CHAPTER THREE

THE PROBLEM OF COMFORT:
SECOND ISAIAH’S RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENT
AND ITS INTRACTABLE PROBLEM

“How will I assure you?
What could I imagine for you, O daughter Jerusalem?
What will I compare to you,
that I might comfort you, O virgin daughter Zion?
For your shattering is as great as the sea.
Who will heal you?”

The historical setting into which the poetry was deployed has a significant impact on the interpretation of Second Isaiah. It is altogether appropriate that interpreters attend to the rhetorical setting of the utterance given Second Isaiah’s presentation as both heavily vocative lyric poetry and as prophecy. However, simply because we are able with relative certainty to assign Second Isaiah to a particular period of years and probable geographic locale, these assignments alone do not solve the problems of its interpretation. First, the setting to which we are able to assign Second Isaiah is one that we know relatively little about. Second, the act of establishing a historical reconstruction does not constitute interpretation in itself though reconstructions have at times been offered in its place. As I indicated in the first chapter, Clifford’s position has garnered wide appeal. His position is that the purposeful intent behind Second Isaiah is to urge departure from Babylon and return to Palestine. In this chapter I will further question that position and the similar claims of Brueggemann since both scholars allow their historical reconstruction of the sequence’s situation to

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1 Lam 2:13.
2 As Paul D. Hanson, Isaiah 40–66 (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 3, writes: “As with all of the prophets, so too with Second Isaiah it is mandatory that the interpreter be well aware of the historical and, to the extent possible, the social realities that the prophet is addressing.”
3 See e.g., the comments of Rainer Albertz, Israel in Exile (trans. David Green; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 3. Further discussion of the lack of evidence for forming a clear picture of exilic life appears below.
overly influence their understanding of its meaning. Instead, I will suggest that the central issue with which Second Isaiah wrestles should be determined primarily from the issues Second Isaiah addresses, the embedded speeches of the audience that appear within Second Isaiah, and Second Isaiah’s allusions to other biblical texts. I will argue that the driving dilemma Second Isaiah wrestles with is the tension between Yhwh’s stated intention to reconcile with Zion and the difficulties inherent in such a reconciliation, not least among these being the audience’s doubts about Yhwh’s trustworthiness. The audience’s likely unwillingness to accept the proclaimed comfort, evidenced in their cited speech, gives rise to a response in the divine voice that both confirms and rejects their fears in its attempt to persuade the audience of the certainty of divinely proclaimed comfort. I will support my claim about the centrality of tension over reconciliation by examination of Second Isaiah’s citations of the speech of its implied audience, its allusions to Lamentations, the claims of the sequence’s opening lines, and the further development of the comfort theme and its juxtaposition with indictment throughout the course of Second Isaiah. This central concern is thus a matter of relationship and one that is open and resists simple solution. This is, in short, the ‘intractable problem’ of Second Isaiah. This notion, drawn from the study of modern poetic sequences, will therefore be employed to consider how this problem plays out in the poetry of Second Isaiah.

1. Situating Second Isaiah

Widespread agreement exists that Second Isaiah ought to be dated to the events surrounding the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Ref-

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4 See ch. 1 for a discussion of the divergence between Clifford’s approach and that of the present study. See also Walter Brueggemann, Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 9.

5 R.E. Clements, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah,” Int 36 (1982): 122, writes that Second Isaiah is “usually dated with confidence in the period of 546–538 bc,” Likewise, David L. Petersen, The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 59, corroborates a date for this text near the end of the exile writing, “much in Isaiah 40–55 reflects the time just as Cyrus was defeating the Mesopotamian powers….Since these chapters know about Cyrus, seem to refer to Babylon about to fall, reflect certain aspects of the Cyrus edict, and do not know about the difficult realities that those who returned faced, we may situate this literature in the general period of 550–530.” Scholars who agree with this general date also include Richard J. Clifford, Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah (New York: