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La Revue Baptiste de Théologie**

**Volume 8, Numbers 1-2  
Spring/Fall 1998**

**The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie  
Volume 8, Numbers 1-2 (Spring/Fall 1998)**

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*The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie* is published semi-annually by Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary. It seeks to provide a forum for theological reflection and discussion from an evangelical Baptist perspective. Views expressed in *The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie* should be considered as the personal opinions of the individual authors and are not to be taken as the official perspectives or policies of Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary.

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

1 Year (\$20.00 in Canada/\$22.00 outside Canada)

2 Year (\$36.00 in Canada/\$40.00 outside Canada)

3 Year (\$54.00 in Canada/\$60.00 outside Canada)

4 Year (\$70.00 in Canada/\$78.00 outside Canada)

**Please remit in Canadian or American funds**

## **SUBMISSIONS**

Manuscripts in either English or French, editorial correspondence, and books for review, should be sent to:

Editor,  
*The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie*,  
Heritage Baptist College and Theological Seminary,  
175 Holiday Inn Drive,  
Cambridge, Ontario, Canada  
N3C 3T2

## **ABSTRACTS**

*The Baptist Review of Theology/La Revue Baptiste de Théologie* is abstracted in *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, *New Testament Abstracts*, and *Old Testament Abstracts*.

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## **ISSN**

International Standard Serial Number 1192-4241

## **PRINTED BY**

Goddard Bowman Graphics Inc.  
3555 Fourteenth Ave., Unit 14,  
Markham, Ontario L3R 0H5

**“WHERE THERE’S A WILDERNESS, THERE’S A WAY!”:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISAIAH 40:3-5  
FOR HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY**

Keith Grant

**INTRODUCTION**

As roads and highways serve as a medium for travel, communication, commerce and pilgrimage, they have tended throughout history to represent the vitality of a nation. The roads of Ancient Israel were no exception, as both internal and international roads shaped the daily life of the nation, and provided a birth-place for its cities. Israel was, in fact, located along the routes which connected the major civilizations at the extremes of the Fertile Crescent. The inter-regional and smaller back-roads of Israel were the means of establishing political and economic unity among the physically and culturally disparate regions of the small nation.<sup>1</sup>

It is the daily significance of highways and roads which imbues the theological conception of “way” with its more figurative meaning. Yahweh used the imagery of roadways to meet with His people in the very place where daily life was enacted. The image’s multiplicity of meaning embraces a teleological process of conformity to the ways and work of Yahweh in creation, redemption, and promise.

In Isaiah 40, the prophet takes advantage of the breadth of meaning captured by “way,” within the specific context of Yahweh’s work of redemption and restoration among his displaced people Israel. The eschatological message of the prophet provides a point of contact and a forum for discussing the relationship between the geography of Israel, its history in exodus and exile, and the theology of Yahweh’s Glory. The various perspectives on the text combine in a unity of meaning and message.

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<sup>1</sup> Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, 2nd ed., trans. A. F. Rainey (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), p. 43.

History and geography provide the people of God with a medium in which to experience relationship, and play not a small role in the particular expression of what becomes the theology of the people of faith. Yohanan Aharoni affirms that, "The historical geography of the Holy Land is a reflection of the mutual relation between God and Israel as understood and interpreted by Israel's national faith."<sup>2</sup> As geography shapes the lifestyle and identity of a people through the course of history, it provides both context and terms of reference for the creation of theology and relationship with God.

The particular terrain and climate of Israel gave shape to the development of its religion. While the neighbouring nations allowed the geography to become the end of their devotion in idolatry, Israel recognized its potential to shape their devotion to Yahweh. The cultic faith of Israel was given framework by its geography; its home in Zion was central and accessible, while its festivals were celebrated in accordance with the agrarian seasons. The same agrarian nature of the land's economy and the nation's location on the international thoroughfare presented Israel with the constant temptation to embrace the fertility gods of the nations. The working out of the divine imperative for Israel to enjoy but not worship the elements of its geography, characterized the historical development of the nation. The geography of Israel, then, presented God's chosen people with both practical and spiritual realities.

However, geography for Israel was far more than a context for, or even determinant of faith. Land in particular was intimately associated with the promises of Yahweh for His people. Elmer Martens insightfully observed that, "Land is the 'middle term' between Israel and Yahweh. Land is a tangible symbol of Yahweh."<sup>3</sup> Exile from either the Garden or the land of promise, or the hope of return to either state, for example, was a theological experience for the people of Israel, which shaped their historical

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<sup>2</sup> Aharoni, *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 109.

development. David Clines succinctly communicates the daily reality of the intimacy of these terms of reference within Ancient Israel:

Thus, what can a promise of Yahweh to a man be but a promise of a divine-human relationship?; yet what value can such a promise have to a Hebrew man if it does not include his posterity?; and what kind of a posterity can a man envisage that does not dwell together in its own land?<sup>4</sup>

Finally, geography and history are given ultimate theological significance by God's willingness to inhabit both. The Presence of God with the nation of Israel (cf. Ex 33:14), and also Christian affirmation that the advent of Immanuel is realized with the incarnation of Christ (John 1:1-18), represents God's willingness to occupy the space and time of his people for the purposes of relationship and redemption. Temporal realities such as history and geography receive their validation and import from their creation by, and relation to the purposes of Yahweh.

#### **The Wilderness and The Way: Isaiah 40: 3 - 5**

A voice of one calling:  
"In the desert prepare  
the way for the **LORD**;  
make straight in the wilderness  
a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
and rugged places a plain.  
And the glory of the **LORD** will be revealed,  
and all mankind together will see it.  
For the mouth of the **LORD** has spoken" (Isa 40:3-5).

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<sup>4</sup> David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 1986), p. 31.



The realities of geography, history, and theology combine with particular relevance in the prophetic message of Isaiah. The geographical significance of the text stems from both the language of its description, and the physical dislocation of Israel from the land. The prophetic *Sitz im Leben* places Israel in the reality of exile, remembering the exodus, and in anticipation of restoration. The prophet's theological message confronts the people with the barren wilderness of their spiritual condition and presents them with the "way" of Yahweh in both ethic and promised restoration.

### Geography: A Highway through the Desert

The geographic landscape of the prophet's oracle is dominated by two typically Near Eastern features: wilderness and a highway. While the pericope is hardly specific in its description, the general characteristics of each provide the text with much of its meaning. If there is not consensus as to the exact location of the wilderness in question, it is agreed that Isaiah's use of the terms *midbar* and *araba* implies a "hostile, uninhabited, uninviting region."<sup>5</sup> The territory which constitutes the vague boundaries of the desert is characterized, not so much by the imagined tracts of sandy waste (those regions are further south than Palestine's borders), as a barren region with sparse vegetation, sporadic rainfall, and scanty population.<sup>6</sup> Aharoni and Avi-Yonah recognize the significance of this geographical feature in writing, "The influence of the desert is extreme in the history of the Holy Land, and an awareness of this wilderness is echoed throughout the pages of the Bible."<sup>7</sup>

The wilderness is described by the prophet not simply on its own merits, but as the setting of the other prominent geographical feature in the

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<sup>5</sup> Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1972), III, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*, rev. ed. (New York: MacMillan Publ. Co., Inc., 1977), p. 14; A.L. Breslich, "Desert," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (hereafter, ISBE), ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1956), II, 831-32; Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, p. 35-6.

<sup>7</sup> Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, *Atlas of the Bible*, p. 14

text—the highway. Its location on the land bridge of the Fertile Crescent profoundly shaped Israel's identity by its proximity to the major highways. The arteries of the Ancient Near East were the two routes joining the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations: the Way of the Sea (or *Via Maris*; cf. Isa 8:23) and the King's Highway (Num. 21:22).<sup>8</sup>

Roads and highways served an important function in the facilitating of both commercial and military expeditions. The transformation of frequented paths and ruts to maintained highways by the laying of earth and stones was gradually necessitated by their use.<sup>9</sup> Once constructed, the roads generally were maintained and improved by each subsequent generation, since “the broken landscape of Palestine makes it so difficult to develop new routes or to modify the old ones that the pattern remained more or less fixed at all times.”<sup>10</sup> The maintenance of roads was actually established in the Torah, with the need to keep paths accessible to the cities of refuge (Deut. 19:3).

As the text alludes (Isa. 40:4), the highways were constructed by being “raised over the plain and driven through a cutting in the hills” especially following the method of the Persians.<sup>11</sup> Isaiah speaks in other places of the process of clearing the desired pathway of stones and building up the road (45:12; 62:10; 57:14; 49:11; cf. Jer. 18:15). At any rate, the text's imperative to clear and cut suggests that the highway is not one of the existing arteries.<sup>12</sup>

The witness of Scripture, extra-biblical texts and archaeology attest to the fact that the highways were maintained primarily for royal use, either military or commercial. There is a distinct possibility that the prophet also alludes to the need, due to the infrequently maintained roads, of royal processions to send ahead messengers whose duty it was to assure that the roads were passable.<sup>13</sup> A specific example of this practice is found in the El

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, p. 45-47; Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, *Atlas of the Bible*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup>Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, trans. D.G. Schley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1985), pp. 119-20.

<sup>10</sup>Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup>Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, III, 28n.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. also D. A. Dorsey, *Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, 1990).

<sup>13</sup>J. Ridderbos, *Isaiah*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p. 336.

Amarna letters (EA 199), in which a ruler from Bashan declares that he has prepared the king's roads as far as Busruna.<sup>14</sup> There is a similar proclamation in Genesis 41:43 which preceded Joseph as an official of Egypt.

The geography influences the meaning of the text as far as it provides terms of reference for both the terrain and the practice of road-building. Wilderness served as both a metaphor, *and* the very physical reality which separated the exiled people from the Land of Promise. An understanding of some of the road-building practices of the day also promotes a greater awareness of the levelling intentions of Isaiah's declaration.

### **History: Exodus, Exile, and Restoration**

The historical framework of Isaiah's message is a collage of past, present and future, as he assimilates the events of the exodus from Egypt, the exile under Babylon, and the hope of restoration to the land. The impending reality of exile is the impetus which necessitated the message of the text, but it was the memory of the first exodus and anticipation of a restored remnant which gave it shape.

The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC (cf. 2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 36; Jer. 52), and the dislocation of a significant portion of the population, marked the beginning of a period of exile until the liberating edict of Cyrus in 538/7 BC.<sup>15</sup> An often overlooked fact is observed by Claus Westermann: "A considerable part of the population was not, in fact, deported; and this also implies the persistence of no small measure of intellectual and religious life" (cf. Lamentation).<sup>16</sup> The dislocation of exile removed the people from the land, alienated them from the cult which formed their identity, and forced them to eke out a new existence, both at home among the ruins, and in the land of foreigners. John Bright recognizes the persistence and faithfulness required by God's people in exile:

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<sup>14</sup>Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Peter R. Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 5.

The marvel is that her history did not end altogether. Nevertheless, Israel both survived the calamity and, forming a new community out of the wreckage of the old, resumed her life as a people.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly God was faithful to His people, and Isaiah 40 speaks of the hope of restoration that was given as words of comfort (cf. v.1). However, there is no doubt that an Israel displaced from her homeland struck at the core of her identity. Psalm 137 attests to the intimate connection for the Israelites between their land, their worship, and the subsequent displacement of exile:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill (vv. 1-5).

The agonizing perspective of the exile is that which dominates the historical picture of Isaiah's prophecy, and as it relates to the other historical and geographic elements, creates the context for theology.

Although the context for the prophecy is unreservedly the exile, there is in the text a remembrance of the way in the wilderness prepared by Yahweh for the exodus from Israel. There is within Isaiah's oracles a precedent for drawing on both the language and experience of the former to give a historical and theological perspective to the exile at hand:

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

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<sup>17</sup>John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 343.

“At first my people went down to Egypt to live;  
lately, Assyria has oppressed them” (Isa. 52:4).

The emphasis of the comparison throughout Isaiah’s oracles is to bring Israel to obedience in response to Yahweh’s faithfulness in history and in light of His promised restoration. Peter Ackroyd referring to the text, says, “The march across the desert will be a new and more glorious Exodus.”<sup>18</sup> While the Promised Land gave a home to the nation of Israel it was certainly the Exodus and its wandering journey which gave it character. The Exodus, with its motifs of liberation, conquest of the might of Egypt, deliverance from the sea, the giving of the law, and the miraculous daily bread, could not help but become a frame of understanding as the people attempted to articulate their despair and their hope of return.

### **Theology: Procession of Yahweh’s Glory**

The geographical terms of reference and historical contexts coalesce to create Isaiah’s prophetic theology. The theology of this pericope is dominated primarily by the revelation of Yahweh’s glory. This theme of revealed glory is the primary message and ministry of the prophet. God’s glory is, and will be revealed in some very tangible, incarnational ways which require a response of spiritual and ethical repentance. While the prophetic theology finds its first fulfilment in the exilic restoration, there is also an aspect of eschatological fulfilment. These themes draw upon the geographic and historical allusions to speak directly to the nation’s contemporary spiritual reality. The setting of the desert wilderness, and the cutting of a way through that wilderness are constant referents for the revealing of Yahweh’s glory.

### **Wilderness**

Having established the geographical sense of the terms “wilderness” and “way”, as they refer to the text at hand, it may also be instructive to examine briefly the theological significance they bring to the text. Wilderness, in the

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<sup>18</sup>Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia*, p. 109.

Israelite experience, shifted from place to experience to motif. The wilderness, as a place of wandering exodus, was the birthplace of much of Israel's national character, and her collective and cultic memory would claim the wilderness as a paradigm for interpreting not only the past, but also new events in the nation's story (cf. Deut. 26:5f; Ps. 78, 136:16; Amos 2:10).<sup>19</sup> However, von Rad insightfully observes that Israel could not honestly remove a sense of dread from the memory of its wilderness experience, or worse, the possibility of a like situation:

The idea of a life in the wilderness became more and more incomprehensible to Israel after her settlement in the arable land and when she had come to enjoy the blessings of that land.<sup>20</sup>

It is such a loss of collective memory which gave need to the prophet's message of urgency. As a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the nation, the concept of wilderness draws from both the physical and the period of wandering disobedience.<sup>21</sup> It is in this wilderness that the "way" of Yahweh is prepared, and where the glory of Yahweh is revealed.

## Way

The theology of "the way of the LORD" (*derekh Yahweh*) in the Old Testament has a multiplicity of meaning, but is centred in passages which associate "way" with the knowledge of God in face to face relationship (cf. Ex. 33:12-23; Ps. 67:1-2). Just as *derekh*, in physical terms, refers to both the road and the journey, so in anthropology and theology, "way" is an

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), I, 280-85.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Cf. J. Ridderbos, *Isaiah*, p. 338. Cf. also George A. F. Knight, *Servant Theology: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 40-55* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984). Knight affirms the theological application of wilderness: "The wilderness represented for their thinkers and prophets the concept of chaos and disorder; it figured for them that area of life where God's ordered world was set at nought; thus it could even be a state of soul as well as a geographical area" (p. 11).

expression of both a person's character and their subsequent activity.<sup>22</sup> Even those passages which emphasize the transcendence of God's ways (Isa 55:6-9) have as their goal the conformity of human ways to His. The law is also referred to as "the way" (Deut. 5:5), as it is an expectation of living which unites God's character with His people's action.

The use of *derekh* in this context of restoration brings to Israel the promise of both God's activity by His returning of the remnant to the land, and also a more intimate relationship with Yahweh, and a knowledge of His character. The image of a highway suggests that Yahweh is willing to dwell among and travel with His people. Certainly it is He who gives the journey direction and a goal, but the text speaks of God's presence among the everyday realities of His people. John Calvin comments that

The Lord had nothing to do with walking, and had no need of a road; he shows that we are so closely united to him that what is done on our account he reckons to be done to himself.<sup>23</sup>

Again, God illustrates that He is willing to become intimately involved in the comings and goings of life (Ps. 121:7-8), in the reality of life in exile, as He did in the Exodus.<sup>24</sup> Isaiah 40:3-5, in both its promise of revelation, and the metaphor it uses to describe it, speaks of God's incarnation among His people.

"Way," then, is at once a highway, a promise of restoration and renewed relationship with God, and a call to repentance. Wilderness is a barren expanse of land, a setting for historical drama, and a desperate spiritual

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<sup>22</sup>Cf. Wilhelm Michaelis, "Way" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1967), V, 74. Cf. also K. Koch, "derekh," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. J.T. Willis, G.W. Bromiley and D.E. Green, eds. G.J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1978), III, 271.

<sup>23</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), III, 204.

<sup>24</sup>John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968), p. 18.

condition. These theological features form the background to the revelation of the glory of Yahweh.

### Revelation of Yahweh's Glory

That the revelation of Yahweh's glory is the central theological concept within this pericope is clear for two reasons. First, the text explicitly states that the climax of the activity of preparing, levelling, and raising is the revelation of God's glory (v. 5). Secondly, there is a resonance within the text of the cultic ceremonial processions of the Ancient Near East which draws not only from the common well of religious experience, but also uses it as a foil for the very tangible glory of Yahweh.

The glory of Yahweh (*kabod Yahweh*) as a theological term in the Old Testament is rich with meaning, if somewhat imprecise in definition. Despite the diversity, most references to Yahweh's glory speak in some sense of an evidential reality of God's character or power (e.g. Ex. 33:12-23; 2 Chron. 7:1-4; Ps. 8, 96; Isa. 6:2). Very often, the phrase points to some form of visible manifestation or theophany. The cultic understanding of *kabod* is usually associated with the tabernacle or temple (cf. Ex. 16:10, 40:34; 2 Chron. 5: 13-14; Ezek. 9:3). Certainly an essential element of God's glory is His holiness—that fear of the “wholly other” which recognizes there is a danger in allowing the glory to abide with impurity.<sup>25</sup> The tabernacle and temple traditions, however, assume that Yahweh is willing to enter a covenant of “self-disclosure” with His people—he is intent to dwell or *shakan* among humanity.<sup>26</sup> There is an incarnation of God's glory with humanity, in both the imagery of “way,” and in the act of revelation. The themes of glory and incarnation coalesce again in their fullest sense in the apostle John's understanding of Jesus' ministry:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.  
We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only,

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<sup>25</sup>Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup>J. N. Oswalt, “*Kabod*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R.L. Harris *et al* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), pp. 426-28.



who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

The act of preparation in Isaiah's imperative assumes that if Yahweh is to dwell with His people, they must be obedient, reflecting His glory in both character and action.

The revelation of Yahweh's glory as the central theme is highlighted in the pericope by the cultic processional allusions as much as by the activity of making a way in the wilderness. It led many scholars to assume an allusion to the cultic processions of Mesopotamia, and particularly those of the god Marduk.<sup>27</sup> Claus Westermann cites this account of a cultic procession:

From hostile Elam he entered upon a road of jubilation,  
a path of rejoicing ... of success to Su-an-na.  
The people of the land saw his towering figure,  
the ruler in (his) splendor.  
Hasten to go out, (Nabu), son of Bel,  
you who know the ways and the customs.  
**Make his way good, renew his road,  
make his path straight, hew him out a trail.**<sup>28</sup>

The study of roads and highways in the ancient world attests to the existence of processional roads whose primary function was fulfilled during annual cultic ceremonies; in the case of Babylon it affirmed the relationship between Marduk and Nabu to the throne.<sup>29</sup> That the comparison is intended is clarified by the prophet's observation in Isaiah 46 of such a procession.

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<sup>27</sup>Cf. James Muilenbury, *Isaiah 40-66 in The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G.A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), V, 426-27. It should also be noted that Christopher North (*The Second Isaiah* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1964], p. 75) suggests the pericope "may even be reminiscent of pre-exilic festivals in which the Ark of 'the King of glory' was carried in procession to the temple (cf. Ps. 24:7-10)."

<sup>28</sup>Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 38, following Ebeling (emphasis is added).

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Jacob Klein, "Akitu," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (hereafter *ABD*), ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I, 138-40. See also E.R. Dalgish, "Nebo," in *ABD*, IV, 1054-56.

Oppenheim makes reference to a *via sacra* or sacred way in Babylon, Assur, Hattusa, and Uruk, each of which had a cultic processional function. The roads were well paved, and (in Babylon) duly decorative.<sup>30</sup> Westermann makes a crucial point about the relevance of this practice to the reading of the Isaiah 40 text. He states that the processions fulfilled the purpose of displaying the power and majesty of the gods in visible form.<sup>31</sup> It is precisely this visible manifestation of glory which Isaiah draws upon; there is a visual emphasis in the text, with revealing and seeing actions paralleled. The imagery of the cultic procession, however, sets the revelation of Yahweh's glory in sharp contrast with the Babylonian ceremonies. While Marduk and Nabu show themselves only in their images, "what reveals Yahweh's glory is his action in history."<sup>32</sup> Yahweh comes to establish His kingdom among his restored people. Isaiah elsewhere affirms that the gods of the nations are impotent, not only because they are made of corruptible materials, but also because there is nothing to compare to Yahweh's establishment in history of His people (Isa. 44), or the return of Israel from the Exile. Restoration, the hope of the oracle, is a tangible incarnation of God's glory in human history.

## Repentance

The language of geography and history also combine to give the theology of the pericope an emphasis on repentance and ethical conformity to the ways of Yahweh. The command to "make way" confronts the Israelites with the necessity of making ethical and moral changes, so that they are capable of receiving God's revelation. The imagery of levelling the wilderness becomes, in the light of ethics and the law, a reminder that disobedience or unfaithfulness are obstacles for the establishment of God's purposes for Israel, which must be removed. There is evidence for such a hermeneutic of repentance both within the oracles of Isaiah and beyond. In another

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<sup>30</sup>A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 139. Cf. also H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), p. 192 for brief discussion of the construction of Sennacherib's royal road.

<sup>31</sup>Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 38-9.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

wilderness scene where Yahweh's glory will be revealed, Isaiah speaks of a similar "way":

And a highway will be there;  
it will be called the Way of Holiness.  
The unclean will not journey on it;  
it will be for those who walk in that Way;  
wicked fools will not go about on it (35:8).

The prophet uses the same imagery of road preparation in yet another oracle of repentance and humility:

And one shall say, "Build up, build up, prepare the way,  
remove every obstruction from my people's way."  
For thus the high and lofty One  
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
"I dwell in a high and holy place, and also with him who is  
of a contrite and humble spirit,  
to revive the spirit of the humble,  
and to revive the heart of the contrite" (57:14-5).<sup>33</sup>

These texts speak with promise of Yahweh and His people walking in the same "way," should Israel have a heart of repentance, to remove those things which prevent the manifestation of Yahweh's glory. In the context of the exile, there is an admonition to the community of faith to align life with the expectations of Yahweh so that the covenant promises of restoration can be fulfilled (Deut 28). Christopher Wright observes that the displaced Israelites saw "the Exile as divine judgement and the people's eventual restoration to the land as a token of a renewed relationship with God."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. J.M. Roberts, "Isaiah in Old Testament Theology," *Interpretation*, 36 (April 1982), p. 130-143.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1990), p. 4.

Such restoration could be realized only if the people heeded the prophetic word of preparation.

The prophet Malachi likewise cites Isaiah in the context of judgement and the need for repentance (3:1-2). The message of repentance preached by John the Baptist is unanimously affirmed by the Gospels as a realization of Isaiah's oracle. The preparation needed for Messiah's arrival is repentance, "for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3: 1-12; Mark 1:3-8; Luke 3:2-17; cf. John 1:19-28; Luke 7:27). Certainly, the text alludes to the action of God in history, but there is also a responsibility for His people to conform their lives to the way set out in the law.

### **Eschatological Fulfilment**

The primary context of Isaiah's prophecy is the exile and hope of restoration from captivity. However, the same oracle is imbued with significance in both eschatological and new covenant contexts which take advantage of the geographical and historical richness of the passage. The emphasis within the text on glory, "an established part of eschatological expectation" is enough to intimate that the oracle will find fulfilment beyond its initial context.<sup>35</sup> The idea that 'all flesh' (Isa 40:5) will see God's glory is reminiscent of one aspect of the Old Testament conception of the last days (cf. Isa. 72:19; Isa. 66:18-19). The prophet Malachi alludes to a messenger preparing the "way of the LORD" in the context of an eschatological day of judgement (3:1-2). The wilderness of Malachi's generation was the spiritual sterility that they tried to mask with superficial sacrifices. As the establishment of God's way in Isaiah would be His work of restoration, so in Malachi, Yahweh's way will be the establishment of universal reign beginning with the day of judgement.

The New Testament also draws on the theology and imagery of Isaiah 40, affirming the need for repentance because of the advent of Jesus, the Immanuel of the prophet (Isa. 7:14). Jesus was not only the incarnation of God's glory (John 1:14; Heb. 1:3), but He also was the way to the Father (John 14:6). While the world waits for Christ's return, the message of the

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<sup>35</sup>Von Rad, "*kabod*" in the Old Testament," in *TDNT*, II, 242.

prophet remains for God's people, until God reveals His glory, not incarnationally, but in power and holiness.

### Concluding Reflections

History and geography provide theology with a context of daily reality and terms of reference for expressing its message; the meeting of these in Scripture gives them meaning. The prophet Isaiah's oracle in 40:3-5 affords the reader with an opportunity to examine the relationship between the three perspectives, within an overall theological framework. The geography of the passage is the source of its language, its history the context. "Wilderness" and "way" become more than physical features as they speak to the historical context of Israel in exile, with the promise of restoration and new relationship. Studying the prophetic word from the perspective of geography and history grounds the theology in its intentions, keeps the message within the context of life. Such an approach is required for the study of a God whose desire is to live among His people.

The prophet's message consists of the imminent revelation of Yahweh's glory in the historical restoration of Israel to Palestine, and in the eschatological establishment of His kingdom. That message of glory meets the people in the wilderness of their experience, and confronts them with both the necessity of repentant lives and the promise of a God who dwells with His people. The pervasive truth of the message is affirmed and replayed by the Baptizer, as the "way" becomes a person who willingly endures the wilderness, promising at long last, the end to His people's wandering.

There is also the role of the prophet to consider. Isaiah 40 represents something of a defining for the prophetic message. The message of comfort and tender speaking is to replace the oracles of judgement. Interestingly, the prophetic message is attributed only to "a voice of one calling" (v. 3). The messenger, any person, must fall into the background while the glory of Yahweh is revealed and takes centre stage!<sup>36</sup> As John the Baptist does his work of preparation, he similarly steps aside as Jesus brings the prophecy to fruition: "He must become greater, I must become less" (John 3:30)

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<sup>36</sup>Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, pp. 26-7.

Theology and ministry similarly find their truest calling as they let the glory of God speak clearly.

The role of the prophet is also moulded by his message. There is a very real sense in which proclaiming the word of God becomes a preparation for His glory—an expression of “making a way in the wilderness.” Von Rad has observed that the whole task of this prophet is to prepare the way for Yahweh.<sup>37</sup> There is something in the very speaking of God’s words which levels the wilderness (Isa. 55:11). The wilderness is daunting, with barren desolation, (whether it is a tract of land between Babylon and Palestine, or a kind of spiritual wasteland of sin), and it takes a courageous messenger to confront the people who must trust God to make a way with them. Yet that is the role of the prophet, and the prophetic responsibility of all who follow the “Way.”

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<sup>37</sup>Von Rad, *TDNT*, p. 242.