CHAPTER TEN

ISAIAH 40:1–11—THE PROLOGUE OF ISAIAH 40–55

INTRODUCTION

The present chapter looks at Isa 40:1–11, commonly called the prologue, the prelude or even the overture of Isa 40–55. I shall first look at the idea of a prelude in order to explore how fitting a description this is for Isa 40:1–11. The majority of the chapter then investigates the ways in which Isa 40:1–11, as a prologue, guides readers towards a certain understanding of the subsequent material. In the present context, my focus is limited to the geographical aspects of Isa 40–55. In particular, I shall examine how Isa 40:1–11 invites the audience / reader to identify the literary persona present in the subsequent material in Isa 40–55 with particular groups of people outside the text.

1. Isaiah 40:1–11—A Prologue

In literature and drama, a prologue sets the tone for a text and alerts the readers to its key ideas by introducing a sample of the major themes, ideas and imagery that are to be expanded upon throughout the rest of the text. The ancient Greek prologos, for example, served as an explanatory first act. A character, often a deity, appeared on the empty stage to explain events prior to the action of the drama.  

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3 Encyclopaedia Britannica (online). Likewise, in musical terminology, a prelude is a short piece of music which serves as an introduction to succeeding movements of a work that are usually longer and more complex.
A prologue furthermore has an agenda that it wishes to impose upon the reader. By highlighting certain aspects of the text (and not others), it directs the reader to see the following text, in its entirety, through a specific lens.\footnote{Stoebe, “Überlegungen zu Jesaja 40,1–11”, p. 104, Barstad, “Isa 40:1–11”, p. 225, Lund, Way, p. 72. See also Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, p. 179, who regards Isa 40:1–8 as an apologia for the message that is to follow in Isa 40–48, and van der Woude, “Can Zion Do Without the Servant”, pp. 109–110, who states that Isa 40:1–11 functions as the key to Isa 40–55, preparing us for what lies ahead and making us curious and eager to read it. } A prologue is commonly written by the author of the subsequent work, composed at the end of the writing process when all of the other pieces of the work have been completed. When this is the case, we can assume that the selection of topics highlighted in the prologue reflects the interests of this person and points us to the way in which s/he would want us to understand the entire text. In the specific case of Isa 40–55, the prologue in Isa 40:1–11 would thus highlight what the authors/final redactor considered to be of primary importance in the subsequent material.

The situation in Isa 40:1–11 may, however, be more complicated. First, all of Isa 40:1–11 might not introduce the whole of Isa 40–55. Those scholars who regard Isa 40–55 as the result of gradual growth tend to assume that Isa 40:1–11 reflects this growth and is therefore a text that is composite in origin. In short, a new prologue and epilogue would have been added for every new edition of Isa 40–55.\footnote{This trend was already in place in the first half of the twentieth century. See, for example, Elliger, Verhältnis, pp. 265; 268, who argues that Isa 40:1–11 is an editorial unit, where 40:9–11 forms a framework with 52:7–10, while Isa 40:1–8 forms an outer framework with Isa 52:13–53:12. } Kiesow, for example, differentiates between a core section, comprised of verses 3ab–5ba, a subsequent layer, consisting of verses 1–2, 5bb, an even later layer consisting of verses 9–11 and the final layer consisting of verses 3aa and 6–8. He argues that each of these smaller parts introduce distinct, chronologically successive, editions of Isa 40–55. Moreover, as discussed at length in chapter 1, these scholars postulate different geographical settings and audiences for each specific edition. It is commonly held that the earliest material in Isa 40:1–11, which introduces the core collection of Isa 40–55, was composed in Babylon, while the later material in Isa 40:1–11, written to fit the subsequent revisions of Isa 40–55, was composed in Judah by exiles returned from Babylon.\footnote{Kiesow, Exodustexte, pp. 201–202. See also Schmitt, “Prophetie und Schultheologie”, } Other scholars do not recognise a Babylonian