

Make straight a highway

By [Paul Stroble](#)

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A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 40:3-5).

The son of a truck driver, I like highways and image of travel. Checking *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary's* entry about roads and highways, I learned that a *messila* was a built-up road, intentionally constructed and improved, while a *derekh* (Num. 20:17, 19, Judg. 21:19) was a path was formed because of constant use and thus had become a road. Other Bible passages, though, use the word *derekh* for path roads, and the *messila* was more common in the Roman era rather than earlier. Another author, in the *NIBD* article concerning transportation and communication, refers to this Isaiah passage and notes that a good, well-constructed and straight road was a sign of prosperity and security. Roman roads had this quality, for they were straight, paved, and marked. But for the historically earlier prophets, a secure, straight road (presumably more difficult to construct prior to the advent of Roman public works) was an image for a future state of peace and well-being, for Israel and the nations.

The image of "making a highway straight" reminded me of something I read in some of my Route 66 books. Originally Route 66 in New Mexico turned north from Santa Rosa and passed through Santa Fe, then turned south again to enter Albuquerque. In the 1930s the road was constructed to bypass Santa Fe and proceed directly to Albuquerque, but both routes required a certain amount of blasting and difficult construction. Even the construction of the later Interstate 40 toward Albuquerque required a lot of dynamite to cut through the rocks and mountains. Straight roads still require construction technology and effort.

Second Isaiah didn't know about dynamite! But that history of Route 66 made me think of something I'd read in Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, the paperback English translation, where Barth used the image of an explosion to refer to Christ's life: "The effulgence, or, rather, the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell, the void by which the point on the line of intersection makes itself known in the concrete world of history, is not---even though it be named the Life of Jesus---that other world which touches our world in Him" (p. 29).

In other words, God the "totally other" cannot be known by unaided human knowledge and experience, so God creates and grounds that relationship from God's side. But that self-revelation of God radically calls into question everything about human beings, puts us under God's sign of judgment. And yet, dialectically, that breaking-in, that moment (*Augenblick*) of God's judgment, is also the possibility of humans being redeemed and able to surrender all that they are to God.

Barth is using military imagery rather than road construction. But I think of the explosive power both of that voice in the wilderness calling for a path to be cleared for God's arrival, and of the arrival itself, God's dwelling among humans. God's arrival is not so noticeable in the baby Jesus, but all in all, it is the *true* power in the world which can bring peace and security and well being.

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