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The Roaming Eyes of Yahweh in Zech 4:10b and the Context of Persian Religions

Biblical scholars have long attended to Zoroastrianism and its influence upon the biblical text. Much less attention has been paid to the influence of the other traditional Iranian deities. Zoroastrian scholars and Persian period historians agree that the worship of many such deities thrived throughout this period alongside the teachings of Zoroaster. A fuller appreciation for the religious context has great potential to help illuminate biblical texts that are otherwise obscure.

In this paper I explore the implications of the broader religious context upon one such biblical text: the obscure identification of the lampstand with “the eyes of YHWH” in Zechariah’s fifth vision (Zech 4:1-14). The reason for a connection between YHWH’s roaming eyes and a lampstand is ambiguous. Petersen provides the most substantial discussion of the relationship, drawing upon ancient Hebrew traditions in which God’s shining eyes denote God’s favor. Because of the apparently benevolent character of YHWH’s eyes in Zech 4, Peterson and others reject the suggestion of Tur-Sinai and Oppenheim that “the eyes of YHWH roaming in all the earth” are analogous to the “eyes and ears of the king,” a network of royal Persian spies referenced by Greek historians. Such Persian spies were feared entities, which does not appear to fit well with the encouraging context of Zech 4:1-14. Indeed, few Zechariah commentators have accepted Tur-Sinai and Oppenheim’s suggestion for this reason.

Cues abound, however, that Persian influence is in play in a manner akin to the suggestion of Tur-Sinai and Oppenheim. I examine the uncommon language that the text uses to describe YHWH’s eyes in Zech 4:10, the immediate literary context of this vision, and the iconographic imagery of the vision in relation to the broader religious context of the Persian period. Through this examination it becomes apparent that the vision in Zech 4:1-14 draws upon imagery associated with Mithra, a traditional Iranian deity associated with fire, light, and eyes that roam throughout the earth for the sake of seeking out injustice. Mithra’s eyes function on a divine level in a manner similar to the political eyes of the king, but they are only fearful if one wants wickedness. Such eyes bring comfort those longing for a just world.

The literary context of Zech 4:10 similarly draws a striking connection between YHWH’s eyes and the promise that God will remove wickedness. For God to seek to eliminate sin is indeed desirable, and it fits neatly within the hope expressed in Zech 4:1-14 that Zerubbabel will complete the temple. When viewed in this way, the Persian context surrounding the roaming eyes of YHWH does not inspire terror. Rather, the author repurposes Persian imagery to encourage the people that YHWH, the Emperor of the cosmos and maintainer of justice, is at work to bring about a hopeful, purified future.