

CONCLUDING REMARKS

INITIAL QUESTIONS AND PRELIMINARY ANSWERS

Any ambitious workshop starts with many questions and ends up with a few answers – and even more questions. At least this is true for a meeting which brings together people from different scholarly disciplines and, while drawing upon previous intradisciplinary research on the topic in question, aims at opening up perspectives for interdisciplinary discourses and for collaborative investigations. When the symposium on “Transmission and Interpretation of the Book of Isaiah” was convened at Maria-spring in 2012, it was clear from the outset that the meeting itself – and also any collection of essays deriving from this symposium – would appear as a laboratory focusing on Isaiah, his Book and its reception. Given the current state of research, as outlined above in the introduction, this was only to be expected. But obviously, the Book of Isaiah renders such an interdisciplinary approach not only possible but even mandatory. Given its tremendous impact on cultures and religions during the last two millennia, it enables and deserves a comparative analysis.

A three-day symposium allows for anything but an encyclopedic approach regarding a topic as multi-faceted as the Book of Isaiah and its reception history. In the introduction to the present volume, we have already outlined which aspects of the overall topic have been dealt with and how the papers have been arranged for the publication: Studies of the transmission of the Hebrew text are accompanied by analyses of ancient translations in Greek, Aramaic and Latin; literary genres like commentaries and homilies are investigated as well as quotations of Isaiah in qumranic, rabbinic and New Testament texts and in Christian oriental traditions. Finally, the person of the prophet and its impact on Christian and Muslim traditions of text and thought have been assessed. On the following pages, we will try to re-read this array of specialized studies in order to highlight some overarching features – commonalities and differences – which arise from the comparative approach to the topic and which open up perspectives for further research¹.

1. For the sake of brevity, we refrain from referring explicitly and extensively to the single papers in this volume. The keywords we use should clarify in which essay more details of any aspect may be found. We would like to thank Christiane Reschke for her preliminary work on the present systematic overview.

TRANSMISSION ...

Which Isaiah?

Perhaps the most simple but equally the most fundamental question is: Which Isaiah are we talking about? Since modern research, generally speaking, does no longer employ the image of a historical person who in the 8th century BCE wrote a prophetic book of 66 chapters, we have to differentiate between traditions concerning perceptions of the person of the prophet and the transmission of the book known under this name. Of course, this is a commonplace in Old Testament exegesis, but it might be worthwhile to remember that the earliest manuscripts already presuppose a complete book attributed to this single prophet, and that all the religious traditions which come to the fore in this volume would reckon Isaiah a concrete and identifiable author. This does not imply that the connection between Isaiah as a historical figure and as author of the prophetic book was equally presupposed in all contexts: the person was sometimes widely detached from the book, as is visible in the *Ascension of Isaiah* or in some medieval Islamic traditions. In contrast, the book could be interpreted without any regard to the author as person, like in the Qur'an. It should be noted that not only the book but also the person was prominent throughout ancient and medieval religious traditions (see below).

It is clear, however, that the bulk of the material related to Isaiah derives from the transmission and interpretation of the book. But here, the question "which Isaiah?" arises again, not only from the fact that the prophetic book as a whole was certainly not written in the 8th century and not by a single human being or by three subsequent authors to be named Proto-, Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah. Moreover, there are mutual influences of the text and its respective contexts, and this is why the aspects of 'transmission' and 'interpretation' are intrinsically intertwined, although we can differentiate them for heuristic purposes. Every stage of the transmission of the Hebrew text (e.g., by Qumran scribes) and every translation into another language (Aramaic, Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and so on) produces not only a specific rendering of the content of the book but also a distinct image of "Isaiah" as its author. While it might seem obvious that, in a sense, there are as many Isaiahs as translations, it remains to assess the dynamics and details of these images and their mutual influences. It is precisely the specific interplay of, e.g., the rendering of the text of the prophetic sayings in particular and the underlying conception of prophecy in general which deserves our interest: it is far from self-explanatory that one and the same prophetic book should inform religious practices in such

different cultural, linguistic and social contexts. It is also important to take into account that every reception includes processes of production, namely, of the text to be received, and this happens not only by virtue of interpretation but also, at an early stage, with regard to the textual material itself.

Rewriting and Translating the Book of Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is the product of a complex process of writing and rewriting and, in consequence, of modifying, enlarging and interconnecting the textual layers. Although the manuscripts only provide access to the last stages of this text-production, it is possible to reconstruct previous stages, though hypothetically, in great detail by the method of *Redaktionsgeschichte*. There is no contradiction between the insight into the successive growth and reworking of the Book of Isaiah until its final stage ('Endgestalt') and the observation that precisely this textual form was fundamental to all kinds of its reception: instead, a reception of "Isaiah" already takes place during the composition of the book which was for centuries transmitted under the name of the prophet and which was continuously rewritten in the course of that process. Such a "rewriting" necessarily involves interpretation, and this is visible not only within the Hebrew Book of Isaiah but also in the latter's transmission in the Dead Sea Scrolls: here, subtle modifications of the text hint at an ongoing process of understanding and interpreting and – for this purpose – modifying the wording. This reminds us that, although the Hebrew text of the Book of Isaiah may in principle be regarded as stable, it is important to differentiate between the authority of the text as a whole and of the single letter. And it should be kept in mind that, e.g., in the opinion of the authors of the Qumran *Pesharim*, the authority of the text can only be established in connection with their own authority as interpreters of the text. In fact, they considered themselves as belonging to the few elect who really understood what was foretold by prophetic scriptures.

That the letter had to be dominated by the spirit (that is, by later writers' authority to adapt the text to the needs of their lifetime) is, of course, crucial to any research into the translations of the Book of Isaiah into ancient languages, in the Septuagint and the Greek renderings related to it as well as in the Aramaic Targum and in the Latin Vulgate. All these translations claim to be faithful renderings of the Hebrew original (in the case of Jerome's Vulgate, this point is made deliberately and polemically against previous Latin versions) and thus testify to the *hebraica veritas* (in the case of the Apocalypse of John, there seem to be even modifications of the "Old Greek text" following the Hebrew original). But at the

same time, their very existence reveals a broad variety of possible renderings (each reckoned legitimate by the respective community). To be sure, there is no *concept* of plurality in antiquity and medieval times concerning the interpretation of a given text. Because of this conceptual gap, the Hebrew original actually serves to govern such a plurality where it is consciously taken into account, most prominently in Origen's *Hexapla* (which is not directly related to the search for different layers of meaning within *one* word, sentence, or pericope).

While textual differences within the qumranic versions of the Book of Isaiah are only slight rewritings, the different Greek versions illustrate that there was considerable philological and theological debate about the correct rendering of the Hebrew Bible in general and of Isaiah in particular (see, e.g., the debate between Jerome and Augustine about the Hebrew or Greek text of the Old Testament as authoritative for patristic theology). Thus, the authority of the text as a whole must be related to a certain fluidity of its linguistic and semantic appearance when transmitted beyond the borders of languages and cultures. It is telling that references to Isaiah in the Qur'an might be due to oral tradition in liturgy and homilies – apparently, there was a kind of “re-oralization” of scriptural prophecy, or to put it more simply: there was an impact of the practical use made of holy scriptures in Jewish and Christian communities on the nascent Muslim movement. Such a fluidity or flexibility was crucial to the trans-cultural “success” of the Book of Isaiah – in interconnection with its being a prophetic book which was genuinely open to diverging, innovative interpretations.

Canons and Genres

Before focusing on such interpretations, we should look at the specific contexts of the transmission of the Book of Isaiah, that is, the process not of rewriting the text itself but of “re-framing” the message of Isaiah in other literary genres. First and foremost, the Book of Isaiah became part of the canon of the Hebrew Bible as well as of the Septuagint and its derivatives. Subsequently, it had authority not only because of its prophetic origin but also because it was part of a normative collection of scriptures, albeit with significant differences due to language and cultural contexts of the emerging canons (e.g., the Hebrew-Aramaic canon in comparison to the Septuagint and Vulgate). While the Hebrew text of Isaiah became literally canonized – and as such, subject to interpretation and commentary (see below) –, this canonization did by no means stop the process of rewriting, if “rewriting” also includes the translation of a

text into another language. In turn, this “canonized Isaiah” – together with the other canonical books of prophets – would from now on define what scriptural prophecy is and how it relates to other prophetic texts, including Christian and Jewish apocalyptic writings, or to newly arising oral prophecies like the Montanist movement in the 2nd century CE. While in ancient Judaism and early Christianity, Isaiah was the most frequently quoted prophetic book, the Old Testament scriptural prophecy was conceived of as unity. Therefore, canonization may well be regarded as a second stage of “scripturalization” or, to put it slightly different, as a normative contextualization on a higher level. While there were many different appropriations of scriptural prophecy in later Jewish, Christian and even Islamic writings, there was only a limited range of possible receptions, and this delimitation was due to the very text and its growing history of interpretation which itself provided a hermeneutical framework for later generations. In other words, there was a creative but well-structured interplay of hypertext and pretext. From this perspective, it would be highly interesting to systematically scrutinize later perceptions of prophecy in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion with respect to the impact of Isaiah on the definition of genre and content of scriptural prophecy in general (a comparative task which would have exceeded the scope of the present volume).

Besides being canonized, parts of the Book of Isaiah were regularly utilized in many different genres, e.g., in the Qumran *Pesharim*, in rabbinic homilies drawing on the Rabbinic *Haftarot* or in Christian preaching. This might be termed “re-framing” because not only the message but the very text of the Book of Isaiah (in its varying renderings) came to contribute to the liturgical and exegetical framework of religious communication. It is as obvious as important that in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion scripturalized prophecy played an important role: it informed interreligious dialogues or polemics but also, on a more fundamental level, shaped possible and actual perceptions of the divine revelation in changing contexts, with or without explicitly naming Isaiah as the source of such prophetic knowledge. It is worth pondering the different frameworks in which Isaianic prophecy was received, from non-scriptural Qumran texts to New Testament writings (most prominently and with reference to the prophet in the Gospel of Matthew, anonymously in the Apocalypse of John) and, again without explicitly naming its source, in the Qur’an. Thus, while at an early stage the growing authority of the book (via scripturalizing Isaianic prophecy) did not completely prevent processes of rewriting the text, in later times the canonization of the Book of Isaiah did not hinder but rather promote its utilization in varying frameworks. The Book

of Isaiah witnesses to the dynamics of scriptural prophecy on the level of transmission. This, of course, is also crucial to the forms of its interpretation to which we now turn.

... AND INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics of Prophecy

The interpretation of prophetic writings not only offers many possibilities of understanding the text itself; it also necessitates adaptations of the prophet's message to the time of the interpreter. There is no need to demonstrate at length that especially the Book of Isaiah was subject to a broad variety of hermeneutical approaches in Jewish and Christian exegesis, theology and liturgy, as well as in Muslim theology and historiography. A systematic mapping of such approaches has still to be undertaken. This is not only due to the fact that in general, there is a lack of studies that explore the exegesis of prophetic scriptures in later religious traditions – beyond single genres or contexts. Apparently, the main challenge is to comprehend the hermeneutical circle that involves both the text of the book and the application of exegesis to the situation of the interpreter and its readership, a task which is especially demanding when scrutinizing the exegesis of prophecy which is by definition polyvalent.

While this may be a commonplace in modern exegesis, it has as yet not sufficiently been taken into account that any "interpretation" and "reception" of a prophetic writing implies a new understanding of this writing itself, or more precisely: the book to be interpreted is perceived in a new way by the interpreter and thus newly constituted as authoritative. While there was a stable Hebrew text and, as soon as the Septuagint had been established, also a reliable Greek text, there is no such thing as a fixed understanding of Isaiah on which later exegesis would have no impact. Instead, the present volume demonstrates that there are many approaches to Isaiah, whether in terms of messianic prophecy, theology and ecclesiology or in terms of ethical paraenesis. The text of the book and the image of the prophet are constantly re-constituted by successive interpretations (often without taking notice of each other, but sometimes depending upon each other). Thus, in ancient and medieval religious communities the Book of Isaiah and its message were conceived of in highly divergent ways. Again, the question is: "Which Isaiah" is referred to in the texts examined in the different papers of this volume? Are there many Isaiahs? The Book of Isaiah may thus serve as a paradigm of the

challenges and difficulties that emerge with any attempt to assess the impact of scriptural prophecy in transcultural perspective – at least if one refrains from viewing “reception” as a one-way street. One has to ask not only for a given *interpretation* of Isaiah but also for (*the book of*) *Isaiah* who (or which) is interpreted in that very moment and thereby received, transformed and constituted anew.

The present volume aims at highlighting some strands of such interpretation of the Book of Isaiah, and it does so with regard to its impact on identity formation in religious communities. While the authority of the book, generally speaking, was regarded as binding, its application to other religious traditions and topics appears as innovative and creative: it could provoke explanation, harmonization, evident “updating” or tacit correction. While eschatology is surely one of the main characteristics of the Book of Isaiah, and messianic hope has often been derived from it, there is also a transformation of messianism into an anti-militaristic stance in the Aramaic Targumim (after the defeat of the insurrections against the Roman occupation forces in Palestine). In later rabbinic texts, Isaiah even served to inspire the urgent hope for peace and justice, and the *Pesiqtot* presented the book as a means of consolation to be used in services at the synagogue. In the Gospel of Matthew, passages from Isaiah were quoted in order to announce the fulfillment of the eschatological prophecies in the coming of Jesus. One and a half centuries later, Origen regarded Isaiah’s vision of God at the temple as disclosing the divine trinity as it had been revealed by Christ (the one of the three who became visible to all people, while the full insight into the trinitarian life is only accessible as mystical experience); from now on, the present world might become the visible place of God’s glory, and the believers’ souls can participate in it as Isaiah did in his vision. While indebted to Origen’s theology, Eusebius of Caesarea is more interested in what the self-revealing logos discloses about the interpreting community, that is, the Christian church. Time and again, Christian commentaries stress the authority of the text, but its metaphorical meaning (with regard to both christology and ecclesiology) is actually dominating (not only) in Eusebius.

While this christological appropriation of Isaianic prophecy is well known, a less known field of research opens up when we compare these different hermeneutical approaches beyond the borders of religious communities: to emphasize the eschatological scopus of Isaiah’s prophecy is valid not only for Jewish readers, nor only for apocalyptic traditions; and a similar ethical paraenesis is found in Christian and Muslim interpretations of Isaiah. Again, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament, the eschatological interpretation of scriptural prophecy reveals

its true meaning – but the idea that the completion of time and salvation is near or has already begun is not the only possible approach to such writings and certainly not the only way of using them as a means of collective or individual self-identification. Hermeneutics of prophecy are in many ways instrumental in constituting and communicating religious identity – and the Book of Isaiah may be regarded as the most prominent writing in intra- and interreligious discourse on identity formation.

Legitimization and Appropriation

This interplay of hermeneutics and identity formation also implies processes of legitimation and apology, that is, of rendering a specific exegesis of holy scriptures plausible for one's own community and defending it against other interpretations of these scriptures. Of course, this is again a hermeneutical circle: When the Qumran *Pesharim*, e.g., affirm the authority of Scripture by claiming that they reveal its true meaning, the authority of the prophet in turn legitimizes this interpretation which was highly controversial within contemporary Judaism. The same is true for divergent readings of Isaiah in nascent and early Christianity. Here, the authority of that book is crucial to the view that Jesus is the divine messenger of the fulfillment of time, and the Book of Isaiah was seen as a principal witness in the contest between Jews and Christians about the legitimate interpretation of scripture. Such a contest is also going on in the Apocalypse of John which explicitly appeals to scriptural prophecies in order to legitimize its revelation as brought about by Christ.

This tradition of Christian apologetics (often in polemical form) can be traced in commentaries throughout Late Antiquity; it became especially vivid after the beginning of Constantine's rule when the frontiers between Jews and Christians needed to be drawn anew, as Eusebius' apologetic writings and his commentary on the Book of Isaiah illustrate. Significantly, Eusebius made use of the Hebrew text (or, to be precise, of Origen's Hexapla) when arguing against the Jews; and in using references to the history of Israel as apologetic arguments, he followed a tradition inaugurated by Philo of Alexandria in his debate with Hellenistic philosophy and taken up by 2nd-century Christian apologists.

While it is well known that early Christian exegesis in Alexandria was deeply indebted to the philological method of Homeric exegesis as applied to the Torah by Philo, it is also important to recognize, e.g., Aphrahat's dependence on rabbinic hermeneutics (as may be observed in his allusions to haggadic exegesis), but with a decidedly anti-Jewish stance. Isaiah as the messianic prophet par excellence thus became a main topic in the

struggles about the legitimate hermeneutical approach to prophecy. Such a struggle even takes place in the dialogue between Patriarch Timotheus and the Caliph al-Mahdi in the early 9th century: the Christian lays claim to the Old Testament as the Bible of the Christians and denies that it could be a witness to the Qur'an in order to conclude that Muhammad is not equal to the biblical prophets (not to speak of Jesus). However, the Muslim caliph argues with Isaiah, too (at least in Timotheus' rendering of the dialogue!); and this fact again hints at the apologetic potential of the text. In contrast, the Qur'an itself alludes to Isaiah's vision as a model for the divine revelation to Muhammad, thus legitimizing the latter as final prophetic authority against all his predecessors. Following up this strategy, Isaiah's visions were used as apologetic material by later Muslim theologians in their disputes with contemporary Jews and Christians. It is striking to map this manifold impact of the Book of Isaiah on processes of legitimizing and delineating religious identity – an impact which is due to the prophetic character of the book in general but also to its openness to highly diverging interpretations of its eschatological message, a feature that interconnects its reception in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Religion.

The Text of the Book and the Life of the Prophet

While modern research into the Book of Isaiah has become very restrictive in attributing early parts of the written text to the 8th-century prophet, ancient and medieval authors were, not surprisingly, convinced of the identity of the prophet and the author of the book. Moreover, the life of the prophet, about which the Old Testament writings do not offer much reliable information, soon became a topic on its own, as can be seen, e.g., in the *Ascension of Isaiah*: In this early Christian writing, the author sometimes refers to passages from Isaiah but is more interested in providing a story of the prophet's death which goes far beyond the information given in the biblical texts. The parabiblical narration of Isaiah's death is modelled according to nascent Christology: it begins with the public and parable-like foretelling in Isaiah but then proceeds to esoteric and non-parabolic announcements (for those who are able to understand it). In the end, Isaiah becomes a (pre-)Christian martyr. The *Ascension of Isaiah* thus is a Christian appropriation of the early Jewish legend of Isaiah as transmitted in the *Lives of the Prophets*. Taken together, both traditions testify to the growing interest in the person of the prophet since Hellenistic times (similar to the *Life of Moses* written by Philo of Alexandria and, in Christian guise, by Gregory of Nyssa). It seems that the interest in Isaiah's

martyrdom became popular in a time when shedding one's blood was increasingly appreciated as an authentic way of imitating Christ during the persecutions of the 2nd century. Thus, Isaiah played his part in the martyrological discourse in Judaism and Christianity and contributed to its specific shape. While the Book of Isaiah was controversial between Jews and Christians, the references to his martyrdom reveal a remarkable similarity in their respective modes of establishing religious identity.

In Christian contexts, Isaiah also underwent a transformation from the martyr to a 'non-bloody' saint: in Origen, Isaiah appears as Christian sage *avant la lettre* and as a model for ascetic imitation of Christ (a concept which became highly important for the development of the hagiographic discourse from the 4th century onwards). The biblical prophet was reckoned capable of incorporating different models of religious experts or 'virtuosos'; the rabbis, e.g., defined themselves as resembling the prototype of the prophets (albeit modified according to the needs of their time). This being so, Isaiah as a person became relevant to the Christian refutation of Muslims who claimed to have a new and unique prophet. As Patriarch Timotheus pointed out to Caliph al-Mahdi, there was neither a legitimate claim to Muhammad as prophet like the prophets of the Old Covenant nor any Isaianic foretelling of Muhammad in particular. The strict demarcations within this literary dialogue should however not be overrated with respect to the reception of Isaiah beyond religious frontiers: in fact, Isaiah's story became part of some fundamental works of Islamic historiography after the emergence of the text of the Qur'an, apparently on the basis of oral transmission as received from Jewish or Christian usage. The interreligious and transcultural potential of Isaiah as person and as author thus enabled later writers to transgress doctrinal boundaries; and it is worth pondering the impact of the person of the prophet on the widespread reception of the Book of Isaiah.

BEYOND THE PRESENT VOLUME

The previous remarks on the transmission and the interpretation of the Book of Isaiah are by no means exhausting. There is much more to be detected in the Isaianic tradition(s). Whether the above findings apply to other branches of the textual tradition and the hermeneutic dynamics of the Book of Isaiah (e.g., as already named in the introduction, the *Vetus Latina*, the *Peshitta* and other translations into oriental languages) has still to be investigated. And it is only to be expected that further aspects will come to the fore which are not yet covered by the present volume. But it

is obvious that scriptural prophecy in general and Isaiah in particular lay at the core of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Religion, as the contributions to this volume demonstrate, while taking the differences in due consideration. Again, it is striking that there are no clear-cut delimitations of similarities and differences: there are as many “Isaiahs” as groups, types and traditions within the three monotheistic religions, and there are many interesting interferences between them.

The editors sincerely hope, therefore, that this collection of (mainly) intradisciplinary studies will stimulate further interdisciplinary research into the Book of Isaiah. There is much to be gained from in-depth analyses of the text, its tradition and its translations as well as from comparative research into the methods of interpretation of the text and the importance of the person of the prophet in and between different religious traditions. It is not that the model of “Abrahamic” religions could and should be substituted by “Isaianic” religions. But a fresh view on the transmission and the interpretation of the Book of Isaiah might also provide a new focus for writing the history of religions in the Mediterranean and beyond from antiquity to medieval times. In doing so, a refinement of the comparative approach employed in this collection of essays could be achieved. The present volume should thus be regarded only as a modest contribution to such an overarching endeavor, and it would accomplish its mission if it led to further individual and joint research into the characteristics and dynamics of the transmission and the interpretation of the Book of Isaiah.

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