A NOTE ON THE BROODING PARTRIDGE IN JEREMIAH XVII 11

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görê dâgar welo yâläd ʾôbah ʾõser welo bemîşıpla bâhâši yâmâywa yaʾazṭehnu ʿâbeʾāḥāritō yishbēh nābâl

The majority of commentators on this passage, both ancient and modern, favour the view that the partridge is a greedy and unattractive bird, that steals eggs from other birds’ nests. The NEB translation is typical of this interpretation of the proverb: “Like a partridge which gathers into its nest eggs which it has not laid, so is the man who amasses wealth unjustly…” 1). According to an alternative interpretation, represented by the AV, for example, and a few modern commentators, the point is the proverbial vulnerability of the partridge’s nest, exposed as it is to marauding predators of many kinds, compared to the vulnerability of the fool who puts his trust in base gain: “As the partridge sitteth on eggs, but hatcheth them not, so he that getteth riches and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end be a fool” (AV) 2). A fresh look at the language and ornithology of the verse, and the history of its interpretation, suggests that the minority view is perhaps in this case the correct one.

The linguistic argument hinges on the meaning of the verbs dâgar and yâläd. Dâgar is the normal Hebrew term for “to brood, incubate (of birds)” 3). Although it occurs only twice in Biblical

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Hebrew (Isa. xxxiv 15; Jer. xvii 11), there is no reason to doubt its normal meaning in this context, with qôrê “partridge” as its subject and yâlad in the next clause. It was translated thus in the Vulgate (fovit) and by Kimhi, who explains it as follows: rôbës ’al-bêšîm úmê-hannâm êtâm “sits on the eggs and keeps them warm” (cf. Rashi). In the Talmud the noun degirâh is used with reference to both the Biblical passages and again it is clear that it refers to a bird’s normal care of its young (Hull. 140b). The question where the widespread sense of “to gather, accumulate” came from is not hard to answer: in Aramaic degâr normally means “to amass, pile up, accumulate”, used of piling up stones, for instance, in Gen. xxxi 46 (Targ 4), and this Aramaic meaning undoubtedly gave rise to the Greek translators’ συγκεκριμένον “gathered up”, adopted by the majority of later interpreters both Christian and Jewish. But the normal sense of degâr in Hebrew is “to brood, incubate”, and, unless there are strong reasons for supposing that this verse is exceptional in some way, evidence, for example, that before this verse was written the partridge was popularly believed to gather up other birds’ eggs, then we must assume that the author intended us to visualize a brooding partridge. As we shall see there is no evidence for this popular belief before the Septuagint translation of Jer. xvii 11, and would not our author have had to use a normal Hebrew word for “to collect, gather” if he had meant that?

The other term yâlad, in the second part of the proverb, is usually assumed to refer to “laying eggs” 5). It is not of course a technical term like degâr. Isa. xxxiv 15 contains the four technical terms for the four stages in the breeding cycle of a bird: qinnên “to build a nest”; bîmlît “to lay eggs”; degâr “to incubate them” and bâqa’ “to hatch them”. Yâlad is a quite general term with a wide range of meaning, used mostly of humans, but occasionally also of animals and birds, normally denoting giving birth to a child and used of the female. It is also used of the father in some contexts, notably the stereotyped formulae of genealogies (e.g. Gen. x 8, 13, 15) and the adoption formula in Ps. ii 7. It is once used of both parents (Zech. xiii 3, 3). But there are indications that in Jer. xvii 11 yâlad refers to “producing young”, not “laying eggs”. In the first place,