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978-0-521-09627-0 - The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah xl 13-14: A Study of the Sources of the Theology of Deutero-Isaiah

R. N. Whybray

Excerpt

[More information](#)INTRODUCTION¹

One of the most rewarding of recent approaches to the study of Deutero-Isaiah has been the attempt to understand his teaching against the background of his ministry to the second generation of Jewish exiles in Babylonia.² Two factors have here to be taken into account: the nature of the Israelite religious tradition which the exiles had inherited from the past, and the actual circumstances of their life in Babylonia, where they were subject to the cultural and religious pressures of their environment. Each of these factors may be expected to have exercised some influence on the teaching of Deutero-Isaiah. It is in order to explore the relationship between the two that this study of one short passage has been undertaken. This passage, which has long been the subject of vigorous controversy, admirably raises the question of the sources of Deutero-Isaiah's theology, and it is hoped that a detailed study of it, employing as far as possible all the techniques of modern critical investigation, may shed some light on the interpretation of Deutero-Isaiah as a whole.

מִי־תִכַּן אֶת־רוּחַ יְהוָה וְאִישׁ עֲצָתוֹ יוֹדִיעָנוּ
 אֶת־מִי נֹעֵץ וְיִבְיָיְהוּ וְיִלְמְדֵהוּ בְּאֵרֶח מִשְׁפָּט
 וְיִלְמְדֵהוּ דַעַת וְדַרְךְ תְּבוּנוֹת יוֹדִיעָנוּ

- 13a Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,
 b or as his counsellor has instructed him?
 14a Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
 b and who taught him the path of justice,
 c and taught him knowledge,
 d and showed him the way of understanding?³

¹ I am indebted to my colleague Mr P. J. Thompson for a remark about the possibility of a reference to wisdom in Isa. xl 13-14, which led me to undertake this investigation.

² An example is H.-E. von Waldow's 'Anlaß und Hintergrund der Verkündigung des Deuterjesaja' (unpublished dissertation), Bonn, 1953. A more recent summary of von Waldow's views is to be found in his 'The Message of Deutero-Isaiah', *Interpretation* 22 (1968), pp. 259-87.

³ RSV translation.

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THE HEAVENLY COUNSELLOR IN ISAIAH XL 13-14

A feature of Deutero-Isaiah's style which causes the greatest difficulties for his interpreters is his unusually frequent use of the question as a technique of argument.¹ This literary device is by no means peculiar to him: it is found in the Old Testament almost wherever rational argument occurs. It is used in a variety of ways, but in most cases the context leaves no room for doubt about its function. These functions have to some extent been classified in the lexica. But in the case of Deutero-Isaiah there are special difficulties. Often the nature of the context is itself a matter for debate. Whether these chapters are, as some have claimed,² a single composition with a continuity of thought, or, as most scholars maintain, a collection of short pieces, there is no general agreement about their internal divisions. Uncertainty about the structure of the thought frequently leads to uncertainty about the precise function of the questions.

The situation is particularly difficult in the case of the many questions beginning with, or involving, the particle 'who?' (מי). The answer expected may be positive or negative; and there is often a range of possibilities concerning the person or persons, thing or things referred to.

Ch. xl 13 f. is one of the passages concerning which there is wide disagreement. Most, though not all, commentators hold that the answers expected to these questions are negative; but even so there remain several possibilities concerning the identity of the person or persons whose role of adviser to Yahweh is thus implicitly denied. The reference may be to man: that is, no man could or did do these things. The point would then be that Yahweh is infinitely superior to man in his wisdom and knowledge. But it is also possible to interpret the

¹ Owing to this prophet's predilection for compound questions which may be taken either as single questions or as groups of separate questions, the exact number is difficult to compute. But in the 333 verses commonly attributed to Deutero-Isaiah there are certainly not less than 72, and perhaps as many as 85. The interrogative particle מי occurs 33 times (35, if two probable emendations are allowed).

² E.g. K. Budde, *Das Buch Jesaja Kap 40-66* (HSAT), 3rd edn 1909; more recently L. G. Rignell, *A Study of Isaiah Ch. 40-55*, Lund, 1956.

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passage as referring to other gods or heavenly beings: as an assertion that Yahweh is superior to or independent of them. If this is the true meaning, the reference might be to a member or members of the Babylonian pantheon, or to an Israelite 'heavenly council' over which Yahweh is held to preside, such as is referred to in some of the Psalms and other passages in the Old Testament – a concept which probably has affinities with the assembly of the gods depicted in the Ugaritic literature. Again, the reference might be to some personified attribute of Yahweh such as wisdom: this view might appear to receive support from some other Old Testament texts such as Job xxviii, together with the fact that Yahweh's wisdom (דעת and תבונה) is here specifically mentioned. Finally it has been suggested¹ that the answer expected is positive: Deutero-Isaiah is declaring that it is the god El, mentioned a little later in verse 18, who advised and instructed Yahweh, so appearing to support a polytheistic view, but only in order to turn the tables in other passages where he declares that El and Yahweh are identical.²

The problem is one which is not without importance for the interpretation of the thought of Deutero-Isaiah as a whole. What is sometimes referred to as his 'doctrine of God' was not constructed in a vacuum, but, like the other aspects of his teaching, forms part of a reasoned apologetic whose aim was to convince his fellow exiles of the reasonableness of his central proclamation of imminent deliverance; and it can only be fully understood if we have a clear picture of the false beliefs which were under attack. It will be argued that these verses are to be understood against the background of a concept of an assembly of heavenly beings which was familiar to the Jews as part of their own religious traditions, but which the Jewish exiles in Babylonia had now encountered in a specifically Babylonian, polytheistic form which some of them found attractive, but which was incompatible with the Israelite understanding of God and threatened to hinder their acceptance of other aspects of Deutero-Isaiah's message.

¹ By P. A. H. de Boer, 'The Counsellor', *VT* Suppl. 3 (1955), p. 47.

² xl.iii 12; xlv.22.

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CHAPTER I

THE CONTEXT

First it is necessary to examine the context of thought in which these verses are set. Many of the older scholars¹ regarded verses 12–31 as a literary unit, whether independent or not, mainly on the basis of their contents and style: the prophet here reasons with his audience, seeking to convince them of Yahweh's claim to total sovereignty. The use of the argument from creation and of the question form throughout the passage clearly distinguishes verses 12–31 both from what precedes and from what follows. Others² made a division between verse 26 and verse 27, recognising that the specific address to Jacob/Israel and the complaint about God's apparent injustice in verse 27 mark the beginning of a new section.

Within verses 12–26 (or 12–31) the older commentators generally recognised shorter sections, each presenting a particular aspect of the prophet's argument. But it was not until the techniques of form criticism were applied to Deutero-Isaiah that the possibility was envisaged that these shorter sections might in fact have originally been independent units.

Gressmann, the first to apply form critical methods, did not reach this conclusion because the hymnic themes and language which he identified here led him to classify the whole of verses 12–26 as a Hymn linked with a word of consolation (*Trostwort*, verses 27–31) to form a single composition.³ It was Köhler, with a more precise understanding of individual forms, who narrowed the context, classifying verses 12–16 as a

¹ E.g. T. K. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 4th edn, 1886; K. Marti, *Das Buch Jesaja* (KHAT), 1900.

² E.g. P. Volz, *Jesaja II* (KAT), 1932; recently C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah*, Oxford, 1964.

³ H. Gressmann, 'Die literarische Analyse Deuterocesajas' (*ZAW* 34 (1914), pp. 254–97), pp. 293 f. Gressmann recognised, however, that Deutero-Isaiah's 'Hymns' are only imitations of genuine cultic hymns, and that the hymnic form is here used to put forward an argument.

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Disputation (*Streitgespräch*), a type of argument based on the forms of legal dispute in use in the administration of justice in the gate, a form which had already been used by some of the pre-exilic prophets.¹

Further precision was attained by Begrich.² He recognised the necessity of distinguishing between the legal argument or judgement (*Gerichtsrede*) and the Disputation (*Disputationsrede*), a form of argument taken from daily life, which, although its general purpose is the same (to convince or persuade), has its own form consonant with its original *Sitz im Leben*. It is characteristic of the Disputation that it begins by pointing to common ground between the disputants, from which a conclusion favourable to the speaker's point of view and disproving that of his opponent is then drawn. Begrich recognised verses 12–17 as a Disputation, correcting on grounds of context, form and metre Köhler's view that the unit ends with verse 16.³ Von Waldow⁴ also regards these verses as a *Disputationswort*. The questions in verses 12–14 imply affirmations about Yahweh which constitute the common ground between the disputants, from which the prophet in verses 15–17 draws new conclusions. Like Begrich, von Waldow holds that the Disputation is derived from the forms of argument used in daily life, but maintains that Deutero-Isaiah in his Disputations also draws on other modes of speech. In these verses he adopts the style of the wisdom teacher.⁵ Fohrer sees these verses as an imitation of the academic discussions (*Diskussionswort*) which took place in the wisdom schools.⁶

¹ L. Köhler, *Deuterocesaja (Jesaja 40–55) stilkritisch untersucht* (BZAW 37), 1923, pp. 110–20.

² J. Begrich, *Studien zu Deuterocesaja* (BWANT 77 (25)), 1938, pp. 41–6, reprinted as *Theologische Bücherei* 20, Munich, 1963, pp. 48–53.

³ *Theologische Bücherei*, p. 50 and note 168.

⁴ 'Anlaß und Hintergrund', pp. 28–36, 135–47. For a discussion of von Waldow's views see C. Westermann, 'Sprache und Struktur der Prophetie Deuterocesajas' (*Forschung am alten Testament (Theologische Bücherei 24)*, Munich, 1964, pp. 127–32).

⁵ 'The Message of Deutero-Isaiah', p. 269 n. 33.

⁶ G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Jesaja*, vol. III (*Zürcher Bibelkommentare*), 1964, pp. 24–6.

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Westermann¹ has attempted yet a further distinction. Within the *Disputationswort* he distinguishes two types: the true *Streitgespräch* or dispute between two opponents, in which the arguments of both sides are presented, even though one of them is given only in an abbreviated form; and the *Bestreitung* or single argument, in which only one side is given, in the form of a reasoned argument, while the other is left to be inferred. In Isa. xl 12-31 there are four examples of the *Disputationswort*, of which only the last (verses 27-31) is a true *Streitgespräch*, while the first three (verses 12-17, 18-24, 25-6) are to be classed as *Bestreitung*. Westermann thus agrees with some older scholars that verses 27-31 are to be distinguished from the previous verses, and provides a new explanation for this view; yet at the same time he holds to the view that the whole section (verses 12-31) really forms a single unit: the prophet has himself combined three examples of one type of disputation with one of another, and has bound them together as parts of a sustained argument. This, he maintains, is proved by verse 27: in this verse Jacob/Israel makes *two* complaints against God – that he cannot help, and that he will not. Only the second of these complaints is answered in the verses which follow (28-31); the first, already implicit in the three previous sections, has already received a triple answer there. Thus verse 27 looks both forwards and backwards, binding together the whole of verses 12-31 into a single unit.

Westermann also makes a further point. Deutero-Isaiah, in combining the form of the Disputation, originally taken from secular life, with that of the Psalm of Praise (*Lobpsalm*), which originally belonged to the cult, has created a new tool for persuading his audience to recognise their proper function as a cultic community devoted to the praise of God, and so a new kind of hortatory style, comparable in some ways to that of Deuteronomy.

Form-critical methods have thus confirmed the opinion of

¹ 'Sprache und Struktur der Prophetie Deuterocesajas', pp. 124-34.

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some earlier critics that verses 12–17, whether they form part of a wider argument or not, constitute in some sense an argument which can stand by itself. Westermann has in addition confirmed the older view that they are to be regarded as the first of four such arguments which together make up a larger section. The form critics have also drawn attention to the fact that the style is composite, drawing upon cultic, and possibly wisdom, themes and language in order to reinforce the argument.

Verses 13 f. must therefore, it would seem, be interpreted within the context of verses 12–17, and possibly also within the wider context of verses 12–31. At first sight the wider of these two contexts would seem to provide comparative material which ought to throw light on the meaning of the questions with which we are concerned, since these questions now belong, if Westermann is right, to a series, of which other examples are found in verses 12, 18, 25 and 26. All these questions are similar to the extent that they are all posed in order to elicit a reply which confesses Yahweh's incomparability;¹ but it does not follow that the actual mechanism of the question is the same in each case; indeed, the fact that even within this short passage the prophet also uses the question technique in quite a different way (verses 21, 27, 28) may well increase our doubt on this point.² Apart from the use of questions, the prophet uses a wide variety of arguments: creation language in verse 12, straight-forward assertions of human insignificance in verses 15, 17, 22–4; a mocking contrast between Yahweh and the idols in verses 19, 20; hymnic style in verse 22; a reference to Yahweh's power over the stars in verse 26; a reproach to

¹ On ways of expressing the incomparability of Yahweh see C. J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament (Pretoria Oriental Series 5)*, Leiden, 1966, especially pp. 27 f.

² Begrich (*Studien zu Deuterocesaja*, p. 49 and notes 165, 166) referred to the predilection for the use of the question as the starting-point of the Disputation, but pointed out that its function is not always the same in each case. He held that in verses 12–14 the questions state the common ground between the disputants, whereas in verses 18, 25 and 27 they pose the question at issue between them.

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Jacob/Israel for lack of faith in verse 27; a comforting description of Yahweh as helper of the weak in verses 28-31. Manifestly we cannot say of a prophet who had such a wide command of thought and language that whenever he uses a particular kind of question he must use it for the same purpose. Consequently the context provided by verses 12-31 sheds no light on our problem; and this is, for the same reason, equally true of the even wider context of chapters 40-55.

It is unfortunately no less true even of the narrower context of verses 12-17. The fact that verses 12-14 consist entirely of questions beginning with 'Who?', 'Whom?' or 'With whom?' has led some scholars¹ to maintain that the answer to all these questions is the same: 'no man'. Westermann² argues that there is an *a fortiori* argument here: if the answer to the questions in verse 12, e.g. 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?', is that man is unable to do this, then the questions in verses 13 f. mean 'How much less, then, could man have directed the Spirit of Yahweh?'

But this interpretation is by no means certain. The meaning of verse 12 itself is in dispute. The question asked here has the same form as some of the questions put to Job by God in Job xxxviii-xxxix;³ but the answer to those questions need not be 'no man'; it may be 'not you, Job', or 'I, Yahweh'. A number of commentators interpret Isa. xl 12 similarly, maintaining that the answer expected is either 'Yahweh'⁴ or 'no one but Yahweh'.⁵ The question would then be intended to rule out not only man, but all other beings human and

¹ E.g. Volz, *Jesaja II* (KAT); B. Couroyer, 'Isaïe, XL, 12', *RB* 73 (1966), pp. 186-96; C. Westermann, *Das Buch Jesaja Kapitel 40-66* (ATD), 1966; J. L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (Anchor Bible), 1968.

² Commentary, *ad loc.*

³ Especially xxxviii 5, 8, 25; xxxix 5.

⁴ So, e.g., J. Skinner, *Isaiah Chapters XL-LXVI* (Cambridge Bible), 2nd edn 1917; B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (Göttinger Handkommentar), 4th edn 1922; Fohrer; North.

⁵ So, e.g., Cheyne and Marti. Labuschagne (*The Incomparability of Yahweh*, pp. 19, 27) understands all the questions in verses 12-14 as expecting the answer 'no one, except Yahweh', but it is difficult to see how this can be true of the questions in verses 13, 14.

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divine. Either of these interpretations is possible, and both find parallels in other passages in the Old Testament. In Deutero-Isaiah itself some questions of this type¹ are specifically given the positive answer, 'I, Yahweh' and 'Was it not I, Yahweh?', although in another passage² the answer is obviously negative.³ With regard to the possibility that the answer is intended to exclude divine beings as well as or instead of men, we may compare Deut. iii 24, 'What god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as thine?'

Even if we allow the possibility that the questions in Isa. xl 12 require the answer 'no man', it is by no means certain that this is also true of verses 13 f. The *a fortiori* argument discovered here by Westermann turns out on examination to be nothing of the kind. To proceed from the question whether man can create the world to ask whether human skill was behind the creator to guide him adds nothing to the force of the argument, and is not directly suggested by it. The questions are parallel, not identical and not consecutive. We are therefore forced to conclude that they may be different types of question, and consequently we are unable to use the immediate any more than the general context to determine the sense of verses 13 f.

¹ xli 4, 'Who has performed and done this?'; xlii 24, 'Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler?'

² xlvi 14: 'Who among them has declared these things?'

³ Outside Deutero-Isaiah we may also compare, e.g. Exod. iv 11: 'Who has made man's mouth?... Is it not I, Yahweh?'

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CHAPTER II

DETAILED INTERPRETATION

We turn to an examination of the literal meaning of the passage.¹

It is clear that the hypothetical situation here envisaged, only to be denied, is one in which there exists some person or being who gave Yahweh the benefit of his wisdom and experience. This is emphasised by the piling up of verbs meaning ‘to teach’ with Yahweh as object: הוֹדִיעַ twice; הִבִּין and לָמַד once each. The scene is one in which Yahweh is represented as taking advice. In verse 13*b*, which should probably be rendered² ‘and (who) was his counsellor who instructed him?’, אִישׁ עֲצָה clearly has a meaning virtually identical with that of יוֹעֵץ, ‘counsellor’.³ It should here be noted that the use of the word אִישׁ does not restrict the reference to human beings: even Yahweh, in a metaphor, can be called אִישׁ מֶלֶךְ־חַמָּה (Exod. xv 3).

Verse 13*a* must be interpreted in the light of 13*b*, with which it is parallel. The former has long been a source of controversy. RSV translates it ‘Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord?’; but the meaning of the verb תִּכְנֶן is disputed, and it is necessary to define more closely what is meant here by the רוּחַ of Yahweh.

LXX has τίς ἐγγύω σοῦ κυρίου, ‘Who has understood the mind of the Lord?’. There is reason to believe that this is the true sense. רוּחַ here refers to the ‘mind’ of Yahweh, including both his purpose and his practical intelligence and ability. When used of human attributes it frequently means ‘temper, mood, disposition’; but in at least two passages it clearly

¹ The consensus of the commentators that the words וּלְמַדְהוּ דַעַת in verse 14*c*, which appear to have no equivalent in LXX, are a later repetitive insertion into the text is here assumed to be correct.

² With Marti, Duhm, Fohrer, North, Westermann *et al.*

³ See further below, pp. 27–9.