



ISAIAH, BOOK OF

ISAIAH, BOOK OF, one of the books of the Hebrew Bible. The book, which is traditionally arranged among those of the latter Prophets, consists, according to a widespread scholarly view, of two main parts: (1) chapters 1-39 present the prophecies of a prophet called Isaiah son of Amoz during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah (Is. 1:1), in the late eighth and early seventh century B.C.E.; (2) chapters 40-66 are usually considered to belong to another prophet, whose name has not been transmitted, and who lived at the time when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar exiled the people of Judah to Babylonia, in the years 587-582 B.C.E. Some scholars would split the book further, and recognize a third prophet in the last chapters of the book, but this does not seem compelling. The unknown author of the second part of Isaiah is often called in the scholarly literature Deutero-Isaiah (or Second Isaiah). He may have been active among the Jewish population who remained in Judah even after the exile. From the point of view of Iranian history, the second part of the Book of Isaiah is particularly relevant, because it reveals an interest in the newly emerging Persian empire and alludes to King Cyrus (II) in very favorable terms.

It was indeed this explicit mention of Cyrus in the prophecies of Isaiah that induced scholars to assign the chapters from 40 onwards to a prophet later than the original Isaiah, since no one in the eighth or seventh centuries B.C.E. could have come up with the name of the founder of the Achaemenid empire. The reference to Cyrus as it occurs in the Book of Isaiah is unique in the Hebrew Bible. No other foreign ruler is called, as is done here (Is. 44:28; 45:1),



“my shepherd” (some scholars amend the word to read in translation “my friend”), “my anointed.” The latter epithet, in particular, resonates in later Jewish literature as the designation of the future savior, the messiah, but at the time of Second Isaiah it may not have meant anything more than a king ruling by divine grace. Even in this restricted sense, the status of Cyrus is far above that of other foreign kings. The reason for bestowing it on him is not far to seek. The people of Judah had been subjected to Babylonian occupation and exile, and found themselves wishing for someone who would rescue them from their misery and who might reestablish them in their homeland and help them rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed. They allied themselves to the Persian king with the hope that he would vanquish the Babylonians and be well disposed towards them in the future, an expectation that was realized.

The attitudes attributed to the Second Isaiah are partly dependent on the interpretation of expressions in the prophecies of this anonymous prophet. Thus, for example, when he says:

I have raised up one from the north, and he has come; from the rising of the sun, one who calls on my name; and he shall come on rulers as on mortar, and as the potter treads clay (Is. 41:25). It has been suggested that the person referred to in this verse is Cyrus, who has been summoned by God to conquer countries, a task which he is carrying out with great ease. He is further said to “call on (God’s) name,” which seems to suggest that the prophet confidently expects Cyrus to recognize the supremacy of the God of the Jews (for comments and references, see S. Smith, pp. 161 f.). Morton Smith argued (in his article of 1963), that the statements of the Second Isaiah concerning Cyrus are inspired by the political propaganda that paved the way to the conquest of Babylonia by Cyrus; the same propaganda, according to him, is embedded also in the famous Cylinder of Cyrus. On reading the two documents, however, it does not seem clear that this claim is substantiated.

Certain verses which have theological significance have given rise to a great many speculations:

I am Yahweh, and there is none else. Besides me, there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not known me; that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none besides me. I am Yahweh, and there is no one else. I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I am Yahweh, who does all these things (Is. 45:5-7). The wording here recalls that of *Yasna* 44.5, “This I ask thee, tell me truly, Lord:



Which craftsman created light and darkness? Which craftsman created both sleep and activity? Through whom does dawn exist, along with midday and evening, which remind the worshiper of his purpose?” (translation follows S, Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathustra*, Tehran and Liège, 1975, p. 66, with some modifications; J. Kellens and Pirart, *Les textes vieil-avestiques I*, Wiesbaden, 1988, p. 149, have a similar translation, except for the verb “created,” which they translate “placed”).

The statement of Isaiah, according to which both light and darkness are the creations of God, reads surprisingly like an echo of Y. 44.5, where it is implied that Ahura Mazda is responsible for the existence of both luminosity and darkness. In later Zoroastrianism the area of darkness is the exclusive realm of the Evil Spirit, but in this early text the deity is taken to be the creator of both opposite poles. Isaiah goes further and claims that God is the creator of peace (i.e., harmony) and of evil (or distress), something that no Zoroastrian, it seems, would have been able to accept. We are left here with a dilemma: is the verse Isaiah 45:7 influenced by Zoroastrianism, or does it go against it? It may be reasonable to assume that it does not reflect antagonism towards Zoroastrianism; its author may have enlarged the scope of light and darkness to include peace and evil, in keeping with his Jewish faith, not necessarily in a spirit of argument (thus according to Morton Smith, 1989, p. 200; cf. also Moulton, 1913, pp. 220, 291).

There are, however, polemical passages. Chapter 44 of Isaiah contains a piece of polemic against those who worship fire: “A man plants a cedar and the rain makes it grow, so that later he will have cedars to cut down. It becomes fuel for his fire: some of it he takes and warms himself, some he kindles and bakes bread on it, and some he makes into a god and prostrates himself, shaping it into an idol and bowing down before it. . . . Such people neither know nor understand, their eyes made too blind to see, their minds too narrow to discern. . . . He feeds on ashes indeed! His own deluded mind has misled him, he cannot recollect himself so far as to say, ‘Why! This thing in my hand is a lie’” (Is. 44:14-20). The argument here is based on the fact that fire is a product of man’s work, aided by the forces of nature, and worshipping it is a delusion. The term used for designating the lack of substance of the divinity of fire is *šeqer* “lie,” which could well be an echo of the term used in Zoroastrianism for the powers of evil, *druj* (q.v.). In Is. 50:10-11 there is a similar polemic addressed at fire-worshippers: “Behold, you are all kindlers of fire, setting fire-brands alight, go, walk into your own fire and among the fire-brands you have



set ablaze” (Is. 50:11; cf. also Winston, p. 187).

It is Morton Smith’s contention (1989, p. 200) that the emphasis on the representation of Yahweh, the Jewish god, as a creator is a late feature of Judaism, and may not have been present before the Babylonian exile. This is a prominent feature of the Second Isaiah, and it is possible to assume that it was introduced under the impact of the Persian religion. This view makes it necessary to accept a late dating for the Book of Genesis, which depicts the creative powers of Yahweh, and this is a dating with which other scholars concur. Not all scholars, however, accept the hypothesis of a Zoroastrian influence on the books of the Bible. A very sceptical attitude, perhaps exaggeratedly so, concerning any early impact of Iranian religion on Judaism is expressed by James Barr (1985).

The prophecies of the unknown prophet (or prophets) whose visions were incorporated into the book of Isaiah reflect the first period of an encounter between Iran and the Jewish religion, one which at a later date contributed to the deep transformation of Judaism which is visible in some of the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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