ISA. III 10-11: AN ARCHAIC WISDOM PASSAGE

BY

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Beirut

Isa. iii 10-11, normally taken by commentators to be a late wisdom gloss 1), is almost always emended as well. Now it is possible that when this kind of judgment is made on a text which we feel impelled to emend, we are guilty of circular reasoning, and I submit that this is the case here. The short passage is unusual in that every word is perfectly well known and understandable: it is rather both the specific nuance of the words and their syntax which causes the trouble. I suggest that the verses can be understood quite well without emendation if we recognize in them more than one archaism. The MT reads:

10 ἀλήθεια ἡ ἡγεσίαν εἰρήνης
καὶ προσφέρει τοῦτο ἀπέλλαθεν

11 οὖν ὁ λαὸς ἐὰν
cαὶ ἵσταται ἡ γνώμη τῆς ἐκσβάσεως

The Qumran Isaiah scroll offers the same text except for the substitution of the synonymous ἰσβάσις for ἐκσβάσις in v. 11.

The second half of both verses is clear: “... for the fruit of their works they shall eat”; “...for the recompense of his hands shall be done to him.” It is clear, too, that the two verses are in antithetic parallelism with each other, the first half of v. 10 citing the righteous man with approval, the first half of v. 11 citing the unrighteous man with disapproval, but beyond this nothing is clear.

The confusion is already clear in the Versions. The LXX offers:

10 εἰπόντες δήσασθεν τὸν δίκαιον, ὅτι δισχεραστὸς ὑμῖν ἐστιν.

11 οὖτι τῷ ἀνόμῳ.

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1) So DuHM (HK, 1922), Marti (KHC, 1900), Procksch (KAT, 1930), Kaiser (ATD, 1963), Wildberger (BKAT, 1966); with hesitation, Gray (ICC, 1912); by implication, Scott (Interpr. Bible, 1956).
“Saying, let us bind the just [man], for he is troublesome to us; therefore they shall eat the fruit of their works. Woe to the lawless [man]! Evils shall happen to him according to the works of his hands.” Here “saying, let us bind” would seem to represent a conflation of forms of דְּבָר and אַבְרָך, with the result that דְּבָר could no longer be taken at face value. Further, in regard to syntax, דְּבָר (or whatever!) was evidently taken as an adjective, while רָע was understood as the subject of כֶּمحاֵל רְעֵי הַדֶּרֶךְ, being read as קְרֵעַ or the like.

In the Vulgate, Targum and Peshitta the second half of each verse follows the MT, but each goes its own way with the first halves. The Vulgate reads: “Dicite justo quoniam bene... Vae impio in malum!...” — “Say to the just [man] that it is well... Woe to the wicked [man] into evil!...” Here דְּבָר is understood as לֶבֶד לֶבֶד; the ר is ignored before דְּבָר, and both רָע and רְעֵי are rendered periphrastically.

The Targum reads, “Say to the righteous [man], your happiness (לֶבֶד לֶבֶד)... Woe to the wicked [man], for their works are bad...” Here again דְּבָר is understood as לֶבֶד לֶבֶד; the ר is ignored before דְּבָר, and both רָע and רְעֵי are rendered periphrastically.

The Peshitta is ambiguous about דְּבָר: “Say to the righteous [man], [he is] good/[it is] well (לֶבֶד)... Woe to the wicked [man], the bad [man]...” Here רָע is rendered by its equally ambiguous cognate, and רְעֵי is understood as in apposition to רָע.

If the Versions are not convincing in leading us to a better understanding of the text, at least they lay bare the questions raised by the two uncertain half-verses: (1) How is דְּבָר to be understood? If it means ‘say’, and if ר introduces the message to be said, then we should surely expect לֶבֶד לֶבֶד, particularly since we have לֶבֶד לֶבֶד in the next line. (2) Are the words דְּבָר and רָע verbs (“it is well”, “it is ill”), or adjectives, and, if adjectives, how are they syntactically related to what has preceded—expecially רָע, which seems to be without syntactic tags at all? (3) Is the message of the two half-verses anything but banal and tautological? Why is it worth saying? Have we been missing the point?

Modern critical scholarship has solved the problems by emendation. It was LowTH who first suggested the reading רְעֵי ‘blessed is’

1) Gray, op. cit., p. 67, indicates such a concern.