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# Cyrus as *Mašiah* or *Χριστός*, and the Implications of this Title on the Theology of Power in Late Antiquity

One of the most interesting aspects of the cultural interconnections between Israel and Persia can be found in the story of the Jewish liberation from the Babylonian captivity under the kingdom of Cyrus the Great. His triumph over the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the progressive creation of a universal empire changed ancient geopolitics and created a new perception of the political space, in which the limits of the world were perceived as having been expanded beyond the traditional, ethno-religious and ethnocultural borders. Thus, despite the fact that we cannot uncritically repeat the *ritornello* of the “Achaemenid tolerance”, whose reasons and meanings must on the contrary be framed within the prudent definition of intelligent and prudent Persian politics of governance and alliance with other ethno-political subjects, without evoking abstract and unhistorical forms of generosity *a priori*, the strategy chosen by the Persian king with his open support for the reconstruction of the Temple of Jerusalem opened the way to a solid and durable cooperation with the Jewish community. The Persian behavior was taken as different and favorable, and in any case it was worthy of deep consideration and appreciation.

It is within this historical context that we must frame the famous sentence through which Deutero-Isa 45,1, presents the Persian king as “the Anointed” of the Lord:

סָגְרוּ: לֹא יִשְׁעֲרִים דְּלֹתֵימִם לִפְנֵי לַפְתָּח אֲפֻתָּח מִלְּכִים וּמִתְּנֵי גוֹיִם לְרַדְּדֵי לִפְנֵי בְיַמֵּינוּ אֲשֶׁר־הִתְחַזְּקֵתִי לְכוֹרֶשׁ לְמִשְׁחָהוּ יְהוָה  
כֹּה־אָמַר

Thus, YHWH says to my anointed Cyrus, whose right hand I have held to subdue nations before him; and I will let loose the loins of kings [...].

*haec dicit Dominus Christo meo Cyro cuius adprehendi dexteram ut subiciam ante faciem eius gentes et dorsa regum vertam [...]* (Vulgata).

Despite the various and controversial approaches to this passage, it is evident that at a certain point, even if this was not the true intention of the original redactor (a conclusion which I do not accept, but that some scholars advanced and that we must take into consideration), literally and simply, Cyrus was consi-

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dered a “Messiah” (*mašiah*).<sup>1</sup> This interpretation, probably valid already for the times of the Achaemenian Empire, assumed and then continued to exercise its influence in later times, and it is so that it was received in the Hellenistic and Late Antiquity periods, underpinning new speculations particularly within the Christian environment.

The Greek version of *Deutero-Isaiah* 45,1, as attested in the *Septuaginta*, reads as follows:

Οὗτος λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῷ χριστῷ μου Κύρῳ οὗ ἐκράτησα τῆς δεξιᾶς ἐπακοῦσαι ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ ἔθνη καὶ ἰσχύς βασιλέων διαρρήξω (...)

Thus says the Lord God to my anointed Cyrus, whose right hand I have held, that nations might be obedient before him; and I will break through the strength of kings),<sup>2</sup>

This sharply confirms that the qualifying title of *Mašiah* was understood as Χριστός.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, we cannot doubt that this text promoted a special image of the Old Persian kingship in the tradition of Late Antiquity, and that this title created a model for the “best” royal person. Certainly, the way in which Cyrus is presented by *Isaiah* 2 attributes a very positive list of qualities to the Persian king, which Lisbeth Fried has summarized well:<sup>4</sup> not only “anointed”, but “shepherd”, and beloved, so fully legitimized in his royal commitments. The present passage emphasizes the special role of this king with respect to the other ones, and explicitly exalts his role as king of kings, of a superior royal authority under the legitimation of the divine oil that anointed him. In this respect, the messianic function can be equally considered as political, and its model inspired further unpredictable developments. Although this is a delicate matter, we can assume that the general atmosphere of this text implies that “the god of Cyrus” was a universal god, and that the Iranian Ahura Mazdā might, at least for a while, be even perceived as a foreign equivalent of the Hebrew supreme god, or, in a reversed formulation, that behind him the universal creative force of YHWH could be imagined as well.

In a series of previous studies, I have emphasized some very peculiar outcomes stemming from this occurrence, which created a direct trajectory linking

1 On this complex matter, see the detailed discussion offered by Fried, “Cyrus the Messiah?”

2 Rahlfs, *Septuaginta*, vol. II, 627.

3 About the title of *mašiah* and its implications, see again Fried, “Cyrus the Messiah?,” 373–393; Paul, “Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform”; Filippone, “Ciro il Grande tra storia e mito,” 178–189. See also Basello, “Il Cilindro di Ciro (ME 90920),” ([https://www.academia.edu/944786/\\_DRAFT\\_II\\_cilindro\\_di\\_Ciro\\_ME\\_90920\\_tradotto\\_dal\\_testo\\_babilonese](https://www.academia.edu/944786/_DRAFT_II_cilindro_di_Ciro_ME_90920_tradotto_dal_testo_babilonese), here quoted with the authorization of the author), note 16, with reference to the comments offered by Elliger, *Deuterofesaja*. 1, 482 and 485–486. Cf. Briant, *Histoire*, 56–58.

4 See again Fried, “Cyrus the Messiah?” *passim*.

the role of the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, to that of Jesus Christ. In this proposal, the witness of a legendary cycle concerning Cyrus and the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem is very fitting, even though its existence is not well known. Actually, this narration underpins the idea that the prophecy of the appearance of a star pointing to the birth of a new supreme king and savior was previously given to another earlier king, worthy of this privilege. The privilege of this dignity was attributed to the only king to have been appointed within the Biblical tradition with the superb title of Μαῤιαῖ and Χριστός, i.e., Cyrus the Great. In this way, we can observe a special application of the doctrine of the *Translatio imperii*, in which the supreme power is transferred from the highest emperor of the ancient world, the founder of the Persian Empire, as the leading manifestation of human and historical authority, to Jesus Christ, taken as the highest incarnation of the divine and eternal power on the earth.<sup>5</sup>

Greek Byzantine and Arabic sources actually knew the present legendary story concerning the appearance of the star to Cyrus, who was asked to order his own priests, i.e., the Magi, to start their journey to Bethlehem and then find the new king of the world. Byzantine manuscripts eventually still preserve a beautiful series of illustrations which visually narrate this extraordinary legend.

A Greek text preserving this tradition is known as Ἐξήγησις τῶν παραθέντων ἐν Περσίῳ, while in Latin it is referred to as *Disputatio de Christo in Persia*, as *De Gestis in Perside* or even as *Narratio de rebus Persicis*. In the present contribution I cannot focus on the philological tradition concerning the present text, whose origin can be framed in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century and to which many other studies have been dedicated. Here, we can give the essential references to the classical German edition of Bratke,<sup>6</sup> and to the more recent French one by Bringel.<sup>7</sup> While in Bratke's edition the name of Cyrus is quoted just once, although the king, whom we can easily associate with him, would be called just in a single and doubtful situation as Μιθοβοάδης,<sup>8</sup> the new critical edition of the text, according to the new edition by Bringel,<sup>9</sup> presents the name of Cyrus at least twice, in both the short and long redactions of this work.

5 See Aus, "The Magi," 95–111; Melasecchi, "Il Messia regale," 63–105, esp. 69–90; Panaino, *I Magi evangelici*, 17–18; Panaino, *I Magi e la loro stella*.

6 Bratke, *Das sogenannte Religionsgespräch*; cf. Wirth, *Aus orientalischen Chroniken*, 143–210. See Heyden, *Die "Erzählung des Aphroditian"*. Very useful is the English translation by Eastbourne, *Religious Discussion*. Translated according to the respective editions of Bratkes and Bringel. Cf. also Usener, *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. 1.

7 Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 264–265, 276–277, 330–331, 372–373.

8 See below.

9 Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 264–265, 276–277, 330–331, 372–373.

The text in any case narrates that, one night, a Persian high priest invited Cyrus to come immediately to a pagan temple, where the statues of the gods had begun to dance out of enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> The main goddess there worshipped is presented with the name of Pegé (Πηγή) “source”,<sup>11</sup> a designation which must be explained as a metaphoric reference to the identity of Mary (Μαρία), the mother of Christ. Furthermore, the text states that she would have married a “carpenter”, so confirming her identity. Being a “source”, as the text affirms, she guarantees a perennial flow of the Spirit, through which only one fish, i.e., Jesus,<sup>12</sup> can proceed. Then, a shining star descends from heaven, stopping on the pillar of the statue of the “Source” revealing to the Persian king the future virginal birth of a child, presented as “the Beginning of Salvation and the End of Destruction”. This child would be the son of the great Sun (Ἡλιος), that is presented as the son of a divinity with three names (τριώνυμος). In this case too, it is clear the Trinitarian reference. At that point, all the statues, except the one atop which the star had stopped, collapsed upon the ground. The star stands out not only for its splendor, but for the diadem (διάδημα βασιλικός),<sup>13</sup> another evidence recalling the different motifs of the Iranian royalty, if we consider that the diadem was one of the most recognizable regalia of a Persian king in late antiquity. A celestial voice from the star then orders the Persian king to send his Magi to Jerusalem. Finally, the god Dionysus makes his appearance, and manifests himself by predicting that the child would have chased away all the false gods and declaring that “Pegé” would no longer be a human figure, but a superhuman one, for having conceived a being generated from divine Fortune.

Obviously, the image of “Fortuna” (Τύχη),<sup>14</sup> in her turn, recalls again a series of Iranian themes typical of the sphere of royalty and religious sacredness, well known in a late antique context. We are here referring to the well-known concept of *xwarrah* in Middle Persian (but also *farn*, *farr*; cf. Av. *xʷarənah-*, and O.P. *farnah-*), the “royal fortune”, or *fortuna regia*, which distinguished the superior dimension of divinities, heroes, kings, and saints. This mixture of Iranian and Christian elements confirms the late antique dimension of this source and shows how an ancient tradition, such as the one of Deutero-Isa, was re-adapted to a new

<sup>10</sup> About the animation of the statues, a custom attested in Syria and Egypt, cf. Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 46.

<sup>11</sup> See Kaufmann, “La Pegé du temple”; cf. Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 264–267, 332–333, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> About the image of the fish in this text, see Heyden, *Die “Erzählung des Aphroditian”*, 243–245 and *passim*. Cf. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ. Cf. Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 266–267, 335–336.

<sup>13</sup> Bratke, *Das sogenannte*, 13, 21, 14, 15; Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 268–269, 340–343.

<sup>14</sup> Bratke, *Das sogenannte*, 14, 18; 21, 21; 202, 203; Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 268–269, 244–245.

environment. In fact, we cannot forget that the starting point in these conceptions of the Messiah was the idea of power, the royal and divine investiture, which qualified the different authority of the king above the rest of the existing crowns of the world.

I must specify that the narrative context in which the story of Cyrus, the temple and the Magi sent to Bethlehem, is framed within a larger literary work, which presents a theological dispute among Pagans, Christians and Jews, probably placed at the Sasanian court of king Cosroes, presumably the 1<sup>st</sup> (although that of Cosroes the 2<sup>nd</sup> is not impossible as well), in which a pagan philosopher, reasonably Mazdean, Aphroditianos, plays the role of an apparently neutral referee, despite the fact that he shows himself to be, at least *in pectore*, a good Christian. Given these general premises, we can come back to the story contained in the *Disputatio*.

King Cyrus ordered the Magi<sup>15</sup> to go to Bethlehem following the star to adore Jesus and Mary, whom they eventually would find, according to the most consolidated tradition of the Christian Nativity, only after having met Herod and his elders. As a variant of the traditional narration, well preserved in the Apocryphal or deuterocanonical tradition, however, it should be noted that Herod's fellows tried to corrupt the Magi, offering them superb gifts<sup>16</sup> in exchange for their silence about the birth of the Savior and the immediate return to their homeland. The Magi responded by reminding them of their captivity in Babylon as a punishment for their wickedness.<sup>17</sup> Thus, this source evokes and contains many other themes and intriguing references, which I cannot deal with on this occasion, but strictly regarding our main subject under discussion we simply can observe that here the link between Cyrus and Jesus is strikingly evident and clear.

We must in particular remark that all the objections raised against these connections in the name of a patent chronological implausibility of the synchronism (Cyrus belongs to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, while the birth of Jesus should be placed between the year 7 and the year 4 of the same era) between Cyrus and Jesus are completely misleading and ineffective. These arguments completely miss the true point. In light of the evocation of the present messianic connection or trajectory, we are evidently not dealing with a true history or a direct historical link between the two kings in crude empirical terms, but with an ideological and symbolical association, which plays with the fact that the unction of the king, his

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<sup>15</sup> Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 47–48.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 270–273, 352–357. About the gifts of the Magi, and the different versions attested in the mss tradition, see again Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 50–52, 272–273, 364–365.

<sup>17</sup> Bringel, *Une polémique religieuse*, 54–61, 361–362.

being anointed by God himself, and thus his transformation into a special person, created a different and special link. Both Cyrus and Jesus were treated as a *persona sacra*, who embodies a number of symbolic and spiritual powers and functions. Cyrus becomes the prototype of the royal identity, as a new David, who, as the best among his contemporary kings above whom he has been placed, sends his own priests, the Magi (who presumably had previously anointed him in God's name as a supreme terrestrial king) to anoint Jesus as the supreme king of the world, as a superhuman hero, the central protagonist of human history. Then, the unction of the king becomes a sacred mark and a legitimization, a charisma, whose distinctive force is additionally emphasized in the Biblical passage from the idea that Cyrus was also God's "shepherd" in I. 44,28 (*ro'î*).

If these ideological elements did not particularly change or impress the self-representation of the Persian royal power and identity within the Achaemenian cultural milieu, this tradition exercised an enormous influence on the Christian traditions, thanks to the preservation of the Jewish biblical corpus and its commentaries. The material, which favored the inclusion of the Persian (or Parthian) Magi among the protagonists of the Jesus Nativity already within the theatrical composition of the *Infancy Gospel*, certainly was inspired by the role attributed to Cyrus in the *Bible*, and his specific Messianic commitment. The mutual recognition between them is considered, obviously *post eventum*, as a fact developed within the Christian propaganda, and the elaboration of the story of Cyrus' vision fully enters into this tradition, in which it developed the idea that the Iranian Magi would have been the true guardians of a secret originally revealed by Seth and handed down through a book kept in great secrecy amongst them. In few words, they would have preserved the promise of Jesus' birth from immemorial time.

According to the *Armenian Gospel of Childhood* 11,10–11,<sup>18</sup> the Magi, when they came to visit Herod, would have declared, that their travel to Israel would have been due to a divine order, which they kept as a written source, transmitted directly by the Lord to Adam, exactly at the time of the birth of his son Seth. Other sources attributed Seth, in particular, with the redaction of a *Book of Revelation*.<sup>19</sup> He would have delivered the letter sealed by the finger of God to his

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<sup>18</sup> See now Terian, *The Armenian Gospel*. Peeters, *Évangiles Apocryphes*, 137–139. Cf. Craveri, *I Vangeli apocrifi*, 168–169; de Villard, *Le Leggende Orientali*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> The tradition about the direct transmission of a secret message to Seth by Adam is found in the apocryphal text named *Descent into Hell*, chap. 3, and its known also in the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaëum*, hom. 2,2 (see Migne, *Patrologiae* LVI, cols 637–638). Cf. in particular Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme*, 65–66. This text is known also from the Gnostic Coptic Library of Nag Hammadi. See Craveri, *I Vangeli apocrifi*, 168–169, n. 2; 353. Cf. Moraldi, *Tutti gli Apocrifi*, 692.

descendants, who passed it on to Noah and, through him, from Shem to Abraham and Melchizedek. Finally, it was Melchizedek, at the time of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the divine letter would finally be entrusted to the Magi. Furthermore, we must recall that, according to the *Book of the Cave of Treasures*,<sup>20</sup> Adam would have hidden the three gifts of the Magi in a cave so that this secret, at a certain point, would be transmitted specifically to Seth in order to be finally transmitted to the Magi.<sup>21</sup> Other sources, such as the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum*,<sup>22</sup> also insist on the fact that twelve Magi would have observed the sky every night on a peak named *Mons Victoralis*, until the star announcing the expected event would be finally shown to them and then, they would have undertaken the long-awaited journey to Bethlehem. Some other traditions (from the *Book of the Cave of Treasures* to the *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, etc.)<sup>23</sup> refer to a prediction, made by Zoroaster himself, about the birth of Jesus. This motif presents the synthesis of two traditions in which the role of the messianic figure of Cyrus and the knowledge of the Zoroastrian doctrine concerning the miraculous birth of the three posthumous sons of the Iranian prophet, the last of whom, i.e., the *Saošiiant-* (in Pahlavi *Sōšyans*),<sup>24</sup> merge together and are finally mixed. We must actually emphasize the role of the Mazdean *Saošiiant-* and his two brothers in the final process of resurrecting all the dead. Obviously, as we have seen, from time to time, in this complex cycle, Cyrus the Great also appears, given his importance in the history of Israel.

It is important to recall that this tradition occurs also in an important Arabic source, the *Golden Meadows* by Mas'ūdī,<sup>25</sup> (a work of the 9<sup>th</sup> century), in which the story narrated in the *Disputatio* is shortly mentioned. This narration insists on the idea that the star can reveal only a “true” king, fully worthy of divine recognition and appointed to as the only person in a condition to transfer it to the Magi. In few words: from an extraordinary (earthly) king to a (superhuman) king. But the memory was not limited to these facts. We must actually observe that a prestigious subtler reference to the anointment of Cyrus becomes the ex-

20 See chap. V; cf. Ri, *La Caverne des trésors*, 17–18; Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne*, 191–197.

21 Bezold, *Die Schatzhöhle*, 7–9. Moraldi, *Tutti gli Apocrifi*, 318 in the note. See also Moraldi (ed. and tr.), *Vangelo arabo apocrifo*, 64–66; de Villard, *Le Leggende Orientali*, *passim*.

22 See de Villard, *Le Leggende Orientali*, *passim*.

23 See de Villard, *Le Leggende Orientali*, 20–68; cf. also Landau, *The Sages*.

24 Messina, *I Magi a Betlemme*, 84–85, *passim*. Cf. also Panaino, “Jesus’ trimorphisms,” 167–209; Panaino, “The Esoteric Legacy,” 368 – 382.

25 See chapter 68 of the *Golden Meadows*, according to the edition by Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, *Maçoudi. Les prairies d'or* 4, 79–80; this chapter has been re-edited with the number 1405 in the revised edition by Pellat, *Les prairies d'or*, 542; cf. van Tongerloo, “*Ecce Magi*,” 57–74, in particular 73.

plicit mark of exemplary legitimate kingship. This character was clearly evoked during the Nestorian Synod of the year 544,<sup>26</sup> when the *katholikós* Mār Ābā invoked God's blessing upon the *šāhān šāh* Xusraw Anōširwān, who was present at the event, formally chairing the synodal assembly. On the occasion of the opening session of this religious event, Mār Ābā wished his king as a sort of "new Cyrus", with a clear evocation of the most fitting passage in *Deutero-Isaiah* 45,1:<sup>27</sup>

By the grace of God, creator, lord and governor of all things, and by the care of the new Cyrus, who is superior to all kings, the gentle and merciful Kosrau, King of kings, to whom, because of his good will, Christ the redeemer of all creatures has suggested to constantly pour out all the goods on his holy Church.

A simple intertextual comparison would confirm that the present reference to Cyrus, who trumps all kings, clearly evokes the submission of the other earthly royal powers (*malākīm/βασιλέων/regum*) just mentioned at the beginning of the Biblical chapter pointing to Cyrus as the Messiah. Thus, we can again observe that the evocation of Cyrus was still working in the most appropriate context of the Christian Church of the East with direct pertinence to the Sasanian king, whose profile was equated with the one of his "spiritual" Old Persian ancestors. Mār Ābā did not dare to explicitly call his king Xusraw as "Χριστός", but he was trending very close to this result, because the image of a new Cyrus, winning over all the other contemporary kings, functions as a mirror of the elder one. We should also consider that Xusraw and Mār Ābā were personally in good terms, and that Xusraw saved the Christian Patriarch from the death penalty, which a Zoroastrian tribunal had inflicted against him.<sup>28</sup> Although the Persian king was moved by political reasons, and not just by personal sentiments of human sympathy or friendships,<sup>29</sup> nobody could deny that the *Katholikos*, who was a Zoroastrian converted to Christianity, was highly considered by Xusraw, and that Xusraw himself considered a good cooperation with the Christian authorities as a necessary instrument underpinning his secular power despite any confessional bias. What we cannot affirm, however, is whether Xusraw had, in his turn, any specific knowledge and conscience of the very singular wish directed toward his own person by Mār Ābā during the opening session of the synodal meeting, or whether

<sup>26</sup> Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, 320.

<sup>27</sup> Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, 320: « Par la grâce de Dieu, créateur, seigneur et gouverneur de toutes choses, et par les soins du nouveau Cyrus, qui l'emporte sur tous les rois, le doux et miséricordieux Kosrau, Roi des rois, auquel, à cause de sa bonne volonté, le Christ rédempteur de toutes les créatures a suggéré de répandre constamment tous les biens sur sa sainte Église ».

<sup>28</sup> Panaino, "La Chiesa di Persia," 765–863. Cf. Peeters, "Observations," V, 69–112.

<sup>29</sup> Panaino, "La Chiesa di Persia," 817–820.

he had a certain knowledge of the Achaemenian fasts. Although the discussion on these matters is still difficult and obviously open, in my opinion, the close relations between the highest members of the intellectual élites of the Christian Church and the contemporary *šāhan šāh*, with whom they interacted, created a cultural space in which the Christians had the chance to use all the opportunities in order to emphasize the good relations between the Iranian royalty and the Jewish-Christian background, of course presented in a way more favorable to the Christian (and not Jewish) interpretations. In this respect, the formula adopted by Mār Ābā during this synodal meeting cannot be considered just as a sort of *captatio benevolentiae*, but it continues a long-aged tradition in which the commitment of the king of Persia assumed a special value in the history of human salvation according to a Christian perspective. This opportunity, of course, was not lost or forgotten by the Christian communities, especially by those who were trying to convert Iranian peoples. In particular, we must think about the Christian strategy toward the conquest of the religious power, which probably tried to imitate what already had happened in Armenia. A religious triumph might have been attained only through the direct conversion of members of the royal family and, finally, of the king himself. It is for this reason that the center of the Christian Church was erected in proximity to the royal palace of Ctesiphon, so that the search for a direct political and spiritual dialogue was openly pursued. At the same time, the Mazdean Church, well conscious of the risks, reacted with the most brutal violence, in particular when Zoroastrian aristocrats or members of the highest priestly family were baptized.<sup>30</sup> Strange episodes such as the ones concerning the personal story of one of the most interesting philosophical and intellectual authorities of the age of Xusraw 1<sup>st</sup>, the translator and fine commentator of Aristotle and Plato, i.e. Paul the Persian,<sup>31</sup> originally Zoroastrian, then converted to Christianity, elected to the highest ranks of the Church, and again probably re-converted to Zoroastrianism, shows the complexity of these intercultural exchanges taking place within Persian society of late antiquity. It is difficult to imagine that Paul and his king, for whom this peculiar scholar translated and interpreted many Greek philosophical sources, had not spoken of Cyrus and his role as Messiah as well as of other Persian details in the Jewish and Christian literatures.

On the other hand, one cannot forget that the Iranian lands were places in which the intellectual role played by the Jewish schools of commentators and

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<sup>30</sup> Panaino, "La Chiesa di Persia," 820–834.

<sup>31</sup> See Panaino, ABEBİM, 59–61. Gutas, "Paul the Persian," 231–240; Teixidor, *Aristote en syriaque*; Bruns, "Paul der Perser," 28–53; King, "The Study of Logic."

interpreters who created the Babylonian *Talmud* had a special influence,<sup>32</sup> and that the interference between Mazdean and Jewish traditions was not at all rare or impossible.<sup>33</sup> We should even reflect on the cultural impact of the Jewish historical literature on the Persian intellectual world, and assume as a working hypothesis that Jewish authorities were active,<sup>34</sup> sometimes in plausibly prudent, but not hostile, relations with the royal power. The Jewish authorities might have even created summaries and *excerpta* of their literary and historical pieces of information about the Achaemenians and their power to give a substantial witness to the good relations already existing between the Iranian world and the Hebrew culture and its people. Concerning Widengren's overly optimistic evaluation of the later Jewish sources,<sup>35</sup> for instance concerning Yezdegird I and the exilarch, Neusner<sup>36</sup> expressed some prudent *caveats*, but, although these assumptions were ungrounded or excessive, we at least must observe that in the Rabbinical literature the memory of Isaiah and the Persians of past times were still usable within the Sasanian context, despite its limited value. Actually, we must also take into consideration that some *Ravas* of the 4<sup>th</sup> century commented on Isa 45:1, stating that Cyrus was not really referred to as the Messiah, and even assumed that all the Persians would be destined to Gehenna.<sup>37</sup> I wonder if these arguments actually circulated as a common opinion or if they were limited to the scope of a few religious authorities, because the impact of these invectives would have been certainly negative from the Persian side. Some Talmudic and Midrashic sources deal with the embarrassing definition of Cyrus as a "Messiah" to justify or even to deny it. We know, for instance that, in the *Megillah* 12a, it is assumed that Cyrus was obviously *not* the Messiah, while the *Roš Hašanah* 3b at least stated that it was *kāšēr* under the influence of a pseudo-etymological speculation about his name, *Kōreš* in Hebrew, interpreted as an anagram of *kāšēr*.<sup>38</sup> Another solution was that of accepting the messianic definition, but at the price of denying his full Iranian origin, so introducing the assumption that he would have been the son of Esther and Ahasuerus. This story was later developed in the Judaeo-Persian literary tradition by Šāhīn, in the *ʿEzrā-nāma*,<sup>39</sup> a poem written in the

32 Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud*. Cf. Neusner, "How Much Iranian," 184–190.

33 See Neusner, *History of the Jews* 4 & 5.

34 For instance, we cannot forget the role of the Exilarches already since Parthian times, and their influence also during the Sasanian era, as well shown by Herman, *Prince*.

35 Widengren, "The Status of the Jews," 117–162, in particular 140.

36 Neusner, *History of the Jews*, 5, 12–13.

37 Neusner, *History of the Jews*, 4, 375–383.

38 Netzer, "Some Notes," 35–52, in particular 42.

39 Bacher, "Le livre d'Ezra," 249–280; Bacher, *Zwei jüdisch-persische*, 66–71. Netzer, "Some Notes," 35–52; Netzer, *ʿEzrā-nāma*, 131, accessible online on the website <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ezra-nama>.

year 1372. The reception of this tradition can be found even in Islamic sources, such as Ṭabarī.

Thus, we apparently face a problem: it seems that the Christians have played with the Biblical tradition about the Messiah and royal power, using a deliberate revival of the image of the sacred royalty from a Christian point of view, with the patent scope of sympathizing with the dominating Iranian element, and with the perspective of a conversion of the king. It is reasonable to wonder whether the Jews, in their turn, had used their literary background and their secular presence in the Iranian and Babylonian lands to improve all the potentially positive resonances with the leading powers, or if their approach had been more skeptical, as some Rabbinical sources invite us to presume, in particular when we observe that the apparent universalism of Isaiah was implicitly denied recurring to the explanation that Cyrus was nothing but a hidden Jew, son of Esther, or that his genealogy could justify the role given to him by god.<sup>40</sup> Other reasons against the image of Cyrus, belonging both to the Palestinian and the Babylonian Rabbinical traditions, have been previously collected by Louis Ginzburg,<sup>41</sup> Ephraim E. Urbach,<sup>42</sup> and later with new arguments by Jason Sion Mokhtarian.<sup>43</sup> From these studies it is now more clear that a number of striking evidences shows the presence of strong criticisms against the image of Cyrus within the exegetic tradition of the Babylonian *Talmud*, so that we must at least infer a remarkable difference between Jews and Christians in the strategies concerning the interpretation of Cyrus's role. While the latter tried to be inclusive, the other part marked the ethno-cultural borders in a radical way. In this respect, the political dimension of the Messiah remained a crucial problem, and its treatment a sensible matter, especially within the Iranian milieu, despite the fact that we still need further investigations.

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<sup>40</sup> Netzer, "Some Notes," 42–43. Despite the Jewish mother, even the *Ezrā-nāma* calls Cyrus "pagan", as noted by Netzer.

<sup>41</sup> See Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 433, n. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Urbach, "Koresh"; reprinted in *The World of the Sages*, 407–410.

<sup>43</sup> Mokhtarian, "Rabbinic Depictions," 114–141.

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