

ECCLESIASTES AND ECCLESIASTICUS.

It has at times been suggested that the compilers of the Canon of the Old Testament made a mistake in including the work which bears the name Koheleth (*Ecclesiastes*), and would have done better to include that which is ascribed to Ben-Sira (*Ecclesiasticus*). Such a view rests on a mistaken notion of the literary position of the two books. Ben-Sira emphatically repudiates all claim to originality, Koheleth is equally emphatic in asserting his. The one claims to have dug a canal and filled it with Bible water, which indeed rushed in more copiously than he had foreseen; the other claims to have searched out aphorisms, and to have weighed and corrected them with the utmost care. His operations combined those of miner and minter: of one who searches for the precious metal, and one who coins it in pieces that are clearly inscribed and scrupulously accurate in weight. If his work had to be described in a simile taken from water, he would have called himself a water-finder or digger of wells.

The question, then, that suggests itself is whether among the books on which Ben-Sira drew Koheleth had a place. And to this, in the present writer's opinion, there can only be one answer. The author of *Ecclesiasticus* not only borrows from *Ecclesiastes* as frequently as from other Biblical books, but assumes the infallible truth of what he finds there, whether it be consistent or inconsistent with what is found elsewhere in his Canon. Provided he can give Scriptural authority for his aphorisms, he is satisfied that they are unobjectionable. Hence in xiv. 16 he advises the enjoyment of life on the ground that there is no enjoyment to be had in the next world—a sentiment so objectionable to the moralist that the Syriac translator alters it;

but his defence would be that he is merely paraphrasing Ecclesiastes ix. 10. If his paraphrases be compared with the parallel texts in Ecclesiastes, it will be found that those texts have by his Procrustean method been accommodated to his nine-syllable rhythm. So whereas Koheleth says of nature "nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it" (iii. 14), Ben-Sira paraphrases this "there is not to take away nor to add" (xviii. 5),¹ where the inversion and omission produce the rhythmical effect required. The process may be illustrated by most verses of Ecclesiasticus as they appear in the only genuine records of them which we possess—the Greek and Syriac versions. Thus in the immediate neighbourhood xvii. 22—"The Most High who shall praise in Hades, instead of persons living and giving thanks?"²—a conflation of Psalm vi. 5, "In Hades who shall give thee thanks?" with Isaiah xxxviii. 19, "The living, the living, he shall praise thee," and an expression derived from Ezra x. 11.

From these observations we learn one fact of importance—that whatever may be the date of Ecclesiastes, he is at the least pre-Maccabæan. More than that—i.e. at what point of the Persian or Alexandrine period he is to be placed—will probably never be known. Such historical allusions as he introduces are of so vague a character and so carefully veiled that without a contemporary commentary they cannot be interpreted. Cases of kings who have been raised to the throne out of confinement and at an age when they were no longer able to take care of themselves occur in the histories of many nations: cities delivered from siege by the ingenuity of some obscure person, afterwards forgotten, are to be found, we fancy, in records

¹ Heb. (doubtless) אין לנרוע ולא להוסיף.

² Heb. לשליון מי יודה בשאול תקחת חיים ונותנים תורה. The division of a word between the clauses is common.

of different ages. If the description of the king Koheleth's luxury were not at the least pre-Maccabaeian, we might suppose it to be taken from the annals of Khumârûyah, son of Ahmad ibn Tûlûn, who indulged himself in a very similar way at his capital Katâ'i' in Egypt towards the close of the ninth century A.D.

Sir Henry Howorth has suggested that several of the later books of the Old Testament were originally written in Aramaic, and if this theory were made to include Ecclesiastes, some arguments could be found in its favour. The chief of these would be the etymology of the word for *man* in vi. 10, where it is said to imply "inability to contend with one that is stronger." The Hebrew *âdhâm* does not suggest this, but the Aramaic (*nâshâ* or *enâsh*) suggests it without any manipulation. The Aramaic dictionaries (rightly or wrongly) connect it with a root signifying "to be weak, powerless."¹ One or two of the most violent Aramaisms might then be accounted for on the supposition that the translator was not quite sure how his original should be rendered, and so retained the actual words. On the other hand, there is a "curious felicity" about many of the aphorisms which renders the hypothesis of translation unsatisfactory, and several of the idioms appear to indicate the influence of an Indo-Germanic rather than of another Semitic language. Perhaps, then, the Aramaic tendencies will be sufficiently accounted for by the hypothesis that the author *thought* in that language, though he wrote in another.

To return, however, to a comparison between the two books, Koheleth is a writer whose studies and observations have resulted in a system which he fearlessly works out, only tempered by occasional concessions to popular piety, which, supposing that they are not the corrections of a

¹ Levy, iii. 446, "Schwach, Kraftlos sein": Kohut, v. 391, similarly.

reader, but slightly affect the result. The fearlessness, however, appears to be confined to the thought. The system is published as the soliloquy of a *dead man*, whose life is past (vii. 15, cf. ix. 9), and this form may have been suggested by the epitaphs of kings, such as that in which Eshmunazar of Sidon recounts his acts, and deplores his untimely death. The character of king is chosen because of the irresponsibility of that post (viii. 3, 4), which enables its holder to try any experiment, and because from its altitude the best view of the world can be obtained. But since the evils of the world are the chief subject of meditation, and a king has it in his power to remedy at least some of these, the rôle is soon abandoned for that of preacher: the king of the first chapter becomes in the epilogue a sage who taught the people knowledge.

If Ben-Sira's rôle be compared with this, it will be found to be a humble one, for he neither conceals his name, nor makes any pretension to independent research, nor cares for any harmony between his statements, provided that there is authority for them somewhere in the Canon. Koheleth is positive that with death men's interest in the affairs which busy those above ground is over for ever (ix. 6). Their consciousness, or personality, is terminated (ibid. 5): the humblest form of life is therefore preferable to the noblest form of death (ibid. 4). This gives Ben-Sira his justification for the assertion quoted above, and for the advice to the mourner not to overdo his grief, because the dead will not profit, and the mourner only lose thereby (Ecclus. xxxviii. 21). "Make no mistake, there is no return." But the Old Testament has other doctrines besides these, and they can be verified also. "We, too, shall return to life" when Elijah comes (xlviii. 11), because that is implied in Malachi iii. 24 (iv. 6). The wicked are to be punished with fire and worm (vii. 17), because there is

Isaiah's authority for that assertion (lxvi. 24). There is no occasion to reconcile these various theories, which are all true because there is Biblical authority for them.

The eternity of the world is a doctrine which at a later time was considered to be a mainstay of atheism, and is shown to be such by Kant in his wonderful chapter on the interest of the pure reason in the strife of the Antinomies (ed. Hartenstein, iii. 330). It is a pillar in the system of Koheleth, who insists upon it in the most positive style. The sum of which nature consists is invariable, admitting neither of addition nor subtraction: any assertion of the appearance of a new element is to be rejected without hesitation as a contemptible error. Accumulations, whether of wealth or of experience, are futile; because there is no continuity in such accumulations, which are dissipated by the succeeding generation. A pious writer might think a little before embracing such a doctrine, but Ben-Sira is quite satisfied with the authority of Koheleth, and so states (xlii. 21) that the marvels of God's wisdom are "before eternity and unto eternity, without addition or subtraction: nor did He (God) need any counsellor"—the last statement being on the authority of Isaiah xl. 13, 14. Yet the theory of Genesis that the world is, comparatively speaking, modern, and that of Isaiah that a new era is at hand, and to be expected speedily (lx. 22) are certainly not rejected by Ben-Sira.¹ What Koheleth thought of the former is not clear: it is evident what he thought of the latter.

A remarkable part of Koheleth's system lies in the influence which he ascribes to *Time*, a doctrine which might have led the author into the fancies of astrology, though there is no evidence of its having done so. Acts in them-

¹ Compare xxxiii. 6, "Renew signs and change wonders," קדש אתות וישנה נפלאות, where the metre and sense show that "repeat wonders" was meant,

selves are indifferent—this he illustrates by twice seven examples of contrary acts. Their value is derived from the time at which they are done : it is in knowing the right time that the wise man differs from the fool—to a certain extent ; for even the wise man is often helpless when the time is against him. Whether the term by which Epicureans and atheists are known in Arabic—*duhris*, “time-worshippers”—has anything to do with the philosophy of Koheleth, is not clear ; but the term would suit the follower of some of his views, Owing to time, the ordinary laws of cause and effect cease to work (ix. 11) ; the best runner loses the race, and the best fighter is defeated in battle. Interpreted as death, which is its result, it sweeps away all distinctions (ii. 15).

Of course, this doctrine is equivalent to denying the moral government of the world, and Koheleth has little hesitation about doing that, and even charges the ruler of the world with making mistakes (x. 5), though he admits the case to be complicated. Punishment may, indeed is even likely to, overtake ill-doing, but it cannot be counted upon to do so in reasonable time (vii. 17, and viii. 11). If men are swept away, it is because time is bringing on a catastrophe, not because their operations are unusual : like fish they are carrying on their ordinary pursuit of swimming when they find themselves in the net. If they knew their time, possibly they could avoid destruction, as the fish might conceivably, just as in the story in Pilpay’s fables.

Ben-Sira’s standpoint, so far as he had one definitely, would doubtless have been opposed to these doctrines, for a book which recommends the study of wisdom from beginning to end, assumes that such study is efficacious. Nevertheless many of the aphorisms in which the views of Koheleth are conveyed are introduced into Ben-Sira’s

paraphrase. "He hath made everything fair in its time" (Eccles. ii. 11) reappears (Ecclus. xxxix. 34) in the form "It cannot be said this is worse than that, for everything will approve itself in its time." This applies in Ben-Sira's context to those forces of nature which are usually associated with evil—fire, hail, wild beasts, etc.: they are not (as might be supposed) worse than other things, because there is a time when they are wanted, i.e. when the wicked are to be punished. It appears, however, that the reference in Ecclesiastes (whose author would scarcely have accepted this doctrine) is not to objects, but to feelings and operations, since he adds that God "has put the world in their heart," i.e. put into man's consciousness all the forces or qualities of which he sees evidence outside him. The comment of the excellent Arabic writer Jâhîz on this notion of man as the microcosm seems particularly luminous: "Man has been called the microcosm because all the forms that are to be found in the great world are to be found in him. He has the five senses and the five objects of sense: he eats both flesh and grain, uniting the habits of carnivorous and graminivorous animals. He unites the leaping of the camel, the springing of the lion, the treachery of the wolf, the cunning of the fox, the cowardice of the house-martin, the spider's power of construction, the cock's liberality, the dog's tameness, the dove's home-instinct. . . . A further reason for calling him the microcosm is that he forms everything with his hands and mimics every sound that he hears. Another reason is that his members are apportioned to the twelve constellations and the seven planets, and his four humours correspond with the four elements. He embodies all the parts, elements and characteristics that are to be found in the great world" (*Treatise on Animals*, i. 99, 100).

Another doctrine which Kant in the passage quoted declares to be subversive of religion is that of fatalism or (its equivalent) determinism. This is, of course, adopted by Koheleth, who (ix. 7) advises men to eat their bread and drink their wine in comfort, because God has already approved their actions or what is to happen to them: it is the part of a "fool" to repine (vii. 9) or to be alarmed. The later writer accepts the conclusions of the earlier, without apparently adopting their philosophic basis. Care and vexation are to be avoided (xxx. 21-24) not because of their uselessness when man is confronted with the decrees of fate, but because they are bad for the constitution and likely to shorten life. Probably, however, the counsels of Koheleth would have been urged as the justification of the decidedly hedonistic precepts in Ecclesiasticus xxxiv. 28-xxxv. 6.

Any further investigation on these lines could only confirm the view which has been reached of the relation between the two authors—the bold and original thinker, and the paraphraser of texts taken from a sacred book. In the case of Ecclesiastes it is impossible to say whether we have to do with an Israelite or not: Ben-Sira leaves the reader in no doubt about his race. If the former got anything from the Greeks, it can only have been stimulation to original reflexion: of the ordinary commonplaces which foreigners derive from Greek sources, such as the four cardinal virtues or the four elements, his work contains no trace, nor can acquaintance on his part with any Greek author be clearly pointed out, as can be done in the case of Ecclesiasticus. The aphorisms which he publishes are his own: and he claims for them two qualities—that like nails driven home they stick in the memory, and that like goads they force the sluggish mind to move.

Most of the aphorisms certainly possess these qualities.

We may terminate this article by considering one with what seems to be Ben-Sira's comment upon it. Chapter iv. ends with a verse which may be rendered "Walk carefully as thou goest to the house of God, and one that is ready to hear is better than fools offering sacrifice: for they know not to do evil." The subject is continued in chapter v., where hasty, ill-considered and verbose prayer is condemned on the ground that "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth." These verses seem to be in the first place the source of Ecclesiasticus vii. 14, where the repetition of a word in prayer is forbidden. But it is likely also that they are the source of xxviii. 2, where it is prescribed that prayer should be preceded by forgiveness of injuries: the author interpreting the words "one that is ready to hear" as "one that is ready to hear the prayers which are addressed to himself." The sacrifice, then, of revenge will be a better thing than can be offered by the fool, who being unable to do evil cannot efficiently gratify it. For the wise man, through knowing the time (viii. 5), could do mischief if he liked: the fool's efforts would be futile. It seems likely that Ben-Sira hit the author's thought correctly, since the other explanations of this passage are quite unsatisfactory.

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