

QUESTION AND ANSWER

INERRANCY AND O.T. TEACHING ON LIFE AFTER DEATH

I am aware that much of the Old Testament teaching has undergone development. But it would seem that what is said about life after death in such books as Sirach, Job, Qoheleth, and some of the Psalms is not simply imperfect, but positively erroneous. I can grant that the writers were not the beneficiaries of a complete revelation on this question, but these inspired authors have made very deliberate, positive judgments on the nature of the after life which are incompatible with revealed truth (cf. Is. 38:18; Bar. 2:17; Job 10:21-22; Pss. 6:6, 88:6, 115:17; Qoh. 9:10). How do you explain the inerrancy of these inspired writings in this instance ?

The inquirer is perfectly correct in suggesting that an answer to this difficulty exclusively in terms of imperfect, gradual revelation, is not wholly satisfactory. But I think that the reason for this is that we do not fully face the implications when we admit to the imperfect and partial nature of Old Testament revelation. We are inclined to take it for granted that such imperfections are only found by way of omissions, namely what is *not* said concerning divine truths. We must certainly admit, however mysterious it may seem to us now, that the Old Testament shows no belief in a true life without end *for the individual*, until a late date. But in practice, we then proceed to take any references to life after death, as indications of the Israelites' belief concerning the after life (namely that they believed there was no after life)! Did they, or did they not, have any revelation on this truth? We cannot have it both ways. If they did not, then it seems quite unrealistic to expect that this lack of revelation will only be shown by way of omission, and never by positive statements, which, if taken absolutely and apart from their milieu, and compared with a later stage of revelation, will appear as errors. The Old Testament writer could say either: 'I do not know of any real life after death for the individual,' or 'There is no real life after death for the individual.' In the latter case, are we to understand in parenthesis, 'As far as I know,' or are we to take the statement as a categorical affirmation suffering no qualification with regard to time or circumstances? I cannot see that there is any essential difference between this example and the hackneyed one from Josue—the statement that the sun stood still. It is true that in itself the question of life after death is infinitely more important than a scrap of astronomical information; but until Divine revelation teaches him the truth concerning individual survival,

the writer is in just the same position in each case. If God did not choose to reveal the true nature of the after life, then the writer was in no better position to make statements than was the unscientific author of the Book of Josue, and like everyone else he thought of the after life as nothing better than a weak and shadowy existence in Sheol.

This delicate question essentially depends on deciding what the inspired authors intended to teach their readers. 'There can be many real affirmations in the holy Scriptures which do not enjoy the privilege of inerrancy, because they are not taught. They are inspired because they play their part in the total work which God has caused to be written ; but they are not immune from error, because their role is a secondary one, and has no necessary link with the essential message, which is the proper object of the book's teaching.'¹ This is easy to understand in the case of a statement like 'The sun stood still' : we are all familiar with the truth that the inspired writers had no intention of teaching us astronomy. But it is equally correct to say that, in the question under discussion here, the authors did not intend to teach us the nature of life after death. How could they, if they had received no revelation ? If these quotations are considered within their contexts, the only legitimate way of considering them, it is clear that what the authors intended to teach us was the truth that men must make the very best use of their time upon earth. So many difficulties arise because quotations from the Scriptures are taken too absolutely, and too independently from their context. The particular *mode of expression* of a truth is by no means absolute or immutable. Its value must be estimated in the light of further knowledge of the truth. In this particular instance, and judged by the light of further revelation, the truth of such statements may be reduced to this, that the Old Testament writers had received from God no revelation concerning the after life and they were therefore ignorant of it. The fact that they show their ignorance in *positive* statements, which if taken absolutely are erroneous, does not make any difference. Only God knows how many of our own very positive statements about life after death will appear erroneous, if we view them in the same absolute way when we get there !

Upholland College
Wigan

T. WORDEN

¹ P. Benoit, *Initiation Biblique*, 3^e édit., Paris 1954, p. 39