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## EARLY TRENDS IN BIBLICAL COMMENTARIES AS REFLECTED IN SOME QUMRAN TEXTS

by J. G. HARRIS

**T**HE biblical commentaries found among the Qumran manuscripts do not throw much light on the original meaning of the Old Testament text, but they supply valuable information about the life and outlook of the Qumran community, and help us to understand better the sense of expectation that was in the air in Judaea on the eve of our Lord's ministry. Mr. Harris, in this interesting article, brings out some of the features of their biblical interpretation.

**E**VERY devotee of the Bible is in some measure an exponent of the Scriptures. The task of understanding and interpreting the teaching and faith of the Bible has been embraced, sometimes passionately, even fanatically, by adherents of the Bible from the Biblical period right down to our day. Thus there has been produced a multitude of commentaries on the Bible reflecting many shades of religious opinion and an infinite variety in exposition and interpretation. Since in recent years there has become available a series of Biblical commentaries, dating from the Biblical period itself, it is now possible to study and evaluate the methods and style, as well as the content and intention, of some of the earliest known commentaries on the Scriptures.

The commentaries referred to originated from a Jewish ascetic sect which flourished in the region of the Dead Sea from the pre-Christian era until the time of the destruction of their community in the second century A.D. This religious community, sometimes known as the Qumran Covenanters, and probably to be identified with the ancient Essenes, known to us from the works of Philo, Josephus and Pliny, was organized and governed by the strictest rules, and lived according to the discipline imposed by their monastic order. They were avid collectors of sacred works, and their legacy to posterity consists of a library of considerable proportions, surpassed in the ancient world only by the library amassed by Ashurbanipal in Nineveh in the 7th century B.C. We do not know who wrote the commentaries on Biblical books, or on parts of them, which are among the literary remains of the sect, but it is fairly certain that they date back to the Biblical period itself. It

is from these that we deduce information about the early trends in Biblical commentaries.

The primary purpose of the Qumran commentators may be understood from the use of the term *pesher*, used by the *Commentary on Habakkuk* (1QpHab), discovered in Cave 1 at Qumran in 1947 and published in 1950 by the American Schools of Oriental Research. The commentary, which is confined to the first two chapters of the Biblical prophecy, was intended by its author to be regarded as a *pesher* on the text. The import of the term is similar to its use in Ecclesiastes 8: 1, where the question is put: "And who knows the interpretation (*pesher*) of a thing?" It is probable that the term implies a combination of exposition and interpretation, of commentary and application. Thus it describes the main intention of the commentators. They undertook to offer an interpretation of the meaning of the Biblical work before them, not for the sake of intellectual understanding and comprehension only, but in order to declare the relevance and impact of the Scriptural teaching upon those who heard it.

Thus these early commentators combined the task of interpreting the Scriptures with an impassioned interest in current events. So far as religious and national affairs went they were deeply steeped in the happenings of their own time. Accordingly their works take on the appearance of being tracts for the times as well as interpretation of Scripture. The *Commentary on Habakkuk* is full of the author's preoccupation with the prevailing conditions inasmuch as these were threatening the existence of the Qumran community. So he endeavours to show how the words of the prophet relate to contemporary issues, and how they offer confidence and succour to the faithful under their present difficulties and trials. The method of the commentator is to quote from the prophetic texts and then offer his commentary upon it, thus:

*Habakkuk* 2: 1, 2: "I will take my watch and post myself on my tower, and scan the scene to see whereof He will denounce me and what answer I might give when He arraigns me. And the Lord took up word with me and said: Write the vision, and make it plain upon the tablets that he who runs may read."

*Commentary*: God told Habakkuk to write down the things that were to come upon the latter age, but He did not inform Him when the moment would come to fulfilment. As to the phrase *that he who runs may read*, this refers to the teacher who expounds the Law aright, for God has made him *au courant* with all the deeper implications of the words of His servants the prophets.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quotations are taken from T. H. Gaster, *The Scriptures of the Dead Sea Sect* (1957).

In a commentator so immersed in the affairs of his time it is perhaps inevitable that he should include information about the men and movements with which he was associated. So the commentary assumes the appearance of a historical tract, setting before the readers the events and personages of the immediate conflict. So the national situation is described as being dominated by the Kittim, a heathen warlike people who sacrificed to their standards, bent on pillage and destruction. But the commentator assured the faithful that they would be spared annihilation because of divine intervention on their behalf. So the commentator sees himself as a comforter of his people, an encourager of their faith, and an inspirer of their hopes. In the days when the Kittim would be destroyed God would also place the execution of judgment on the heathen in the hands of His elect. The leader in the struggle for the supremacy of freedom and independence was the Teacher of Righteousness, a true exponent of God's law, who received direct knowledge from God of "the deeper implications of the words of His servants the prophets". But the Teacher of Righteousness was harassed by traitors who aligned themselves with the Man of Lies, his adversary, who had rejected the way of divine obedience. When the Man of Lies deflected from the divine law some of the sectarian community followed him, and those of the House of Absalom did not come to the defence of the Teacher of Righteousness. But he had his faithful followers, the men of truth, who carried out the law and abode by the truth. It was these, says the commentator, who would live through their faithfulness, and be delivered from the coming judgment. Neither the Kittim nor the Wicked Priest would escape the rightful punishment.

In his references to the leading contestants in the struggles of his time the commentator resorts to the use of pseudonyms. This is a further characteristic of these ancient commentaries. It was inevitable that he should do so, although after this lapse of time it is not easy to identify the characters and movements referred to. Nevertheless, the use of pseudonyms is to be recognized as a distinctive feature of the Qumran commentaries, and they serve to impress the intense interest of their authors in the men and movements of their time, and their purpose of interpreting the truths of Scripture in relation to the events with which they were associated.

The line of Biblical usage and interpretation developed at Qumran includes the commentators' tendency to introduce information about current practices and customs. One example of

this concerns the reference in the *Commentary on Nahum* to the practice of hanging people alive. Thus in Nahum 2: 12:

"The lion rent the limbs of his own whelps, and strangled his own lionesses for prey."

*Commentary*: This refers to the Young Lion of Anger who proceeded to smite his own great men and his own confederates.

"and filled his caves with prey and his abodes (dens) with torn flesh."

*Commentary*: This refers to the Young Lion who wrought vengeance on them 'that sought smooth things', in that he proceeded to hang them up. Such a thing had never before been done in Israel for the Scripture designates a man hung up alive as a reproach to God.

The reference to hanging in this commentary has become the subject of much discussion as it has been assumed to refer to the practice of crucifixion, and the hanging of the Teacher of Righteousness<sup>2</sup> has reminded us of the crucifixion of Jesus. But it is far from certain that crucifixion was meant, and if it was it by no means carries the full significance which Christians accord to the saving and atoning death of Christ. It would seem that if the Teacher of Righteousness did actually meet his death by crucifixion it was death by martyrdom rather than a voluntary offering of himself on behalf of others.

A further feature of these commentaries from Qumran is their apocalyptic nature and interest. Their authors interpreted Biblical prophecy from this standpoint. God, they believed, was about to initiate the final events which had been clearly foreseen by the prophets. They thought of themselves as living in the latter days. This was for them the crisis of the ages when God would vindicate decisively the righteous and bring vengeance and doom upon the wicked. The function of the commentators was to make this plain and to prepare others for God's transcendent and final act. However, it must be said that many of the features of classical Old Testament apocalyptic, such as are found in the Little Apocalypse of Isaiah 24-27, are absent from these ancient commentaries. There is no grotesque imagery or any extensive use of symbolism in them. Neither is there any elaborate description of the celestial battles in which the destiny of the wicked and the people of God will be decided. But throughout the commentaries the sense of living in the "end of the age" is present, and this permeates them through-

<sup>2</sup>[This passage, of course, is far from implying that the Teacher of Righteousness was one of those who were "hung up alive"; those who "sought smooth things" were probably the Pharisaic opponents of Alexander Jannaeus, on whom he took such ferocious vengeance. According to the *Commentary on Psalm 37*, God preserved the Teacher of Righteousness from the attacks of his enemies.—ED.]

out. In the *Commentary on Micah* there are frequent references to imminent judgment (1: 5), the conquest of God's enemies (1: 6); and there are many similar references in the *Commentary on Habakkuk* (1: 12-13; 2: 18, 20 *inter alia*).

The interest of these ancient commentators in the events of their own time, and in the Scriptural relevance to them, and the sense that they were living in the latter days, did not make them neglectful of the place of personal piety and devotion in the religious life. The religious life as it is portrayed by these early interpreters of the Scriptures is a life of utter abandonment to God, of unswerving obedience to the laws governing their communal religious life. The authority for the life and manners of the Qumran sect is the *Manual of Discipline*, but these are reflected too in the *Commentary on Psalm 37*. This psalm is an exhortation not to envy the wicked or the evil-doers but to place our trust in God who will eventually make a just discrimination between the good and the evil. It is a call to quiet trust, for in His own time God will free the land of the wicked. In his interpretation of verse 11 of this psalm the commentator refers to the reward of the life of meekness, for the meek will ultimately be delivered from "all the snares of want". The meek will be freed from the nagging desires of lust and greed, and in this will be their reward. It reminds us of the meaning of the beatitude of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. There is stress upon repentance too in this commentary. The need for repentance in the religious life is paramount, and in his commentary on verses 8, 9, of this psalm the commentator refers to the punishment of those who refuse to repent and the necessity of returning to God's law and so repenting. Those whose conduct is blameless will live in safety (verses 18, 19) and in every time of need God will preserve them (verse 20). Those whose love to God is valued above everything else will become the leaders of God's people, and those who delight in God's holiness will inherit God's favour (verses 20, 21). The strength of the religious community lay in the piety and conduct of its members, and this emphasis is implicit throughout the *Commentary on Psalm 37*.

A dominant and recurrent note in these ancient commentaries is the hope of the faithful. The writers saw the reign of wickedness as being short-lived, and then the faithful would enter into their own. According to the *Commentary on Psalm 37* at the "end of forty years" the wicked would be wiped out. The oppressors of God's flock would be completely destroyed and disappear "like the smoke". On the other hand the people of God were assured of their salvation. This was the hope to which the commentators bore

witness and which they offered to the faithful as the reward of their obedience.

Apart from their great historical value, and the knowledge they contain about conditions in Palestine during the inter-testamental period and afterwards, the Biblical commentaries from Qumran are important for the insights they contain into the methods and purposes of early exponents of the Scriptures, and also for the truths they preserve and advocate. These truths are the mainstay and interest of religious people in every age, and the knowledge that God is active in the affairs of the world as well as in human life, and that He vindicates the life of piety and devotion, is common to the religious life of every age. Furthermore, in the interpretation of Scripture the proper application of its teaching to practical living and affairs is a subject of utmost importance. It is this that gives urgency to the rightful exposition of Scripture and ranks the work of the commentator above that of theoretic or purely intellectual engagement. In this the Qumran commentators succeeded, and they have pointed the way to their successors in every age.

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