The Concept of Torah in the Book of Isaiah

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1 Introduction

Until recently it has been a broad consensus within biblical scholarship that references to Torah in the book of Isaiah did not mean the Torah of Moses, but should be understood in a more general sense indicating prophetic instruction. In the book of Isaiah there is only a small number of texts, twelve altogether, which make use of the Hebrew word הָעֵרוּת. It is never prefixed with a definite article nor is it followed by the mention of Moses as is the case in the Deuteronomistic and Chronistic literature. The concept is used in the absolute sense (2:3; 8:16; 20; 42:21; 51:4) or it is called הָעֵרוּת אֱלֹהֵנָה (1:10; 30:9), הָעֵרוּת יְהוָה (51:4), הָעֵרוּת יְהוָה (42:24), הָעֵרוּת יְהוָה (5:24), הָעֵרוּת יְהוָה (42:24), and הָעֵרוּת יְהוָה (51:17), the suffix once referring to the Servant of the Lord (42:4) instead of to the Lord himself. Only once the plural הָעֵרוֹת occurs (24:5).

Biblical scholars have often expressed their surprise that the prophets in general hardly ever refer to the revelation at Mount Sinai or mention the Torah of Moses explicitly. While some of the prophets in any case allude to the responsibility of the priests for teaching and correctly applying Torah (Jer 2:8; 18:18; Ezek 7:26; 22:26; 44:23; Hos 4:6; Zeph 3:4; Hag 2:11–13; Mal 2:6–9; cf. Deut 33:10), they never connect Torah to Moses, except in the closing section of the book of Malachi: ‘Remember the teaching of my servant Moses (להָעֵרוּת מֹשֶׁה), the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.’ (Mal 3:22 = NRSV 4:4). With regard to Isaiah and his book it has been common opinion for a long time that הָעֵרוּת exclusively refers to a kind of prophetic Torah, comparable to the one the prophet Samuel delivers in

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2 LXX has the singular.
4 All translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
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1 Sam 15:22–23. The first and second time that the concept is used provide a good illustration, for in both cases תּוֺרָה is paralleled with דְּבַר־יְהוָה ‘the word of the Lord’, which clearly is a prophetically coloured concept. Isa 1:10 says: ‘Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!’ And inverting the sequence of the parallel nouns Isa 2:3 states: ‘For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.’ As in most modern Bible translations תּוֺרָה is translated with ‘instruction’ and not with ‘law’.

The origin of Isaiah’s concept of prophetic Torah has been sought in the context of Wisdom, though some scholars prefer to think of a more priestly origin and even suggest that Isaiah’s use of the concept is satirical. Recently, however, several scholars have argued that the present form of the book presupposes an interpretation of תּוֺרָה as referring to the Torah of Moses. In this paper I want to survey and discuss the arguments of this understanding of the concept of Torah in the book of Isaiah. For if the advocates of this ‘new’ interpretation are proven to be right, this will probably change our understanding of the overall message of the book and its function within biblical theology.

2 Supposed References to Mosaic Torah

Although traditional Judaism has always suggested a direct relationship of the book of Isaiah with Mosaic Torah, within critical scholarship this understanding could only rise when scholars started to focus on the final form of the book. Ground-breaking for this shift in Isaiah studies has been the plea of

7 J. Begrich, Die priesterliche Tora (BZAW, 66), Berlin 1936; R. Rendtorff, Die Gesetze in der Priesterschrift (FRLANT, 44), Göttingen 1963.