The Oldest Interpretation of the Suffering Servant

H. L. Ginsberg

New York

I

Five years ago I noted briefly\(^1\) that my Daniel source Apoc iii\(^2\) (= Bc in my terminology of that time) deliberately employed with reference to Antiochus III and especially Antiochus IV unique phrases which in ancient prophecy are predicated of Assyria, thereby identifying the Assyria of the passages in question with Seleucid Syria.

Thus Num xxiv 24a was understood by Apoc iii to mean ‘And ships from Kittim shall afflict Assyria, which in turn shall afflict the Hebrews’, and to refer to the humiliation of Antiochus IV by the Roman legate Popilius Laenas and to his subsequent measures against the temple-state of Jerusalem and against the Jewish religion. Accordingly Apoc iii begins his allusions to these events as follows: ‘But Kittite ships (read ‘ships from Kittim’ ṣiyyim mikkittim [haplography]) shall come against him, and he shall be humiliated, so he shall return and rage against the Holy Covenant.’ The choice of the initial phrase conveyed to the reader that the events in question were a fulfillment of Balaam’s oracle about Assyria.

Again Isa viii 7-8a was understood by Apoc iii to refer to the southward sweep of Seleucid armies over Judea, and so every time he had to relate such a sweep he employed the unique expression šṭp wʾabar (< Isa viii 8a); see Dan xi 10 (of Antiochus III’s conquest of Judea) and xi 40b-41a (of Antiochus IV’s anticipated advance thru Judea upon Egypt). And even when he spoke of Antiochus IV’s forces achieving victories north or south of Judea, our author liked to use at least the verb šṭp alone; see xi 22, 26. The reader was expected to

---

\(^1\) See my Studies in Daniel (New York 1948), 78, n. 21.

\(^2\) My new sigla for the strata in Daniel B (i.e. Dan vii-xii) are presented in my paper ‘The Composition of the Book of Daniel’ (to be published in Eretz Israel, vol. 3), paragraphs 19 ff.
recognize the phrase and to infer that the events in question were the fulfillment of an Isaian prophecy about Assyria.

Most important of all, Isaiah says in Isa x 5 ff. that Assyria is the rod of the Lord’s anger and the staff of his indignation, and in v. 23 ibid. that the Lord ‘is going to work a destruction and a thing decreed’ (hendiadys for ‘a decreed destruction’, cf. v. 22b) ‘in the midst of all the land’. There follows, however, in vv. 24-36 a promise that the Lord’s indignation will soon spend itself: then Assyria will no longer be able to wield the rod over the people that dwells in Zion, but instead the Lord will wield a rod over Assyria. Obviously Apoc iii was bound to indicate that all this applied to Seleucid Syria, specifically to Antiochus IV. Accordingly, in the middle of his account of Antiochus’ religious persecution he makes this observation (Dan xi 36b): ‘And he shall prosper until the indignation has spent itself, when that which is decreed shall have been wrought.’ Further comment is superfluous.

II

But prophecies featuring Assyria were not the only sort that Apoc iii believed to be in process of fulfillment in his own day. For he had precisely the same conviction about the famous Suffering Servant pericope Isa lii 13-liii 12. This section speaks of a Servant of the Lord who bears the sins of the Many (rabbim), thereby justifying (atonning for) them (Isa liii 11, 12b). Tho he even dies in the process (liii 8b-9, 12acd), he lives again (the general sense of the difficult last 8 Hebrew words of liii 10a).

It has of course been noted before that the Enlighteners (maskilim) of Dan xi 33-xii 10 are accorded in Dan xii 3 an epithet—“justifiers of the Many”—which is taken from the statement in Isa liii 11 that ‘my Servant shall justify the Many’ (omitting, with others, ṣdq as a dittogram of the last four letters of yṣdq), and Bentzen suggests that the idea of a resurrection of large numbers expressed in Dan xii 2 is a development of the idea of the resurrection of the Servant in Isa liii. But so far as I know nobody has observed the plain fact that the author of Dan xi-xii has simply identified the Servant of Isa lii 13-liii 12 with the Maskilim (Enlightened or Enlighteners) of his day, and the Many of the said passage with the Many of Dan xi 33, 34, etc. Yet there can be no doubt about it. The Maskilim, like the Servant, justify the Many; and tho one sense of this phrase in Daniel may be that they instruct them and induce them to take the right path (Dan xi 33), some of the Maskilim do also suffer martyrdom and are resurrected, and it is only to these that the epithet of ‘justifiers of the Many’