CHAPTER FOUR

THE REDACTIONAL FORMATION OF ISAIAH 19

1. Introduction

In the current form of the book, Isa 19:1–25 comprises an oracle about Egypt that begins with a מַשָּׂא superscription, in common with many other oracles about foreign nations in Isa 13–23. This chapter is distinguished from the preceding Cush oracle by a מַשָּׂא title at 19:1, while a narrative about Cush and Egypt begins at 20:1. Although 19:1–4 may probably be attributed to the eighth century B.C.E. (see below), the following discussion will seek to demonstrate that the remainder of the chapter has been produced by later editorial additions to the original oracle. While most critical scholars agree that the five ‘in that day’ passages constituting verses 16–25 are probably secondary, we will show that there is also reason to doubt the authenticity of verses 5–15. Thus, much of Isa 19 is the product of various accretions that are held together by common interest in Egypt. In what follows, each of the major stages in the formation of the chapter will be surveyed, with particular regard to literary influences that have played some role in their development.

2. Isaiah 19:1–4

The question of authorship stands among many uncertainties about Isa 19:1–4, not least because the vague historical allusions provide weak footing for a determination of the date of composition. The ‘harsh master’ and ‘mighty king’ in 19:4, for example, could refer to any number of rulers. While these epithets could be suitably applied to Assyrian kings of the eighth century B.C.E., the text makes no specific mention of Assyria, nor does it describe a foreign ruler over Egypt. The portrayal of internal conflict in 19:2 may also suggest various circumstances in Egypt’s history, but significant doubt remains concerning what may be intended. Given the weak historical references in 19:1–4, a literary analysis of these verses provides a better indication of their origin.
From a literary standpoint, many critical scholars deny Isaianic authorship of Isa 19:1–4 on two main grounds. First, this oracle is one of nine in Isa 13–23 that begin with a 'משה GN’ superscription (13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1; 23:1; cf. 14:28; 30:6). Since a few of the משא oracles seem to relate to events toward the end of the exile (especially 13:1–14:23; 21:1–10), some commentators assume that the collection of these oracles would not have been incorporated into the book until after that time (see Chapters 1–2, above). However, other משא material, such as 17:1–3; 22:1–8, seems to relate to the eighth century B.C.E., which suggests that the superscription does not necessarily preclude the authenticity of any oracle’s contents.

Secondly, the authenticity of Isa 19:1–4 is often ruled out on the basis of a style that is thought to be a poor imitation of the genuine work of Isaiah ben Amoz. For example, ‘Egypt’ is repeated eight times within the first four verses, and the appearance of Yhwh riding on the clouds in 19:1 is thought to be more characteristic of psalmic texts than prophetic material (cf. Pss 18:10–11 [9–10]; 68:5, 34 [4, 33]; 104:3). Even if certain broad literary characteristics can be identified among texts for which there is a greater consensus, these cannot rule out the possibility of Isaianic authorship for a particular passage. In this particular case, there is no basis for the assertion that the prophet Isaiah could (or would) not have mentioned Egypt several times within a few lines or used certain poetic imagery.

On the contrary, several literary features of Isa 19:1–4 support the Isaianic origin of this passage. To begin, these verses contain a few terms and expressions that are found in other material widely recognized as Isaianic. אֱלִילִים (‘idols’), for example, is especially common in Isaianic passages (cf. Isa 2:8, 18, 20 [twice]; 10:10, 11; 19:1, 3; 31:7; also Lev 19:4; 26:1; 1 Chr 16:26; Ps 96:5; 97:7; Ezek 30:13; Hab 2:18).  

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2 Cheyne (Isaiah, 112) lists several additional literary characteristics along these lines to dispute the authenticity of Isa 19:1–4.

3 The etymology of אֱלִילִים is uncertain, although it may have developed as a disparaging pun on אֵל or אלים (‘god, gods’). If the Isaianic passages account for the