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SOME NOTES ON THE CHARACTERIZATION OF CYRUS THE GREAT IN JEWISH AND JUDEO-PERSIAN WRITINGS

The figure of Cyrus the Great in the Jewish sacred writings, especially in the Book of Isaiah, has occupied Jewish thought through the ages. Cyrus is mentioned and discussed in passages in Talmud, Midrash, in the medieval commentaries and in Judeo-Persian writings.

Chapters 40-55 of the Book of Isaiah have long been recognized as a distinct work contained within the larger work under the name of the prophet Isaiah. These chapters are known as the "Book of the Consolation of Israel" because of their opening words: "Console my people, console them". Cyrus is mentioned by name twice in this section, but there are numerous other allusions to him which are not at all obscure, and which were perfectly obvious to contemporaries. Allusions to the progress of Cyrus' armies together with ever increasing confidence in his successes and rejoicings over victories, enable later passages to be distinguished from earlier ones. The "Book of the Consolation" was probably begun in 545 B.C. The writer seems to have witnessed the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. and his death soon afterward may be referred to in a eulogy by another hand at the end of the book.

The "Book of the Consolation" was addressed primarily to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, although it has been argued as we shall see later, that several passages have a meaning intended especially for those few who had been left in their own land by the Babylonian conqueror, "some of the poorest of the land as vineyard workers and ploughmen" (2 Kings 25:12). The exiles had been so long in Babylon that very few, if any of them, could have had any distinct memory of their land, Jerusalem or the temple. They had experienced a major disaster which, they thought, had brought an end to their historical existence, and many of them, as we see reflected in the argument of the Book of Isaiah, were not ready to listen to words of hope or encouragement. Moreover, the disaster was not only physical. What made it especially painful was that in the consciousness of the people of Israel, inhabiting their own land was bound up

with their relationship to their God. They regarded their land as the gift of God. God was the owner, and they dwelt in the land, the terms of whose lease were the people's moral and spiritual integrity. Each one of the exiles could trace the history of his nation's downfall by recalling the almost steady loss of rectitude in personal and public life from the time of the successors of King David down to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Thus, they had suffered spiritual as well as physical destruction. It is generally accepted by scholars that during this period, the exiles tried to keep their faith alive by the considerable work they did in collecting, organizing and studying their sacred writings. But it is evident from a number of passages in the "Book of the Consolation" that their recent experience had destroyed the faith of many. It is difficult for the present-day reader to understand how impossible the promise of the restoration of Jerusalem would have seemed to the community of Jewish exiles in Babylon.

The earliest allusion to Cyrus in this portion of Isaiah is probably 41:1-7:

Keep silence before Me, islands and nations.
 They shall renew strength, approach,
 then they shall speak together :
 'Let us draw near for judgment.'
 'Who has raised up from the east
 one whom "the right" came to his feet to meet?
 (Who) both gives nations unto him
 and causes him to subdue kings?"

...The isles saw it and feared,
 the ends of the earth were afraid,
 approached and came.
 They helped each his neighbour,
 and one said to another, 'Be strong';
 and the metal-graver encouraged the refiner...

These lines express the anxiety of the cities of the eastern Mediterranean at reports they have heard of Cyrus. It is most likely that the war between Cyrus and Nabonides had already started, which would

¹ The translation of this verse is taken from Sidney Smith, *Isaiah Chapters XL-LV*, London, 1944, Chapter III: "Some Unrecognized Historical Material". All other biblical verses, unless specifically noted, are from *The Jerusalem Bible*.

date this passage about 545². The people are not certain what to make of the reports they hear. It seemed inevitable that sooner or later they would have to choose sides. What should be their policy of alignment? The Jews share in their anxiety, and the prophet tries to make them see Yahweh as the power behind Cyrus' conquests. Ibn Erza (1092/3-1167/8), the renowned medieval commentator³, tells us that some of the Talmudic writers thought these verses might refer to Abraham, who in Genesis 14 defeated the kings and broke their idols. They thought the same about 41:25: "I roused him from the north to come, from the rising sun I summoned him ...". Ibn Ezra, however, concluded from the context of these passages that they referred to Cyrus. We have here an example of allusions to historical events which were clear to contemporaries, eagerly awaiting the latest news of the new conqueror, but whose meaning was lost to later readers because of their lack of historical knowledge.

Chapter 42 tries to assure the Israelites that Cyrus, of whose surprising humanity in war they must already have heard, will also interest himself in distant Palestine and its exiled population. It is possible that the prophet had heard of at least one instance of repatriation which Cyrus had permitted even before his conquest of Babylon⁴. He would also have realized that Cyrus wanted to conquer Egypt, and so would value Palestine as a gateway to north Africa.

The Talmudic commentators are divided in their opinion as to whom the opening passage of chapter 42 refers: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights". Ibn Ezra says that most refer this to the people Israel, to pious Israelites, or to the messiah king of the future, but he himself refers it to the prophet. Sa'dia Gaon (892-942) says that the verse applies to Cyrus, and that in it the prophet is indicating that Cyrus will be a righteous king. The contemporary hearing this chapter in its entirety would immediately have recognized it as exultation over the course of Cyrus' victories:

Sing a new hymn to Yahweh!
Let his praise resound from the ends of the earth,
let the sea and all that it holds sing his praises,
the islands and those who inhabit them.

² Cf. Smith, *op. cit.*

³ *The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah*, ed. and tr. M. Friedländer, N.Y. n.d., London, 1873. Ibn Ezra's commentary on Isaiah follows the text verse by verse.

⁴ Cf. Smith, *op. cit.*

Let the desert and its cities raise their voice,
 the camp where Kedar lives.
 Let the inhabitants of Sela cry aloud
 and shout from the mountain tops.
 Let them give glory to Yahweh
 and let the people of the islands voice his praise.

Yahweh advances like a hero,
 his fury is stirred like a warrior's.
 He gives the war shout, raises the hue and cry,
 marches valiantly against his foes (Isaiah 42:10-13).

It has been suggested⁵ that the contemporary hearer would have seen in verse 15 of this chapter the impending threat to the "other Babylon" which Nabonides had built in the southern desert at the oasis of Taima (Tema'), the city surrounded by canals and marshes where Nabonides was now encamped :

I will make waste mountains and hills
 and dry up all their herbs,
 and I will make rivers islands,
 and I will dry up the marshes.
 in this context

Also recognizable in this context would have been the otherwise unintelligible verse 14 of chapter 43, a description of the Babylonian withdrawal from Taima :

Thus says the Lord, your redeemer,
 the Holy One of Israel :
 For your sake I have sent to Babylon
 and have brought south all their divining priests,
 and the Chaldaeans whose cry is in the ships.

Ships were brought to the Gulf of 'Aqaba or some port on the eastern shore of the Red Sea to facilitate evacuation of the southern city. No Babylonian army moved without diviners.

Verses 18-21 of chapter 43 and 3-5 of chapter 40 have, with some exceptions, usually been considered to be of purely eschatological significance :

No need to recall the past,
 no need to think about what was done before.
 See, I am doing a new deed,

⁵ *Ibid.*

even now it comes to light; can you not see it?
 Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness,
 paths in the wilds.
 The wild beasts will honour me,
 jackals and ostriches,
 because I am putting water in the wilderness
 (rivers in the wild)
 to give my chosen people drink.
 The people I have formed for myself
 will sing my praises...

A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness
 a way for Yahweh.
 Make a straight highway for our God
 across the desert.
 Let every valley be filled in,
 Every mountain and hill be laid low,
 let every cliff become a plain,
 and the ridges a valley;
 then the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed
 and all mankind shall see it;
 for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken'.

This passage can also be read⁶ as a reference to the roads built by the Achaemenians, roads which they raised over plains and cut through hills, and which were unknown in the world before this. If this reading is correct, then this is the earliest known written allusion to the Persian high roads.

It has long been noticed that the text of the "Book of the Consolation" reveals that the prophet's mission of arousing the people to active hope before the fall of Babylon was met by stubborn opposition on the part of some, powerful ones in the community, who found the prophet's support of Cyrus radical and politically dangerous. Chapter 53 may be a lament over his death at their hands. Was he openly advocating rebellion against the Babylonians in order to help Cyrus? Was he telling the few remaining Jews in Palestine to aid Cyrus actively? An intriguing reading for 40:6-8 has been proposed:⁷

A voice commands: 'Cry'!
 and I answered, 'What shall I cry'?
 —'All flesh is grass

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

and its beauty like the wild flower's.
 The grass withers, the flower fades
 when the breath of Yahweh blows on them.
 (The grass is without doubt the people).
 The grass withers, the flower fades,
 but the word of our God remains for ever'.

Every hearer among the prophet's community should know that rebellion is being proclaimed, therefore, proclaim something harmless, at first hearing meaningless, so that the government will not hear tales of sedition.

This interpretation seems superfluous in light of the fact that the "Book of the Consolation" already contains such considerable enthusiasm for the conqueror Cyrus. But there is no doubt that this reading of the passage tells us much about the mood of the prophet and his followers.

The Talmudic and medieval commentators were uncertain about some of the allusions to Cyrus, not only because they no longer knew the history of the period, but because these passages presented them with a religious and psychological problem. To be addressed by God as "servant", "in whom my soul is well-pleased", to be called "he whom God loves" (48:14), belonged to Abraham, Moses, David, perhaps the prophet, the people as a whole or the holy souls among them. From the perspective of these later interpreters, some of them living in another exile for more than a thousand years after the destruction of the second temple, the prophet's exuberance over Cyrus was incomprehensible. Verse 6 of chapter 42, for example:

I, Yahweh, have called you to serve the cause of right;
 I have taken you by the hand and formed you.

It is known that in many lands of the ancient East, the grasping of the hand by the god of a city meant the conferring of kingship. In the Cyrus Cylinder, Marduk, the god of Babylon, does this for Cyrus. Isaiah is saying two things in the above verse: that it is Yahweh who has given Babylon to Cyrus, not Marduk; and more than that, Cyrus is to be regarded by the Israelites as God's chosen king. Continuing verse 6 we read:

I have appointed you as a covenant of the people,
 And as a light of the nations (42:6-7).

Cyrus is a living covenant. But for the Jews, the covenant meant

their betrothal to their God in love and lasting fidelity. How could they grasp the intimacy with which this foreign king had entered into the very substance of their life? This was a difficult point not only for the Talmudic and Medieval commentators, as Ibn Ezra testifies, but even for the Prophet's contemporaries. Modern scholars, following the rabbinical commentators on this point, see that verses 9-13 of chapter 45 reflect the difficulties which deliverance through the hands of a pagan king caused in the Israelite community. Here God has to justify his action. He argues with his people that, since he is lord of all creation, he can use whom he pleases to execute his will. In chapter 45, verse 1: "Thus says Yahweh to his annointed, to Cyrus whom he has taken by his right hand", Cyrus is not only recognized as king according to pagan rite, but by anointing is given a true place in the line of David, made a legitimate king of Israel.

The prophet wants to instruct Cyrus also, addressing him in the language of the Mazdean cosmology which will be familiar to him:

Though you do not know me, I arm you
that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun
that, apart from me, all is nothing.

I am Yahweh, unrivalled,
I form the light and create the dark.
I make good fortune and create calamity,
it is I, Yahweh, who do all this (45:6-7).

These verses, together with the polemic against idolatry which follows, have led the commentators to conclude that Cyrus came to acknowledge the God of Israel, and, as Ibn Ezra adds, caused the whole world to recognize Yahweh. But the text clearly does not claim this. The point of the prophet's argument is that when the nations see how God used Cyrus in order to resurrect his people, they will be filled with wonder and acknowledge the power of the God of Israel.

Josephus (37/38-after 93), who believed that the entire Book of Isaiah was written 140 years before the destruction of the temple, which would mean about 180 years before the rise of Cyrus (it is now established that the book is composed of at least several sections written over a period of about 200 years), said that Cyrus read what was written of him more than a century and a half before, and recognized the God of Israel and his will for the return of his

people to their land and the erection of the temple (*Antiquities* XI, 1 and 2).

The Midrash says Cyrus slew Belshazzar because he heard the prophecy in Daniel 5:28, and vowed that he would permit the Jews to return home with the vessels of the temple which had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar (*Canticles Rabba* 3:4). Cyrus wept and sighed when he heard the story of the destruction of the temple (*Yalkut Shim'oni*, 68) and believed that God never leaves its location (*Exodus Rabba* 2, 2). Talmud considers the name K-R-Š an anagram of K-Š-R, Kasher, which means worthy (*Rosh ha-Shana* 3b). His call to go up to the Land of Israel is compared to the call of Joshua to cross the Jordan and to the good news of the future redemption of the messiah king (*Canticles Rabba* 12:2). A Haggadic work argues that Cyrus was descended from Japeth who, together with Shem, the ancestor of the Hebrews, was rewarded for his delicate behaviour toward Noah when he was drunk (*Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* 35). This observation, which does not conflict with the geneology of the Median tribes given in Genesis 10 is, as it were, an attempt to give Cyrus a blood lineage which would make him more honoured in the eyes of the Jews, an attempt which anticipates his naturalization in the poetry of the Jews of Persia.

The rabbinical scholars also realized that the building of the temple was not actually begun during the time of Cyrus, even though he had ordered it. They also knew that the return of the exiles during his reign was meagre. Because of this, some of them wanted to take from him the title of "annointed" or Messiah. By Talmudic times, a more definite concept of the Messiah had been developed, one of whose elements was the belief that in the days of the Messiah all of the Israelites would return to their Land. Moreover, the Messiah, according to the more developed conception of Talmudic times, was to be a religious figure, making it even more difficult to fit Cyrus into such a conception. Thus, together with praise, there is a tendency in Talmud toward a different evaluation of Cyrus' role in Jewish history, originating at a time when both spiritual expectation and hope for deliverance from the political domination of the Romans caused people to look for a Messiah yet to come. However, the Jewish meeting with Cyrus was, despite these expressions of disappointment, a positive one. He arose before their eyes as a redeeming wonder at a time when they, as well as the rest of the world, thought that the national existence of the house of Israel had come to an end and that they were

finished as a people. As we have noted, this was an especially profound crisis for the Jews because their faith in God was bound up with their national existence. This is why they had to struggle to fit Cyrus into their religious conceptions as well as their historical ones. We will now look at the appearance of Cyrus the Great in Judeo-Persian literature.

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Cyrus appears as an important figure in three Judeo-Persian works. *Oeşse-ye Dāniyāl*, a small prose work written perhaps in the 12th century, elaborates in narrative style a meeting between Cyrus the Great and Daniel the Prophet. This work draws heavily on the apochryphal additions to the Book of Daniel, although there are scholars who maintain that it might be a translation of the lost second Targum of the Book of Daniel.

The *Dāniel-nāmeḥ*, composed in Bokhara by a Jewish poet who calls himself Kh(w)ājeh, narrates the history of the Book of Daniel, especially battle field scenes, in fantastic form. Here, Cyrus of Persia and Darius king of Media fight successfully against the warriors of Belshazzar. Cyrus' personality and heroic deeds are praised.

The most significant Judeo-Persian work for our study is the *Ardashir-nāmeḥ* of Shāhin, a poetic work written in 1332, perhaps in Shiraz. The *Ardashir-nāmeḥ* contains about 9,000 verses, and is the story of Ardashir (Bahman) son of Gashtāsb, the hero of the *Shāh-nāmeḥ* of Ferdausi⁸. But in Shāhin's work, the story of Ardashir leads on to the story of Cyrus, and is also woven into the story of the Book of Esther. For Shāhin, Ardashir is the Ahasueros of the Book of Esther, and Esther, wife of Ardashir and Queen of Iran, is the mother of Cyrus. The *Ardashir-nāmeḥ* also includes another intricate love story, that of Shiru, son of Ardashir by his wife Vashti, and his beloved Mahzād, daughter of the king of China. In most manuscripts, the *Ardashir-nāmeḥ* is followed by a short work of about 500 verses called the '*Ezrā-nāmeḥ*, written in the same year.

Shāhin tells of the birth of Cyrus :

When Esther became one breath with the king
She found throne and exaltation

⁸ According to the *Shāh-nāmeḥ* of Ferdausi, Bahman son of Esfandiyār was also called Ardashir by his grandfather.

Ardashir rejoiced in the beautiful one
 On whose face he could see nothing but light
 He remained with her in serenity and delight
 And with happiness and joy
 Esther by command of the great One
 Became with child by the worthy king
 When her time came she gave birth

God opened to her the gate of happiness
 A boy with the face of the sun
 One worthy of the crown and throne of Jamshid
 The king rejoiced in the beauty of his son
 On whose face there was a kingly light
 He named the boy Cyrus
 And thus uprooted oppression from its foundations
 He abolished the caravan taxes
 Gave gold and dirhams to the needy
 No poor remained in the city of Susa
 Because of his generous beneficence
 The poor became rich because of the king

...
 Esther in the new-born
 Rejoiced and thanked God
 Two affectionate and kindly nurses
 She chose to whom she gave the boy
 Who would care for her son
 And give him to her as a tall cyprus
 She gave silver and gold and colorful dresses
 Abundantly from her treasury
 When Cyrus reached the age of four years
 His face was like spring and tulip
 That exalted kingly essence
 Grew like a tall cyprus
 The king had no peace without seeing his face
 Day and night and at dawn (MB MS 980ff.62a b)⁹.

Shāhin continues, telling at length of the education of Cyrus by the most learned men of the time until he has acquired all the arts and crafts and science of his age, and become a mighty hero, "as strong as Rostam son of Zāl".

When Cyrus ascends to the throne of his father, he gives a coronation address whose theme is justice. Justice is the foundation of his statesmanship. He criticizes Ardashir, his father, who has not

⁹. MB indicates that the manuscript cited is found in the collection of the Machon Ben Zvi, Jerusalem.

followed the path of justice, who mistreated Rostam and his family, who razed the land of Kābolestān. Cyrus preaches that the great men of the world—Nauzar, Keyqobād, Rostam, Tus, Iraj, Salm, Tur, Lohrāsh, Bahman, Zāl, Giv, Goshtāsb—all perished. Nothing remains of them except the memory of mere names. Therefore, only justice makes a man eternal (ff. 119b-120b).

In the section of the work known by the independent name of '*Ezrā-nāme*h, Shāhin gives an elaborate description of Cyrus' banquets (*bazm*), as is common in Persian epic poetry, e.g., *Shāh-nāme*h of Ferdausi. He continues by illustrating Cyrus' dexterity in the kingly art of hunting. Then, suddenly, he tells the story of the destruction of the first temple of the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar (ff. 122a and b).

After the introduction of this event of Jewish history, Shāhin speaks of the struggle undertaken by Ezra and the other leaders of the Jewish community in diaspora, to prevent the final extinction of their people. Ezra summons the leaders of the Jewish community and urges them to take advantage of this happy moment. They should go to the king of Iran and open to him the secret of their peoplehood, and ask him to grant them liberation from their torture and oppression, bringing all of them to their holy Land. Ezra took with him figures named Haggai, Zechariah and Mattathiah as delegates for this mission¹⁰.

When they reach the royal house, Ezra enters to meet Cyrus who has just returned from hunting. He tells the king that three others whose face shine are waiting to come in. Cyrus orders the gatekeeper to bring them in immediately. Mordechai, perhaps being a permanent attendant at the palace, opens the discussion :

"O moon-like and upright hero
Behold these leaders are dear to us
A good and distinguished people
They are the prophets
Who are the kings of the people of Moses"
He mentions their names one by one
All being exalted and great ones
Cyrus praised all and seated them
And expelled from his presence all the non-intimates

¹⁰ It is interesting that Daniel is not included in this mission, since Shāhin already mentions him as the communicant between Esther and her uncle Mordechai. Daniel fulfils this delicate task at the time of the events of the Book of Esther, playing the role of Hathach in the Book of Esther (f.39b).

Then Cyrus asked Mattathiah
"O essence and jewel of the house of Judea
Tell me what is your desire
Of jewels, treasures and kingship
So that I can fulfil your desire
And smooth your path before you
When Mattathiah heard this from the king
Mattathiah the head of the house of Judea
He said "O king of knowledge and justice
The whole world became happy and joyful in you
May your crown and throne be never vacant
And your fortune be eternal
O king, you should know that the land of Canaan
From the time of Moses son of Amran
Has been our dwelling place
And that it became ours by generous gift of God
We have been a people of justice and truth
And worshipped God with increasing fervor
We have had crown, throne and treasure
Victory, strength and fortune
Then we became idol-worshippers and went astray
We planted the seed of oppression and calamity
Our throne was toppled
And we were caught in every evil
And one day at the hands of an evil-minded one
Our land and houses and homes were destroyed
Now seventy years have passed
And our land has remained destroyed in injustice
My desire is that you with your generosity
Once again build this land, O upright one
So that your name will remain as a good one
And the prayer of the offspring of Jacob will follow you"
Thereupon Cyrus gave an answer to the leaders and to Haggai
"If you want your desire to be fulfilled
I have a wish and that is, from my hand
You will drink a gladsome cup of wine
So that whatever in goodness you want
To build like the garden of Tubi
All of it I shall restore
Land, palace and temple"
When Mattathiah heard this from him
He said "O you, generous like the clouds of the sea"
He said to the king "with your knowledge
The world became prosperous and happy
Today I cannot do this
Do not seek my destruction
Now I shall go to my friends
To the leaders and people of name

To see what the law of God
 Decides about this thing
 Tomorrow morning I shall come to you
 And open the hidden secret"
 He said this and went with the heroes
 Happily from the side of the king of Iran
 He sat with Zechariah and Haggai and Ezra and others
 And made an assembly of the learned ones
 And asked their verdict
 Thereupon Ezra the prophet said to him
 "O chosen creature of God
 Anything which comes from the hands of a pagan
 This drink will be improper and stench
 But if the holy place is to be rebuilt
 By one cup of wine
 Take it and drink it
 So that the honoured house
 Will be once again built up, O good one"...
 Mattathiah awoke from his sweet sleep
 And went to the king
 Together with Zechariah
 And Haggai and other friends
 Noble and renowned leaders
 When Cyrus saw him he praised him
 And made him sit near his throne
 Like the kings of Rome, India and China
 He gave him a cup of pure wine and told him
 "Drink and ask me your wish"
 He took the cup and drank
 As he saw no other choice and did not resist
 Cyrus thereupon gave his decree
 To rebuild the land of Canaan
 And also to build the house of God
 Gold and silver shall be invested in it
 The people of Moses rejoiced
 And they turned their faces from evil deeds (123b-124b)¹¹.

¹¹ The poet's accounting for Cyrus' decree as a response to a petition on the part of the Jewish community is interesting in the light of the current controversy over the authenticity of the texts of the decree given in the Book of Ezra. Critics find that the text in Ezra 1 contains Jewish phraseology, and for this reason many doubt that it could have been a proclamation of the Persian government. It is interesting to speculate that the decree might possibly have been formulated by a Jewish delegation. The authenticity of the text of the decree as given in Ezra is discussed in the light of what is known of Achaemenian statesmanship and parallel documents, in "The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra 1", *Journal of Biblical Literature* LXV, 1946, by E. Bickerman.

Shahin later describes the death of Cyrus. The great king ruled according to the path of God and truth. When his time arrived his posture bent like the letter *dāl* and his soul departed from his body and left this world. His body was washed clean and wrapped in beautiful silk and fragrant perfumes, and was put inside a *dakhmeh*. A long eulogy of Cyrus follows, emphasizing the worthlessness of this transient world.

A number of things should be noted about the presentation of Cyrus in the *Ardashir-nāmeḥ*. First, we have his birth of a Jewish mother. Moreover, not only is Esther a Jewess, but according to the story of Esther and Mordechai, she was raised by God to the throne of Iran for the special mission of saving her people from disaster. The salvation brought to the Jews by her son Cyrus is foreshadowed by their salvation from the plot of Haman at her intercession, a story which Shāhin includes in the *Ardashir-nāmeḥ*.

The birth of Cyrus is the gift of God. The reader must feel that only he who already knows and suffers over the story of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem can appreciate why God is so lavish in bestowing all beauty and goodness on this child. It is part of the drama that the divine mark is to be recognized from the moment of Cyrus' birth. We have seen how the Book of Isaiah and the rabbinical commentators reflect the struggle the Jews had with the idea of the restoration of their national existence and their temple by the instrumentality of a pagan. Shahin forestalls such objections by making Cyrus to be born of a Jewish mother, and also a godly figure, of no less stature than the prophets and kings praised in the Book of Ben Sira.

Shāhin develops this theme in Cyrus' enthronement speech, where the king manifests a character totally formed according to justice and truth. Shāhin has Cyrus condemn even the injustices committed by his own father—to be sure, the Ahasueros of the Book of Esther who was almost duped by Haman into executing a major pogrom against the Jewish exiles in the Persian empire, a pogrom which was only averted, as we have mentioned, by Cyrus' mother, Esther. There is, furthermore, a great and deliberate irony on the part of the poet when he puts this speech in Cyrus' mouth. Behold, Cyrus is quite the opposite of the majority of the kings of Israel. He has the integrity which they lacked, and which could have saved their people from disaster if they had possessed it. The poet makes a further effort to enlighten the hearer on this point when he has Cyrus

speaking about the heroes of the world being now only mere names; only justice could have made them eternal. This juxtaposition of name and eternal would have a special sound for the Jewish hearer. It would suggest to him the recurring theme of his sacred writings that the eternity of the name of God was somehow bound up with the continuing existence of his people. God is implored to save his people so that his holy name should not perish. In the Book of Ezechiel, one of the prophets of the Babylonian exile, God reproaches his people for damaging his name in the eyes of the world by the disaster they merited on account of their evil deeds. To the Jewish hearer, Cyrus is delivering a reproach, which they will understand as meaning that the injustices which brought an end to their national existence have put the eternal name of their God in jeopardy. This is the background the poet wants to create for the speech in which Mattathiah will explain to Cyrus the reason for the destruction of his nation.

Cyrus is a hero and king after the traditional model. In the midst of description of his magnificent banquets and prowess at hunting, the poet introduces the story of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. He tells how some of the leaders of the people struggled to prevent exile from becoming final extinction, and implies that they were making little progress in their efforts. The reader is supposed to feel the tension of the poet's juxtaposition of the blessed, invulnerable and invincible Cyrus, and this tale of frustration and woe.

The members of the mission to Cyrus from the Jewish community require attention. Ezra, organizer of the community and promoter of their return, heads the mission. Mattathiah cannot be identified with certainty. Bacher conjectures that Mattathiah is another name for Zerubbabel¹², perhaps basing his conjecture on the fact that Shāhin calls him prince (f. 123a) and head of the house of Judea. Zerubbabel was a descendent of the house of David who was made governor of restored Judah at the time of the rebuilding of the temple. He is given messianic titles by two of the prophets, one of whom is Haggai, his companion in the mission to Cyrus (Haggai 2:22-23). Critics unanimously see in the corrected text of Zechariah 6:9-14 reference to the crowning of Zerubbabel as king of restored Judah by Zechariah, another one of his companions on the mission. There

¹² W. Bacher, *Zwei Jüdisch-Persische Dichter*, Straßburg, 1908, p. 67.

is also a Mattathiah in Nehemiah 8:4, who stands at the right hand of Ezra as he reads the Book of the Law of Moses to the group of exiles returned to Jerusalem.

Haggai and Zechariah are two of the twelve minor prophets. The discourses of Haggai date from the year 520, and are addressed to the group of exiles who have returned to Jerusalem, but are lagging in the work of rebuilding the city and its temple. In particular, he speaks to Zerubbabel, promising him a dynasty which will extend to messianic days, and exhorting him to the work of rebuilding. The Book of Ezra mentions the prophetic activity of Haggai.

Zechariah is the eleventh of the twelve minor prophets. He is also a messianic prophet, addressing himself to the same community in Jerusalem as did Haggai. His messianism is strongly apocalyptic, couched in the form of symbolic visions. His message is one of repentance and restoration of the Land of Israel with Jerusalem its center. The rebuilding of the temple is already a sign that messianic salvation is approaching. The exiles will be gathered home, all the nations will worship Yahweh and there will be universal peace and joy. We have already mentioned the passages in the Book of Zechariah about the crowning of Zerubbabel.

These are the men who stand before Cyrus. Mattathiah speaks for them. He addresses Cyrus as «king of knowledge and justice». He expects Cyrus to understand the explanation he gives of the Jewish plight. The land of the Jews was the gift of God, a gift made to a people who were just, truthful and worshippers of God. Then this people began to worship idols and treat one another with injustice. They were entirely destroyed. Seventy years have passed.

Mattathiah wants to imply that these were seventy years of self-knowledge and purification. But he does not say it. He implies that his people are ready to return to their Land and undertake to rebuild and re-inhabit it in conformity with its difficult religious and moral requirements.

The cup of wine is a detail which could have a number of significances, none of which is certain. For instance, it is told that the Jewish minister Sa'd ad-Daula was given a similar honor by Arghoun in the year 1287¹³. There is a story in Talmud about a Rabbi who was conversing with his Persian friend. His friend wanted to offer him wine to drink, but did not want to touch it with

¹³ *Revue des Études Juives*, XXXVI, 1898, p. 252.

his hands since he knew the Jewish custom of not drinking wine from the hands of a non-Jew. (Interestingly enough, the Rabbi told him it was all right because the wine had been boiled, Aboda Zara 30a).

It is puzzling to hear Cyrus called a pagan. Why does not the poet, who has elaborated for us the tale of Cyrus' birth of a Jewish mother—a story also told by the Moslem historian Ṭabari¹⁴—take advantage of the Halachic law that anyone born of a Jewish mother is a Jew, in order to give a more satisfactory solution to Mattathiah's dilemma over the cup of wine? Why does he not even mention Cyrus' birth from Queen Esther later in his work, precisely at the point where Cyrus enters into the mainstream of Jewish destiny?

We have seen how Cyrus created a problem in Jewish thought from the beginning. It is a characteristic of Jewish monotheism to be irrevocably opposed to the gods of other nations. On the other hand, it is indicated in a sufficient number of places in the Jewish sacred writings that it is all right for the nations to worship each his own god. They will not be punished for loyalty to their own gods; only Israel will be punished for imitating them. Suddenly here, a benevolent and just king liberates the Jewish people from exile, orders the rebuilding of their temple, fulfilling the words of the God of Israel, and at the same time acts with the same magnanimity toward other nations and their gods. Depending on which trend of thought was followed, Cyrus could have been taken as a pagan because he honoured the gods of all nations, or, he could have been taken as herald of messianic times because of his deliverance of the whole world. Precisely here, Jewish thought in the Talmudic period, which had witnessed the passage of many centuries without the advent of messianic days, had to put a question mark over Cyrus' divine mission. The messianic era has its own eschatological character according to the Jewish conception, and as we have seen, the rabbinic scholars used this conception in its more developed form to evaluate the role of Cyrus. This is what gave two different direc-

¹⁴ According to Ṭabari, Bahmān's wife was the Jewess Rāḥab daughter of Pinḥas, who was an offspring of Rāḥab'am the son of king Solomon (*Annales*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Prima Series, II, 1879-1901, p. 688). See also Mojmal al-Tavārikh, ed. Malek al-Sho'arā-ye Bahār, Teheran, 1339/1960, p. 30. Ṭabari also says that Esther was the mother of Bahman (p. 688) and that Cyrus the son of Ahasuerus was given command of Babylonia by Bahman (pp. 654, 691, 718).

tions to their thought, and is perhaps what is reflected in Shāhin's story of the cup of wine.

Another point should be noted regarding Cyrus' Jewish birth. A parallel phenomenon occurs in Persian national literature with regard to another hero, Alexander, who was «Persianized» by being given a Persian father¹⁵. Although there is a marked difference between Cyrus' role of deliverer of the Jews, and Alexander's role of destroyer of the Persians, there is also a profound similarity between both cases of "naturalization". In each case, the hero is involved in a crisis in which the very existence of the nation is at stake. The Persians, first great empire in history, could not endure the sudden shock of destruction at the hands of a small enemy country. Alexander is cursed, called *gujastak* in several works of Pahlavi literature. But slowly he is changed from a conqueror into a hero and later, in Neẓāmi, into a prophet¹⁶.

As we have seen, the Jewish national consciousness was totally bound up with the notion of their being a people whom God loved, so that their attitude toward Cyrus stems not only from his role as restorer of a conquered people. It was an enigma to them that God did not help them through a king of their own from the house of David, and one of their reactions to this enigma was to find a Jewish parentage for Cyrus as well as a spiritual affinity. The figures of Alexander and Cyrus in Persian and Jewish literature are examples of how national literatures express, interpret, and preserve for the future a people's peculiar consciousness of its existence and identity.

¹⁵ See *Eskandar-nāmeḥ* of Neẓāmi. Earlier works, dating from the period when Persian writers wrote in Arabic, also refer to this, such as Tabari, Bal'ami, Dinavari and Tha'ālabi. All refer to Darius II as Alexander's father.

¹⁶ See Neẓāmi, *Eqbāl-nāmeḥ*, which is actually the second part of the *Eskandar-nāmeḥ*.