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EXEGETICAL PROBLEMS IN QOHELETH

Robert B. Salters

With the possible exception of the Song of Songs, the book of Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth), is unique in the Old Testament in having been interpreted in a variety of ways, some of these in direct opposition to others. In the past hundred years, for example, it has been described, on the one hand, as "Das Hohelied der Skepsis" by Heinrich Heine¹, while at the other end of the scale Franz Delitzsch considered it to be "Das Hohelied der Gottesfurcht"². Earlier this century M. Jastrow Jr.³ gave his commentary on it the title "A gentle Cynic" and, more recently, H.W. Hertberg⁴ has gone so far as to describe it as "...die erschütterndste messianische Weissagung, die das Alte Testament aufzuweisen hat". These quotations draw attention to the extremes of opinion held as to the book and its contents.

It should not be thought, however, that this variety of opinion is merely the result of the critical scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries. It might be said that the book of Ecclesiastes has divided scholarly opinion throughout its existence, and the controversy which accompanied the inclusion of the book in the Jewish canon (c. 100 A.D.), a summary of which is recorded in the Midrashim and Talmud, simply underlines this. This division among the Rabbis throws into relief just where the problems of interpretation lie; in effect one side is saying that the orthodox and pious statements in the book modify and control the unorthodox, while the other side claims that the scepticism is of the essence of Qoheleth and remains over against the pious statements to be found there. The former views won the day and Ecclesiastes found a place in the canon, partly because it was believed that Solomon was the author, partly because of the existence of these pious statements, and

partly because certain exegetical principles employed at that time could render the sceptical and unorthodox statements harmless, and even pious. Long after Jamnia (c.100 A.D.) there were those who felt that Ecclesiastes ought to have been relegated to the Apocrypha because, they felt, the orthodox and unorthodox could not be sufficiently reconciled.

Many of the problems which Ecclesiastes affords will be familiar to the reader, and in any case they are too numerous to be dealt with on this occasion in their entirety. I shall therefore confine myself largely to the passage 11.9–12.1

There is a school of thought these days which seeks to encourage us to approach the text of the Hebrew bible only as canonical literature, as the book of the synagogue or of the church, and so to interpret it. We are reminded that in the so-called pre-critical period the attitude to the text was basically accepting, and consequently fruitful, and that we need to recover something of that stance. While there may be something to be said for this approach in that the literature has come to us as the religious literature of the synagogue or church - and it helps us to understand those early commentators if we keep this in mind - yet there are disadvantages which must be recognised. If, for example, the lessons of the prophets were not learned or were inadequately perceived by collectors or editors, the juxtaposition of oracles, historical notes etc. may reflect this and the redactor's interpretation may thereby be responsible for our misunderstanding of a particular saying. One of the tasks of the scholar must be to attempt as far as possible a recovery of such oracles and contexts, while acknowledging and interpreting the views of the collectors and canonisers.

The book of Ecclesiastes, in spite of disputes about its status, became officially regarded as scripture by

Judaism and Christianity, and was interpreted accordingly. Thus among the early commentators in the Talmud, Qoheleth Rabbah, Yalkut Shemoni and the medieaval commentators, among the Greek and Latin fathers and in the ancient versions the book appears as holy writ, a work of piety, whose author, thought to be Solomon, was concerned to direct our attention away from earthly matters to heavenly ones.

As far as 11.9–12.1 is concerned the tendency was to see this as a warning not to gratify one's desires when young but to put away evil and to honour the Judge, our Creator.

We should observe, however, that this group of writings comes from those who, in some way, represent the official standpoint of synagogue and church. This was not the whole story, and here and there in the history of interpretation we may detect a certain uneasiness about Ecclesiastes, both about the book as a whole and about specific passages.

We have already alluded to the controversy surrounding the book, and I want to pick up now six references which give an indication of this. In the Talmud (B.Tal. Meg. 7a) it is recorded that the rival schools of Hillel and Shammai were divided as to the status of Ecclesiastes, Shammai maintaining that it was not inspired scripture, Hillel maintaining that it was, though no specific examples are given. Then there is a reference to scholars who claimed that the author of the book had contradicted himself in places, and that it was therefore unsuitable to rank along with other established holy books. (B.Tal. Shab. 30). Thirdly, in the Midrashic collections, Qoheleth Rabbah (1.3; 11.9) and Yalkut Shemoni (11.9), allusion is made to wise men who tried to suppress the book because of heretical statements found there. Except for the views of Shammai and Hillel, it is difficult to date these statements, but it is

likely that they arose in connection with the discussions concerning the canon. Fourthly, as late as the 4th century A.D., Jerome⁵ refers to Jewish scholars who hold that "the book ought to be suppressed because it asserts that all God's creation is vain, and regards everything as empty, preferring eating, drinking and transient pleasures before everything else". Jerome himself, it should be noted, is enthusiastic about Ecclesiastes and disagrees with this viewpoint which he quotes. In the preface to his commentary on it he declares that he read the book to a devout young woman from Rome, Blessila, in order to encourage her to despise this present age. He does not say with what result!

The Christian church seems to have been reluctant to comment on the book for quite some time, and this very reluctance gives us yet another indication of the underlying negative attitudes to the book. It is one of the few O.T. books not mentioned in N.T., which is odd if it is a Messianic prophecy as Hertzberg would have us believe. And it is late 3rd century A.D. before a Christian commentary appears at all, that of Gregory⁶ (Thaumaturgus) whose dates are 210-270.

Finally, in the light of Barthélemy's conclusion⁷ that the Septuagint of Ecclesiastes is in fact the work of Aquila, the question arises as to whether there ever was an Alexandrian translation of the book. It is just possible that the book had not become fully accepted in Alexandria prior to the debates on its canonicity, and since the Septuagint as a whole had fallen into disrepute in Jewish circles, owing to its association with the Christian church, and Aquila was being encouraged to produce an entirely new translation, the gap was not subsequently filled by Alexandrian scholars⁸.

It may be that we should infer from these examples of a certain disenchantment with the book, that the

opposition to it as scripture was much greater than is immediately suggested – remembering that the examples are given by those who had accepted Ecclesiastes as canonical. We might also infer that the era was not as uncritical as is sometimes assumed.

Over and above the question whether the book as a whole was worthy of scripture, there were a number of specific passages which occasioned some uneasiness – verses such 1.3; 2.24; 6.2; 11.9; to name but a few – and a long hard look was needed before such passages could be interpreted in a manner which satisfied the would-be exegetes.

1.3 reads “What advantage has a man in exchange for all his toil in which he engages under the sun?” and it is recorded in the Midrash that objections were raised to the implications of this passage. The conclusion is drawn that the author cannot surely have meant all toil. Fixing on the possessive pronoun ‘his’, one argument given is that the phrase עמלו ‘his toil’ refers to secular toil but excludes the toil connected with (the study of) the Torah. Another way of looking at it is that toil ‘under the sun’ has to do with worldly effort, whereas there is no questioning of toil ‘above the sun’ i.e. religious striving.

So confident are the exegetes of their conclusions that this passage is actually quoted in the Talmud in support of the book’s canonical status (B.Tal. Shab. 30b). “The book ends with the words of Torah: Fear God... and it begins, with words of Torah: What advantage...”

This kind of interpretation raises the question of the nature of the exegetical climate before and during the discussions on the status of Qoheleth. Midrashic exegesis, such as we have just observed, is to be found in many of the early commentaries and seems to have been acceptable in the pre-Christian era. Paul resorts to it in

his discussion of the 'seed' in Gal. 3.16. R. Akiba (c. 50–132 A.D.), the father of Rabbinic Judaism, is said to have been adept at extracting masses of exegetical material, allegedly latent in the text of the Bible (Genesis Rabbah 1:1; 4:1; 21:20) even to the point of pronouncing exegetically on the sign of the definite accusative **אֵת**, and we know that he was influenced in this by a predecessor, a certain Nahum of Gimzo⁹.

We must not think, however, that exegesis was completely dominated by these methods. Those who raised objections to Ecclesiastes being accepted as scripture did so on the basis of literal interpretations of the passages in question. Furthermore, there is the ancient Talmudic injunction **אין מקרא יוצא מידי פשוטו** 'a text cannot lose its plain meaning' (B.Tal. Shab. 63a). Again, there is the statement by a rabbi of the second century, R. Judah who said, "He who translates a biblical verse literally is a liar but he who elaborates on it is a blasphemer." (B.Tal. Kid. 49a) The way of the translator is hard! It is true R. Judah is not speaking specifically of exegesis, but in his comments he shows an interest in such careful rendering of a passage as to betray a concern for the plain sense. His polemic against literal translation may reflect opposition to a slavishly literal rendering such as that of Aquila. Nevertheless although there are these indications of an interest in the plain sense the point is that where Midrashic exegesis is possible there is the danger of a text being totally or partially misunderstood.

This can be illustrated by considering Eccles. 3.15. At the end of the verse¹⁰ is a clause **והאלהים יבקש את נרדף** which is elucidated by the Vulgate "and God repeats what has vanished", and this interpretation has been adopted by Ibn Ezra, the A.V. and most commentators since. But the phrase appears almost word for word in Ben Sira 5.3 where the passage is "Do not say, Who shall prevail over me? For God seeks **נרדפים**". All the versions

here (including V) take this term to mean 'the persecuted', and it has to be allowed that this is what it must mean in this passage. It cannot have this meaning however in Eccles. 3.15, but this does not prevent the versions (apart from the Vulgate) and the Midrash interpreting it, as in Ben Sira, 'God seeks the persecuted'. What characterises these versions in this instance is that they all isolate the text from the context, and find a meaning which cannot be reconciled either with what goes before or what comes after.

This disregard for context is often apparent in the exegesis of the Midrashic literature in general. It seems that this kind of exegesis of Ecclesiastes was tolerated, if not popular, at least as early as c. 200 B.C. (Ben Sira).

It was the combination of Midrashic interpretation on the one hand, and the viewing of the book as canonical literature on the other hand, which made it impossible for Qoheleth's sceptical notes to be heard. Rashi's grandson, Rashbam, who made a conscious and explicit attempt to abandon the Midrashic approach in favour of the literal one, is hampered by the fact that he can only approach the book as holy writ. The most he can do is to suggest an editorial framework for the book¹¹ and lay bare some of the author's scepticism, especially in the first chapters.

If we look at 11.9 and at the history of its interpretation we can get a clearer picture of what is involved. This verse which is one of the most controversial in the book, is part of a passage 11.7-12.8 in which the author points out that since we do not know what lies ahead in life we should get on with the business of living; old age, misfortune and death come soon enough. It would seem that from verse 9 onwards his concern is with youth, and there is considerable urgency in his tone as he advises the young man to enjoy life to the full while he is young. In this advice he

employs words from Num. 15.39 where Yahweh instructs Moses to say to the Israelites: '...you shall remember all the LORD'S commands to obey them, and not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly.' Qoheleth's words are: 'Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.' And then we have a further statement, 'But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement.'

Leaving aside the modern period of exegesis, and beginning with Mendelssohn's commentary of 1770 and working backwards, we can get a glimpse at how this passage has been interpreted.

Mendelssohn comments at length on this verse¹². He recognises that the passage in Num. 15.39 is being alluded to, but he cannot accept that Qoheleth is encouraging what Moses prohibited and is at pains to show that it is the middle course which is being advocated, and avoidance of excess: that the message is to walk in the ways of the heart and in the sight of the eyes without being guilty of sin. It is clear that Mendelssohn's view of the text as scripture prevents him taking a more straightforward look at Qoheleth's words.

Luther was obviously troubled by the verse. He does not appear to recognise the link with the Numbers passage but he does admit 'that it sounds almost like something evil to say that someone walks in the ways of his heart.' Luther finds escape in the suggestion that the verse has a touch of irony. Whatever 9a may mean, the recollection that God will bring him into judgement will prevent him from sinning¹³.

Andrew of St Victor (12th cent.) comes to much the same conclusion¹⁴, except that he does not require the final clause about God's judgement to come to the

rescue. וְיִשְׂכַּח לְבָבְךָ for him means 'let your heart be well intentioned', hence to walk in the ways of your heart is tantamount to saying 'walk in the ways of your good heart'. The phrase 'in the sight of your eyes' is taken to mean 'your mind's eyes', that is, reason. Hence the advice is: Rejoice while you are young; live according to the dictates of your well-intentioned heart and reason.

Nicolaus de Lyra (1270–1340) on the other hand, observes¹⁵ that the advice to 'walk in the sight of your eyes' is evil advice, and concludes that the author is being ironic. It is like a father who says to his son, 'Go home and drink and play' meaning 'you will suffer afterwards.' And this is virtually the same example as is given by Rashi, who, along with Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, seems to be of the opinion that the words 'walk in... eyes' is advice to sin, but that the final clause referring to God's inevitable judgement, rescues the passage from the charge of heresy.

There is nothing in the Vulgate rendering to reveal the translator's views, but in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Jerome argues¹⁶ that while the first half of verse 9 advises pleasure to the full, the second half pulls away the rug from under the feet of the would-be pleasure-seeker by making a reference to the final judgement. (It is interesting, however, to note that in the translation offered by Jerome at this point, there appear in two MSS of the commentary, two additional words after the phrase 'and the sight of your eyes', namely, *sine reprehensione* – 'without reproof' or 'without blame'.¹⁷)

The Targumist is very paraphrastic. He is also homiletically motivated and is concerned to remove anything which appears unconventional in the text. The translation of his rendering is: 'Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart be cheerful in your youth, and walk in humility with the ways of your

heart, and be careful as to what your eyes see, and do not look on evil, and know that for all these things the Lord will bring you into judgement.' It is not clear whether the Targumist considered the verse ironic. What is clear is that he was anxious that the first half of the verse should not be interpreted in any way other than that which conformed to the sentiments of Num. 15.39. This means that there was a real danger that it might be so interpreted. The Septuagint, normally an extremely literal rendering in Ecclesiastes, deviates from MT in two important respects. For 'walk in the ways of your heart' we have 'walk in ways blameless', and for 'and in the sight of your eyes' we have 'and not in the sight of your eyes'. The translator has obviously been unable to suppress his presuppositions. Again, we cannot be certain as to how he understood the function of the final clause in the Hebrew, but it is clear that he felt that his usual literal rendering would be inadequate at this point. And he was not content with a free translation either. He found it impossible to let these words go unchecked: to him they advocated the gratification of desire, and he was unable to believe that scripture could make such suggestions.

It is not surprising that Qoheleth Rabbah maintains a similar attitude to this passage. It is at this point (11.9) that reference is made to the objection to the book: 'Wise men sought to suppress the book of Qoheleth because they found there things which lead to heresy...' Num. 15.39 is quoted in part, the implication being that Qoheleth (=Solomon) seems to contradict it, and the objection continues, 'the restriction has been removed; there is no judgement and no judge'. This objection is only introduced into the Midrash in order that it may be countered, and Qoheleth Rabbah continues, 'since he said: But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement, Solomon has spoken well.'

These remarks are followed by five parables told by various Rabbis to demonstrate that everything hinges on the final clause in the verse and that it is pointless to engage in waywardness if, in the end of the day, judgement is certain.

There follow other interpretations which concentrate on the first half of the verse. 'In your youth' means 'in the Torah which you studied in your youth', 'in the days of your youth' means 'in the Mishnah' and 'walk in... eyes' is a reference to the Talmud.

The cumulative remarks in the Midrash Rabbah indicate that there were three schools of thought. Firstly, there were those who regarded the speech as ironic. Then there were those who objected to the book on the grounds that Qoheleth was urging behaviour prohibited in Num. 15.39. Their statement 'restriction has been removed; there is no judgement and no judge' demonstrates that they are unable to accept the point of view which takes the passage as ironic. Did they suspect that the final clause was not from the hand of Qoheleth? Did they feel that 9a was of the essence of the author and that 9b did not ring true in the context? We are not told. In fact there is no discussion of that final clause by those who object to the first half of the verse. The objection hardly makes sense with the text as we have it, "there is no judgement and no judge". The question arises whether the initial objection to the passage arose at a time when the final clause was not in the text.

Thirdly, there are those who seem unable to trust the ironic interpretation and who feel that 9a itself has either to be altered or explained away in fanciful exegesis. In the Midrash Rabbah they are represented by those who see references to Torah, Mishnah and Talmud in the first half of the verse, but the additions and alterations to the text in Jerome's commentary, the Septuagint and Targum were made by those who may

have been of like mind. Is the final clause an addition of the same genre as those in the Septuagint? The suggestion that 9b is an addition has been made before – there is nothing new under the sun – but it was on the ground that Qoheleth's remarks elsewhere precluded these sentiments.

In the light of these considerations, it would seem that v.10 was originally a direct continuation of 9a, and its two imperatives are part of the chain of imperatives which began with **שמח** (v9). The motive clause is then clearly seen as 10b.

Taken together, it is clear that the urgency with which v.9 began is continued in v.10 and the reason for that urgency is given. The young man is further advised to remove anxiety from his mind and to banish trouble from his body. The reason this advice is urgently offered to the young is that youth will soon pass away.

But the early interpreters, faced with 9a, 9b and 10, were inclined to interpret differently, chiefly because the context was different for them, and the presence of a few ambiguous terms and a *hapax legomenon* made their guidelines confusing.

The two statements in 10a receive a moralising treatment at the hands of all the Versions. Hence the translation is "Remove anger from your mind and evil from your flesh", and Jerome¹⁸, in his commentary, explains that the evil of the flesh signifies carnal pleasures in general. It is interesting to note that Luther¹⁹ takes this advice as meaning "Put away pain from your body", but he is an exception, and the tendency is to interpret these injunctions as warnings following on from 9b rather than as the continuing urgency of 9a²⁰.

The word **שחור**, taken by T as related to שחור "to be black", and to refer to early manhood, the time of black

hair, was not recognised by LXX, P or V. The Septuagint, possibly baffled by the *hapax legomenon*, translates it "folly", and this is blindly followed by P and Jerome (V) who is obviously uncertain about the term and who, in his commentary, renders it "pleasure". The translators, unable to suppress their presuppositions, guessed at a word which seemed to them to characterise youth. They were also of the opinion that הבל, the predicate of the motive clause, meant "emptiness" or "purposelessness", whereas it had there the meaning 'fleeting' as is recognised later by Nicolaus de Lyra, and after him, Mendelssohn²¹.

It seems, therefore, that in the interpretation of these verses a great deal turns on the question of the authenticity of 9b.

There is one further matter (in 12.1) which has been influenced by the attention given to these verses. In the great bulk of the history of the interpretation²² of this verse the clause, "Remember your Creator..." was treated simply and without anxiety. The meaning was straightforward: the young man was being encouraged to honour God while young, and this might help him to reflect on the last things.

With the rise of Biblical criticism this clause came under closer scrutiny and it was felt by some to be suspect, although all the ancient Versions support MT. It was argued that if the clause was original, the latter part of the verse, 'before the evil days come...' must carry the suggestion that a time will come when you are unable to remember the Creator. If, on the other hand, 12b is original the first clause is most likely to have contained an exhortation to find enjoyment while there is yet time. The injunction to remember God is irrelevant at this point since no time limits have been imposed for this activity.

It was also argued that Qoheleth's word for God was consistently אלהים, and that there is no apparent reason for him to use a different word at this point. Hence the clause was seen as from the pen of a glossator.²³ However, it might equally well be asked why a glossator would choose to use the term 'your Creator' in this context; the alternative is to take a closer look at the term itself.

In the Jerusalem Talmud (Sotah 2) and elsewhere, (including Rashi *ad loc*) there are references to one R. Akabiah, whose dates are not certain but who may have lived 30 B.C. or earlier, and who is said to have derived three ideas from the one word: בוראך — the King of Kings before whom you shall give account and reckoning...; בארך — the worm and the maggot; בורך — the malodorous secretion.

With this sort of exegesis surrounding the book at such an early date – prior to any of the ancient versions – it is possible (and I am not myself convinced at this point that this is the answer) that this term which seems awkward in the context is a corruption of בריך from ברי, meaning 'health, vigour'²⁴. "Remember your vigour in the days of your youth...". It is possible that the present reading is due to the methods of exegesis already referred to, in a text whose status and wording was not yet fixed, combined with the tension occasioned by the words of Qoheleth in the previous verses. The advice to remember one's vigour when young, follows more naturally in this context than "Remember your Creator...". It is the kind of advice one might have expected from Qoheleth and it finds an echo in the injunction in Ben Sira 26.19, "My son, guard your health in the bloom of your youth."

The original author of this book would smile at the title 'Ecclesiastes' if it means as Jerome says it means, 'preacher'. But it was only the preacher – Qoheleth in

orthodox dress – which could find a place in the canon, not Qoheleth the sceptic. Although it is important that we continue to attempt to recover his words from the text, we should also keep in mind that without the glossators, the Midrashic exegetes and the canonisers, the book would have been lost to us. The Preacher has provided the means of survival for the sceptic.

It is with pleasure and gratitude that I contribute to this volume in honour of Professor Weingreen, who, many years ago, inspired in me, and in many others, a love of Hebrew and a fascination for the Hebrew Bible.

FOOTNOTES:

1. See F. Delitzsch, "Auslegung des Buches Koheleth" BK 1875 p.190; cf. S. Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity" VT XXIV 1974 p.168.
2. *ibid.*
3. M. Jastrow Jr., A Gentle Cynic, 1919
4. H.W. Hertzberg, "Der Prediger" KAT, Band XVII/ 4, 1963, p.238.
5. cf. Jerome, "Commentarius in Ecclesiasten", MPL , 23, 1172
6. C.D. Ginsburg, Cohleleth, 1861, p.99.;
7. D. Barthélemy, "Les Devanciers d'Aquila", VTS, 10, 1963
8. Cf. S. Holm-Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology", ASTI X 1975/6 pp.57f.
9. Cf. Genesis Rabbah 1:1; 4:1; 21:20.
10. See my "A Note on the Exegesis of Ecclesiastes 3:15b" ZAW 88 1976 pp.419–422.
11. S. Japhet and R.B.Salters(eds.) The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir on Qoheleth, 1985 pp.34f.,92f.

12. M. Mendelssohn, Megillath Sepher Qoheleth, 1770 *ad loc.*
13. M. Luther, "Annotationes in Ecclesiasten" (1532) Luthers Werke, Band 20, 1898 p.191.
14. P.G. Callandra, De Historica Andreae Victorini Expositione in Ecclesiasten, 1948 p.55.
15. Textus Biblie cum Glosa Ordinaria Nicolai de Lyra, III, 1520, 353b.
16. *op. cit.* 1160f.
17. *ibid.* 1160 n.7; cf. LXX.
18. *ibid.* 1161.
19. *op. cit.* p.192.
20. Cf. AV "Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart and put away evil from thy flesh..."
21. *op. cit. ibid.*
22. Langton placed the chapter divider at 11:9; it was later moved to the present position, probably because it was felt that the statement makes a break with what precedes. This move, however, has had a great influence on the subsequent interpretation of the passage.
23. Cf. D.C. Siegfried, "Prediger und Hoheslied" HAT 1898 p.73f.
24. Cf. H.L. Ginsberg, Koheleth, 1961 p.129.