

# CYRUS AS MESSIAH

## MOSHE REISS

Most biblical scholars today believe that Isaiah son of Amotz of Jerusalem, summoned to his mission in 740 BCE, authored the first 39 chapters of the canonized Book of Isaiah. They understand that the remaining chapters were almost certainly written by another prophet, who composed them during or shortly after the lifetime of Cyrus the Great (600 - 530 BCE), and this author is often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah (D.I.). It is accepted that he composed at least chapters 40-55. Some affirm that he wrote the remainder of the book as well; others that a third author, sometimes called Trito-Isaiah (T.I.), wrote chapters 56-66.<sup>1</sup> The identity and locale of D.I and T.I., Palestine, Babylonia or elsewhere, remain unknown.

Lisbeth Fried<sup>2</sup> suggested that Deutero-Isaiah believed Cyrus would become the successor Davidic monarch.<sup>3</sup> D.I. tells us *the Lord has redeemed Jacob* (Isa. 44:23) in the past sense, implying that the Messiah has come. Fried does not claim that Cyrus or the Persians were intended to embrace Judaism; however, she believes that Cyrus was to be the Judean King; the King of Zion.<sup>4</sup>

For Fried the relevant Isaiah sections begin with:

*Who has stirred up one from the East? Victory meets him at his feet. He places nations before him, and he subdues kings. He makes their swords dust; like chaff, their bows are driven. He pursues them and passes on safely; the path does not touch his feet. Who performed and did this from the beginning? I, the Lord, am first, and with the last I am He . . . I stirred up one from the north, and he has come. From the rising of the sun, he is mine. He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay (41:2-4, 25).*

Before introducing Cyrus, God notes that He is *your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb* (44:24), the God of knowledge (44:25) and the

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Rebuilder of Jerusalem (44:26). God then introduces Cyrus as His shepherd (44:28) and *His anointed one, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him* (45:1). When the people are aghast at this anointing (45:9), Isaiah declares: *Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel and his Maker: "Will you question Me about my children, or command Me about the work of My hands? . . . I will arouse him [Cyrus] in righteousness; I will make all his paths straight. He will build My city, and let My exiles go free – not for a price and not for a bribe, says the Lord of Hosts"* (45:11-13). This language is unique to D.I.,<sup>5</sup> as is the idea of calling a non-Jew God's anointed.<sup>6</sup>

Fried suggests that collaborating with foreign powers was a standard method of gaining power.<sup>7</sup> This approach was acceptable to Babylonian and Egyptian priests after their defeat, and it seems to be the approach of D.I. as well, envisioning the Jewish people "joining forces" with Cyrus. Fried concludes that Cyrus actually fulfilled his messianic role by permitting the ingathering of the exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple.<sup>8</sup> Cyrus initiated a general policy of permitting religious freedom throughout his domains. According to the Cyrus cylinder,<sup>9</sup> he permitted foreigners who had been forcibly settled in Babylonia to return to their own lands. This included the Jews of the Babylonian captivity, who were also permitted to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem. In light of this, the hero of Isaiah can be construed as Cyrus, the Messiah.

Claus Westermann explains that God proved Himself by foretelling Jerusalem's doom through the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and reinforced His power through salvation. This is the theological function of Cyrus, the agent of God's salvation. D.I. is different from all other prophets in that he preached a salvation that was an accomplished historical fact rather than a future event.<sup>10</sup> *The Lord has redeemed Jacob* (44:23) – note the past tense.

This oracle from D.I. (44:24-28; 45:1-8), addressed to Cyrus and the people of Israel, "is unique in its importance for Deutero-Isaiah's proclamation. Its form, too, that of the royal oracle, is unique."<sup>11</sup> Much of the phraseology of this proclamation is remarkably similar to that of the Cyrus cylinder. Both documents include a non-Persian deity (Marduk, the Babylonian god, in the cylinder, and the Lord of Israel in Isaiah) choosing Cyrus as a "friend",

"taking his hand" and nominating him as ruler. Cyrus will treat others with justice and righteousness (42:6); he will be compassionate, favorable to good deeds and intentions.<sup>12</sup> By taking his hand the Lord would make Cyrus anointed to "every contemporary . . . in the ancient Near East."<sup>13</sup>

According to Asher Eder, Cyrus was praised "as a warrior and as a statesman," and for "his benevolence, tolerance, justice and righteousness, his sympathy for the oppressed." He liberated and repatriated many peoples. Isaiah says of him, "*I [God] have aroused him in righteousness and made all his paths straight*" (45:13). Cuneiform records attest that there was indeed a vast difference between Cyrus and the kings of Assyria and Babylon in their treatment of conquered peoples.<sup>14</sup> According to D.I., God's servant's mission is justice and righteousness to the nations (42:1, 6), a mission that Cyrus can be seen to have fulfilled.

In the traditional commentaries to Isaiah, Cyrus is merely regarded as a temporary servant of God, a tool used to implement God's decree – much in the same way that Jeremiah refers to Nebuchadnezzar as a servant of the Lord (Jer. 25:9). However, as we have seen, Cyrus may have been viewed as a temporary king of Israel, a redeemer, even a messiah.<sup>15</sup> Sydney Smith referred to that idea: not only would Isaiah's contemporaries have been shocked to hear such a claim, he himself was astounded by Deutero-Isaiah's audacity.<sup>16</sup>

Cyrus reversed the situation of the Jews, allowing them to quit their exile, return to the Land of Israel and rebuild their Temple. One might even argue that he saved the Jewish people, a function of the Davidic Messiah.

*This article is dedicated to Michael Shapiro, a dear and learned friend who died recently.*

#### NOTES

1. Bernhard Duhm (*Das Buch Jesaia* published 1892) was the first to define in a scholarly manner for Christians the difference between Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah. The first Christian commentators to recognize that a different prophet wrote the latter parts of the Book of Isaiah were Ioannes Godofridus in 1783 and Johann Ludwig Doderlein in 1789. Earlier medieval Jewish scholars recognized the divisions within the book. They include Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), Moses ben Samuel Gikatilla (11<sup>th</sup> century), Maimonides (Rambam, 1135-1204), Nahmanides (Ramban, 1194-1270), and Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508).

2. Lisbeth Fried, "Cyrus the Messiah? The Historic Background to Isaiah 45:1", *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (2002) p. 374. She is currently Visiting Scholar at the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies.

3. Sidney Smith, Keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum and Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of London, had suggested in the Schweich Lectures of 1940 that Cyrus was to be accepted as the chosen King of Israel, "the light of the nations and the executor of the Lord's will." Sidney Smith, *Isaiah Chapters XL-LV: Literary Criticism and History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944) pp. 59-60.
4. A few other scholars believed that as well: John Skinner, *Isaiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), and R. A. Torrey, *Isaiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928).
5. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) pp. 14-15.
6. The only other persons called God's Messiah in the Hebrew Bible are Saul (eleven times), David (three times), an unnamed King (I Sam. 2:35), a Judahite King (Lam. 4:20), in Habakkuk's prayer (3:13), in Hannah's prayer (I Sam. 2:10) and in eight of the Psalms.
7. Fried, pp. 387-9.
8. Fried, p. 393.
9. The cylinder, a ten-inch long clay object, records Cyrus's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. The cylinder states, among other things, "I returned to [these] sacred cult-cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries which have long been in ruins and the gods who lived in them, and [I] established for them sanctuaries." It thus supports the accounts in Isaiah, Ezra and Chronicles.
10. Westermann, pp. 11-16.
11. Westermann, pp. 153-4.
12. Quoted from the cylinder in Westermann, p. 158.
13. Sidney Smith, p. 73.
14. Asher Eder, "King Cyrus, Anointed (Messiah) of the Lord", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (1995) p. 190. Eder quotes Herodotus, Xenophon and Strabo.
15. Westermann, pp. 159-161; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) p. 156; Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) p. 225.
16. Sidney Smith, pp. 173-4.



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