessarily true with those from Deuteronomy.) However, in a sense, they are. Deuteronomy is, in essence, not just a list of God's teachings on righteous living. It is in its very format and structure, a covenant document. In it, the Torah takes the form of a Divine covenant, which it is. The haftarot from Isaiah assume the existence of that covenant. They encourage Israel to keep that covenant and warn them of the consequences for not being faithful to it.

Furthermore, the haftarot from Isaiah present to us a grand and majestic view of God. This is the same with the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, particularly in Parashat Va'etchanan, God is depicted as the God who elects, the God who loves, and the God who is the supreme Judge of all mankind, as well as the God who keeps covenants.

Therefore, instead of being running commentaries on the specific passages of Deuteronomy, the corresponding haftarot comment on the general covenantal themes originating in Deuteronomy.

There is, however, an additional purpose for these haftarot that the sages had in mind when they chose them. In the Hebrew calendar, they all fall after Tisha B'Av (the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, which corresponds roughly to late July or early August), the day of the commemoration of the destruction of the First and Second Temples. The haftarot preceding this tumultuous day were designed to warn Israel to avoid such disasters in the future. The readings following Tisha B'Av, beginning with our present haftarah were designed to give Israel comfort in the wake of such disasters.

Thus, according to Rabbi Hertz,

The Prophetic Reading of this Sabbath is the first of the seven “Haftarot of Consolation” that follow the Fast of Av. They consist of sublime messages of encouragement that have sustained and fortified Israel during its ordeals of cruelty and persecution throughout the ages.¹

We might add that not only have they ministered to a persecuted Israel, but they have also been the source of untold comfort and encouragement to millions of believers in Yeshua as well.

There is one additional point. The student might notice that this section of Isaiah is highly theological in that there is much that it teaches us about God, particularly that He is a judging God, a merciful God, and a comforting God.

Exposition

Many believers acclaim chapter 40 of Isaiah as truly one of the greatest chapters in the whole Bible. Its words of comfort and assurance are almost unparalleled in the entire Bible. Brief commentaries like this one cannot do justice to such a magnificent passage as the one before us. All we can do is begin to unpack some of its precious truths and spur the students on to further personal study.

It seems clear that the main point of this haftarah is the comfort of God and how it affects God’s people. Consequently, the outline will reflect that. Hence, the approach to this haftarah will examine . . .

- I. The Announcement of Comfort
- II. The Assurance of Comfort
- III. The God of Comfort
- IV. The Hindrance to Comfort

In this excerpt from Haftarat Va’etchanan, we will focus on section I, The Announcement of Comfort.

I. The Announcement of Comfort

“*Nachamu, Nachamu, Ami* (נחמו נחמו עמי)” are certainly some of the most assuring and comforting words that God has ever uttered to His people. This Hebrew statement opens our passage of comfort in Isaiah chapter 40; so right from the start we are afforded a breathtaking insight into the very heart of God.

The Hebrew word translated “comfort” (*nachmu* – נחמו) means “to comfort” or “to console.” It is in the Piel stem, which means that it is in the intensive form. God not only wants to wish comfort and consolation upon Israel for all that she has been through, but He wants to intensify this consolation.

There is a closely connected Hebrew word (though not of the same root). It is a synonym. It is the word *rachamim* (רחמים). When God uses this word to comfort Israel, as He does on occasion, He is communicating something very tender to His people. He is comparing His care for them to that which a mother has for her children. Just as there is a special bond that every mother possesses for those to whom she has given birth, so too does God have such a bond for His people. In

fact, it is safe to assume that God created that bond and relationship that mothers have for their children for this very purpose — to serve as living examples for how much God cares for us.

These two closely related words form the thrust of the opening words of this haftarah. The discipline was delivered. The children of Israel and Judah sinned greatly. Because of that God delivered them a severe blow by sending to them the mighty armies of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Now, as the children are still crying, deeply wounded, hurting, and wondering whether or not their Father still cares for them, the Holy One, like a tender mother to her child, takes them close to Himself, hugs them, and speaks very tender and assuring words to His disciplined children.

A. Speak to the Heart

How does God comfort His people? The first thing God does is to speak to His choice prophet and instructs him to “speak kindly to Jerusalem” (40:2). Actually, the word “kindly” is not found in the Hebrew rendering. Rather, the verse reads literally, “speak to the heart of Jerusalem.” Moreover, the first word “speak” is a command in the plural, signifying that God does not just have Isaiah in mind, but instead He is instructing all of His servants to speak to the heart of Jerusalem. Although God speaks specifically to Jerusalem, in reality, He has all of Israel in mind, Jerusalem being, the symbol of the whole of Israel.²

B. It Is Finished!

What is the basis for this comfort? The latter part of verse 2 tells us. There are two pieces of good news that Judah needed to hear. First, the Lord says to them, “that her warfare has ended.” Naturally, the warfare of which Isaiah had been speaking was that of the Assyrians. They in fact invaded Israel and Judah during his own lifetime. But, this raises a question of the timing of this section of the book, specifically this haftarah.

The Assyrians are hardly mentioned in the whole second part of his book, rather the Babylonians and the Persians are. This means that apparently, when he spoke these words in 40:1–2, Isaiah was looking far ahead of his own time to when the Babylonians would come and go and the Persians would deliver the people of Judah from exile. Moreover, we can therefore, say that

in writing it he [Isaiah] had primarily in mind the purpose of giving comfort to his countrymen after they would go into exile, and of promising that God would deliver them from this exile.³

While we believe that it is true that Isaiah wanted to comfort a future generation by telling them that that particular period of warfare was finished, this prophecy also had particular application to the people in his own day. Again, citing Dr. MacRae’s viewpoint,

I am convinced that these chapters, although dealing with events more than a century after Isaiah’s time, had a very definite purpose in relation to the people of his own day.⁴

In the first part of his book, Isaiah spends a great deal of time confronting the sins of his own generation, but there were also those who were loyal to the prophet, and consequently, loyal to God. One of the main thrusts of this, the second part of Isaiah's book,

was to give comfort to the believers and to assure them that God had great plans for blessing those who would be true to Him.⁵

Hence, not only did Isaiah look ahead to a time when the present warfare (the Assyrians and coming Babylonians) would be complete, but he also wanted to assure God's people that her sin would be completely paid in full.

Thus, we read in the latter part of verse 40:2 that Judah's, "iniquity has been removed, that she received of the Lord's hand double for all her sin."

C. "Double" or "Equivalent"?

The word translated "double" is from the Hebrew root *kaful* (כפל). Usually it means "double," or "multiply." In the Bible, the word *kaful* may have a slightly different nuance, especially in this context. Herein, it is difficult to picture how the discipline levied by God for Israel's sin, that is, the destruction of Jerusalem, including the First Temple and the subsequent Babylonian exile, is giving Israel *double* for all of their sin.

Instead, Dr. MacRae has, what we consider to be a better approach to this word in this context. He suggests that,

The solution to the difficulty lies in recognition that the Hebrew word used here, one of several that are commonly translated "double" can be properly considered as similar to the English "double" when used to represent a person who looks so much like another that it is difficult to distinguish them. Each of them is the "double" of the other. It might be clearer to render it "equivalent," "counterpart," or "substitute."⁶

If this is the correct understanding of the Hebrew word, then this interpretation throws a different light on our understanding of the fulfilment of this prophecy.

We can see here a good example of the nature of predictive prophecy, especially that of Isaiah's. Often, the prophet is not aware of chronological time charts. He merely writes as God gives him revelation and he concentrates on meeting the needs of the people of his own generation. In this case, it was enough for them to know that their time of trouble will end. They would not only be taken from their Land, but would also return to it.

In addition to that, however, they also needed to know that God would deal with their sin and in a just and compassionate manner. They did not know specifically how God would do this. The *how* is the theme that Isaiah is just now beginning to develop and will find its most complete expression in chapter 53.

The prophecies that were written were hardly ever written in the proper eschatological time sequence. When they were, sometimes there is little or no transition between a prophecy intended for Isaiah's contemporaries and a

promise intended for future generations, or both. That is one reason why biblical prophecy is so difficult to properly interpret.

Thus, Isaiah is not saying that Israel will receive double for their sins. That does not make too much sense. Rather,

the phrase looks forward to the time when God will declare that the equivalent for their sin of all believers has been paid. No man could pay this penalty; only the divine Servant of the Lord could do it.⁷

This is where the prophet is heading in the following chapters. For now, this constitutes the announcement of comfort from the God of all comfort.

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 776.

² Ibid.

³ Allan A. MacRae, *Studies in Isaiah*. 206.

⁴ Ibid, 207.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Allan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, p. 42.

⁷ Ibid.