

No comparison: Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11

## **We know things only insofar as we can describe their likeness.**

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

Isaiah faced a challenge. How was he to awaken an exiled community from the lethargy of despair? The people's confidence had been shattered. Their entire worldview was drained of its mimetic properties. Former glories lay in ruins. Now the people lived in the land of the dreaded enemy, reciting litanies of lamentation while ghouls goaded them with "Sing us some of those songs of Zion, miserable losers! Celebrate the memory of what no longer exists." Psalm 137 records the agony of exile and culminates in a cathartic curse.

But in the taunt lurks a solution, a strategy used by untold generations of the conquered: Take the lemon of the oppressor and make lemonade. Using a series of rhetorical questions, the prophet pushes aside the numbness that is our common defense against pain. Who created this? He asks. Who sustains that? Don't you know? Haven't you heard? Why do you keep on chanting that your way is hidden from Yahweh, that your plight is disregarded by God? Don't you know? ("Of course you know!") Haven't you heard? ("Of course you have!")

Remember the temple psalms of praise, Isaiah urges. You've heard of God's might because you've sung about it! The descriptions of God's mighty acts of creation in the oracle are retrieved from hymns of praise, the ones you're remembering now. Yes, the accompanying rituals are gone, but the power of the worshipping community is awakened in the oracle of comfort. Yahweh (not Marduk) created all this. God (not the king of Babylon) is in control.

One of the prominent themes of these hymns is the incomparability of God, a cultural trope that signifies the highest form of praise. To whom can you compare God? Who is God's equal? There is no other like the One. This is a common biblical assertion, given expression in the common names Mi-ka-'el and Mi-ka-ya(hu) and Micah "Who is like God/Yahweh?" It is found among the oldest poetry in the Bible,

“Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods? Who is like you, awesome in splendor?”

Incomparability is also related to ineffability. We know things only insofar as we can describe their likeness. So the use of this convention also expresses the ultimate mystery of God, and acknowledges that our language and symbols can never adequately grasp the being and will of God. I was taught that pious believers do not pronounce the name of God, not because that name is too holy, but because we believers must avoid assuming that it is possible to grasp God, to fully understand God or to control God.

Incomparability is also related, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to the monotheistic claim that there are no other gods. There are no equals or even standards of measure that might be mustered to quantify God’s greatness. Not the idols—even the skillfully made ones. Not the gods—even the beneficent ones. And certainly not the princes and rulers who like to play God—not even the powerful ones.

Having affirmed this, however, it is just as evident that the Bible is full of such implicit comparisons. While the effects of God’s acts are described by explicit comparisons, or similes, God is always described metaphorically. God is a rock, a fortress, a redeemer/avenger of blood, a shepherd, a doting mother, a bridegroom, a warrior, a consuming fire, a sound of sheer silence. A plethora of penultimate metaphors constitute the divine epithets of the Bible’s prophetic and hymnic literature.

In this oracle of comfort the prophet uses the hymnic traditions of the pre-exilic temple to introduce the theme of Yahweh’s sovereignty over nature and history. It contains a subtle polemic against the astral deities whose worship was at the heart of Babylonian religion. The assertion of God’s sovereignty over the nations is intended to rouse the people from their stupor of lamentation and reestablish their faith.

Psalms 147 reflects some of the same themes as Isaiah’s oracle of comfort. God’s mighty works as creator and redeemer are rehearsed here from a postexilic perspective. God is a healer and a reverser of fortunes, a lifter of the downtrodden and a capsizer of the wicked. God takes note and takes care. The metaphors bring us into the vicinity of the great mystery. It is fitting to sing praise and give thanks to

this God, for when we do this together, the community is reconstituted and sustained.

Finally, there are the characteristic aspects of God's delight and desire. This underappreciated and underutilized theological concept reflects a divine aesthetic that is deeply ethical. It belies the typical Christian images of the God of the so-called Old Testament as a wrathful, vengeful, punishing foil to the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Yahweh's delight is not in the strength of the horse or the speed of the runner, but in those who worship (fear) the One and hope in that loving loyalty.

This brings us back to the essential theme of Isaiah's comfort oracle. Those that wait and hope for Yahweh will be strengthened and renewed. These verbs do not denote static inactivity but active expectation. Those who wait, then, live in the faith that the God who created and sustains, who is incomparable, who overturns the plans of the most powerful princes of this world—that this God will do/is doing/has done the restorative and renewing work for child, woman and man.

By worshiping its way to renewal and hope, the community of faith has something to offer a world full of weariness, faintness, powerlessness and despair. Wherever the young are exhausted, wherever the old are clueless, those who know how to hope offer relief from pain and numbness with their songs of praise and joy.