One reason why Isa. 40,1–11 holds a special attraction for the exegete is its location. Placed at the beginning of the so–called Deutero–Isaian corpus, and serving as a kind of “prologue”, it is not unreasonable to suspect that verses 1–11 “set the tone”, and introduce samples of ideas and imagery in the subsequent work.

In this, however, there also lies a danger. Any reading of these first verses that does not take into account other parts of Isa. 40–55, but is based rather on “intuition”, extrinsic circumstances, or preconceived ideas borrowed from secondary literature, is bound, in the long run, to determine unduly the way we understand the remaining parts of the Deutero–Isaian corpus.

From a methodological viewpoint, any reading of these first, important paragraphs, should be synoptical, with continuous attention to related ideas and expressions throughout Isa. 40–55. Since lexemes, idioms, and motifs can never be understood outside their semantic contexts, meanings must first be established within the whole Deutero–Isaian corpus. Because the unknown author of Isa. 40–55 also draws on other biblical traditions, it may sometimes be necessary to look elsewhere for valid contexts. Only when no effort has been spared in the attempt to establish meaning on text–internal grounds, should one

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proceed further. Then, and only then, it is advisable to look for possible extra-textual referents. Even if such a reading procedure should always be followed, it becomes more crucial when dealing with poetic texts, where references to historical surroundings may sometimes be extremely difficult to establish.

The reason why I deal with Isa. 40, 1–11 as a unit, is, nevertheless, in the first place, convention. It has often been assumed that a division follows after v. 11. However, we should realize that the delimitation of units in Second Isaiah is notoriously difficult, if at all possible.

After 40, 1–11, a series of small units follows. In Isa. 40, 12–14 we find a set of rhetorical questions, a well known feature of Isa. 40–55.2 The purpose of these questions is to underline that YHWH is unrivalled. The stressing of the incomparability of YHWH is, likewise, well known in Deutero-Isaiah.3 Vv. 13–17 deal with the nothingness of the nations. This, too, is a well known motif in Isa. 40–55.4 In vv. 19–20, following another rhetorical incomparability question in v. 18, we find a description of idol production. Idol production is also a well known motif in Isa. 40–55.5 Throughout all the 16 chapters of the “book” a similar parallel motif emerges.

The text of Deutero-Isaiah is self-propagating and cumulative, spatial, rather than linear. It constantly quotes and alludes to itself and to other texts, unremittingly repeating but, above all, varying words, expressions and dominant ideas. Just when we think we have reached the end of a “unit”, we are already well into the next one. It is simply impossible to stop and say: This is where it ends! In this way, we may reach the conclusion that the whole text of Isa. 40–55 is one large literary creation.


5 K. Holter, Second Isaiah’s Idol–Fabrication Passages, BBET 28 (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).