

Volume XII Number 2

Autumn 1989

# KING'S

# Theological Review

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## PROBLEMS WITH ECCLESIASTES...?

STEPHEN SIMS

Each week the preacher faces the task of interpretation, and one of the most difficult questions to be faced concerns the extent to which personal presuppositions are allowed to determine our understanding of the text. This is particularly the case when the passage under consideration comes from a book like Ecclesiastes, which poses uncomfortable questions for the community of faith. Indeed, the book of Ecclesiastes, or Qoheleth as it is named in Hebrew, has always proved something of an enigma to both Jewish and Christian scholars, and continues to present itself as such today. Its presence has always been an uncomfortable one, and consequently, many have preferred to ignore it, or dismiss it in a few sentences, rather than face some of the important questions that it raises for the community of faith. Of those who have been prepared to give the book more than a passing glance, many have endeavoured to make it more orthodox by means of their exegesis<sup>1</sup>—an approach that has resulted, more often than not, in a book that fits more easily into the Bible, but which does little justice to the perception of the original writer. This latter approach was that adopted by the writer of the Targum.

The Targum is an Aramaic version of the Hebrew scriptures, produced with two purposes in mind. Firstly, it was a translation, necessary because Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the popular language; and secondly, it was expository, seeking to aid the people's understanding of the text. In effect, the Targum offers the traditional interpretation of the text so far as orthodox Rabbinic Judaism was concerned, and that makes Targum Qoheleth a valuable book for us, since it informs us of those areas of Qoheleth's work that came to be perceived as problematic.

By far the most significant of all the Targum's midrashim, both in number and effect, concern the subject of theodicy. Throughout the majority of the Old Testament period, the problems raised by the presence of evil and suffering had been dealt with by what is loosely described as the "doctrine of just reward and retribution". Von Rad<sup>2</sup> questions this description since talk of "reward and retribution" implies an outside agency who bestows good or evil accordingly; whereas in the majority of the Old Testament it is the deed itself that initiates the effects that the perpetrator eventually experiences—good resulting from good deeds, and evil from evil deeds. This was life as Yahweh, the Creator, had designed it and his direct intervention was necessary only to over-ride the process in response to the prayers of repentance of his people. Qoheleth, however, severs the link between deed and consequence. He observes cases where the scheme does not operate, and he concludes, as a result, that meaning cannot be found for life by means of this belief. The Targum, however, reasserts the traditional doctrine, but in a modified form in which it can be described accurately as a "doctrine of just reward and retribution", for Yahweh rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Some of Qoheleth's observations, however, are patently true, so the Targum responds by

introducing references to life beyond the grave. Thus, the Targum restores moral order to the world, gives meaning to life and protects the character of God from the effects of some of Qoheleth's harsher statements.

In 8: 14, Qoheleth lays out his observation that life contradicts traditional belief. The Targum repeats his observation, but then adds its own theological interpretation, by the authority of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup>:

There is a vanity which takes place on earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also vanity.

*(Qoheleth 8: 14).*

There is a vanity that is decreed to be done upon the face of the earth; there are righteous to whom evil happens as if they had done like the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked to whom it happens as if they had done like the deeds of the righteous. And I saw by the Holy Spirit that the evil which happens to the righteous in this world is not for their guilt, but to free them from a slight transgression, that their reward may be perfect in the world-to-come. And the good that comes to the sinners in this world is not for their merits, but to render them a reward for their small merit they have acquired, that they may eat their reward in this world, and to destroy their portion in the world-to-come. I said, by my word, this also is vanity.

*(Targum Qoheleth 8: 14).*

Thus the Targum justifies occasions when the moral world seems to break down, and people receive reward in place of retribution, and vice versa. However, the above scheme only deals with one particular presentation of the problem. What about those righteous who die early whilst some wicked prosper and live long lives? For Qoheleth, with no belief in an afterlife, this presented another perplexing observation:

In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing.

*(Qoheleth 7: 15).*

All this I saw in the days of my vanity; from the Lord are decreed good and evil to be in the world, according to the planets under which the children of men are created. For there is a righteous man perishing in his righteousness in this world, and his merit is kept for him for the world to come. And there is a wicked man who prolongs

his days in his guilt, and the account of his evil doings is kept for him for the world to come, to be requited for it in the day of the great judgement.

*(Targum Qoheleth 7: 15).*

In the above two passages, then, Qoheleth's observations regarding those who receive good or evil unjustly and those whose end does not come according to the traditional understanding of the deed-consequence relation are acknowledged and given justification by means of reference to the afterlife and the judgement of God that will be apparent there. But this still left the question of why God should have delayed judgement so long. In order to deal with that question, the Targumist seized the opportunity afforded by the assertion of the orthodox position that is to be found in 8: 12:

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him;

*(Qoheleth 8: 12).*

And when a sinner does evil a hundred years, and time is given him from the Lord that he may repent, it is nevertheless revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. And I know that it will be well in the world-to-come with those that fear the Lord, that fear before him, and do his will;

*(Targum Qoheleth 8: 12).*

So the Targum explains the delay in judgement in a way similar to the New Testament<sup>4</sup>, and further, reinforces that by inserting a number of appeals for repentance.

An important factor in the Targum's reassertion of the deed-consequence relation is its introduction of the concept of the afterlife, a notion that was still developing in Qoheleth's day, but which Qoheleth rejected. The Targum introduces frequent references to the afterlife, often in the context of reward and/or judgement. Furthermore, it seizes upon Qoheleth's phrase; "under the sun," which he uses throughout the book as a description of the sphere of man's existence and activity, to imply the existence of another life. This the Targum does by prefixing the phrase "under the sun" with the words "in this world". It then proceeds to draw out the implication of another world, not under the sun. Certainly, the presence of the concept of the afterlife in Targum Qoheleth testifies to the development of the belief in the intervening centuries after Qoheleth wrote. However, the fact that virtually all of the many references are in the context of setting right the injustices of this world by attributing reward or punishment accordingly, points to the problems created in this area by Qoheleth for orthodox Judaism.

The introduction of the concept of the afterlife by Targum Qoheleth to reassert the deed-consequence relation proved useful in other ways too. Not only did it enable the Targumist to cope with the injustices of this world on behalf of the community of faith, but it also

formed the basis upon which the Targum could exhort ethical actions such as good deeds and charity, for a clear ethical code appears to be lacking in the book of Qoheleth.

The original deed-consequence relation had not been limited to the individual, but had applied also to the life of the nation. Qoheleth had nothing to say on the subject of national suffering, but the Targum adapts one of his proverbial sayings in order to deal with this aspect of theodicy also:

If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, he must put forth more strength; but wisdom helps one to succeed.

*(Qoheleth 10: 10).*

And when the people of the house of Israel sin, and the heavens are made strong as iron to keep back the rain, and that generation does not pray before the Lord, all the world is afflicted with famine on their account. And when the multitude gather themselves together and overcome their evil spirit, and appoint their superiors to ask mercy from the Lord of heaven, there is acceptance for them, because of the abundance of their true wisdom.

*(Targum Qoheleth 10: 10).*

Behind many of the changes made under the broad heading of theodicy, there is an apparent concern to protect the character of God. The result of Qoheleth's severing of the deed-consequence relation was his conclusion that life was meaningless. This in turn raised serious questions about the Creator of such an aimless existence with all its attendant suffering. By re-establishing the link between deed and consequence, the Targum was able to see suffering and evil either as punishment (for the wicked) or as corrective and beneficial (for the righteous). Hence, the character of God was protected from the implications of Qoheleth's observations. But Qoheleth also had some harsh observations to make concerning the created world, such that on two occasions he refers to God having made things "crooked". It is at these points particularly that the Targum's concern to protect the character of God can be seen most clearly. On the first occasion (1: 15), reference to the created world is referred by the Targum to the perverted individual; and on the second, the Targum gives a different connotation to the term "crooked":

Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?

*(Qoheleth 7: 13).*

Consider the work of the Lord, and his strength, who made the blind, the hunchback, and the lame, to be wonders in the world. For who can make straight one of these, except the Lord of the world who made him crooked?

*(Targum Qoheleth 7: 13).*

In relation to Biblical interpretation, the Targum's treatment of Qoheleth's work raises the serious question as to what constitutes a valid approach to Scripture.

Childs' "Canonical Criticism"<sup>5</sup> is one of the more recent approaches of modern scholarship to the subject of exegesis and interpretation. Whilst Childs' approach cautions us against ignoring the fact that the text in its final form and in its present surroundings may have something to say to us, the work of the Targumist on Qoheleth points up very sharply the dangers of allowing the Canon in which a work is situated to be the criterion that above all others is allowed to determine the interpretation of that work. Part of the aim of the Targumist was that of ensuring that one part of Scripture did not contradict or raise questions about another part. All Scripture, being the Word of God, had the same basic message and it was clear from the traditions of Judaism what that message should be. The result, however, was that the distinctive contribution of a radical thinker like Qoheleth was lost. As John Barton remarks:

Qoheleth may well be gnashing the teeth he would not have expected to find in Sheol over the way his bitter words have lost their edge by being included in the orthodox framework of sacred Scripture<sup>6</sup>.

The book of Qoheleth raised many questions for orthodox Judaism, but perhaps the greatest were in relation to theodicy, not least because many of Qoheleth's observations were so patently true: life does not always suggest that there is a moral order in the world. Qoheleth severed the deed-consequence relation of traditional Old Testament belief, and so effectively that the Targumist had to labour hard and contrive at length in places to reassert it. In its way, the Targum was seeking to deal with the issues raised by Qoheleth on behalf of the community of faith, but we must question whether its efforts were likely to have been beneficial to Judaism or not. Levine concludes his study of Targum Qoheleth with the following remarks:

After reading the Targum Qohelet there is hardly any recourse from the conclusion that it is much less a book than Qohelet. For it is an apologetic, conventional, simplistic work. Unlike Qohelet, it is neither powerful nor challenging, nor even disturbing. On the other hand, it is a handbook of faith by which the masses could live — and, in fact, did live — for two millenia... There is no doubt that Targum Qohelet and not the Biblical Qohelet speaks for the theology, value-system and life-style of Judaism. It is the voice of "The True Believer" who despite the "evidence" sanctified the life cup he was given... In the final analysis one must ask whether Qohelet really does "suffer in translation"!<sup>7</sup>

Levine seems to make the assumption that the community of faith is stronger for being protected from the difficult questions that Qoheleth raises; if he is right, then the Targumist has performed a valuable service. I question the assumption, however, and suggest that a more vibrant faith might have resulted if people had been helped to face the questions and doubts raised by Qoheleth, many of which may well have occurred to them anyway, but found no form of expression. The Targumist covers up the difficulties; and whilst there must be a place for proclaiming the certainties of faith in the face of the uncertainties of life, to adopt uncritically the approach of the Targum must lead inevitably, I suggest,

to a colourless and restricted uniformity of belief, rather than a lively and life-giving community of faith that can enable the faith of the individual to develop and grow strong through the difficulties with which life presents the believer.

### Footnotes

- 1 For a recent example of this approach see M A Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament series, Leicester: IVP, 1983.
- 2 G Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol 1, London: SCM, 1975, pp 384-6.
- 3 All Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible; all Targum quotations are based on the translation from the Aramaic by Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet*, New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1978.
- 4 2 Peter 3: 8ff.
- 5 B S Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, London: SCM, 1979.
- 6 J Barton, *Reading the Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study*, London: Darton Longman and Todd; 1984, p 102f.
- 7 E Levine, op cit, p 83.