

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

ECCLESIASTES VIII. 10, AND INCIDENTALLY  
PARTS OF VI. 3 AND VIII. 9.

WHAT is one to do with a verse like Qoheleth viii. 10? The only two possible renderings that have so far been proposed of the Masoretic text as it stands may safely be described as mere counsels of despair, and the serious efforts at explaining the meanings thereof are so many additional counsels of despair.

Let us take the Authorised Version first :—

“ And I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity.”

Some special remarks on the inadmissibility of the detail referring to the burial of the wicked will be made presently ; and, apart from the unlikelihood of the Hebrew word concerned bearing the meaning of “ gone ” (also to be specially considered later in this paper), what is the sense of “ who had come and gone from the place of the holy ” ? What was it, furthermore, that they had done ?

The Revisers, realising—as one may suppose—the meaninglessness of the earlier version, adopted (with Symmachus, Vulgate, etc.) for the text the rendering “ right ” for יָשָׁר (otherwise translated “ thus ”) ; they have :—

“ And withal I saw the wicked buried, and they came *to the grave* ; and they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city : this also is vanity.”

Some of the objections to the renderings of the Authorised Version also apply to the Revised translation ; and, in addition, what is one to make of “ and they came *to the grave* ” (the words in italics, which are meant as an explanation, being in reality nothing but a very fair instance of

“*lucus a non lucendo*”? Nor can it be maintained that the translation of לָּ by the term “right” is sufficiently natural in this passage or in agreement with one’s general impression of the diction of Qoheleth, and with this objection the idea that two different classes of persons are spoken of in this verse falls deservedly to pieces.

With such gropings in the dark as are represented by our two English versions in general use and the earlier authorities on which they more or less rely must be compared the renderings so far based on proposed emendations of the text. Before criticising these, however, it must first of all be admitted that, just as the Rabbis of old sometimes felt themselves compelled to exclaim: “this verse says: interpret me” (or “make a Midrash of me”), so are we right in insisting on it that a verse like this cries aloud for emendation. It is, indeed, true that the greatest possible circumspection is required before resorting to alterations of the received text. A very wholesome antidote to over-readiness in proceedings of this kind has quite recently been provided by Prof. W. Emery Barnes in his article entitled, “The Mischief of Metrical Theory” (*EXPOSITOR* for Sept., 1923); and it may, in the present writer’s view, be confidently asserted that many emendations proposed in the last thirty years or so have only succeeded in substituting Schoolroom Hebrew for good old idiomatic Hebrew. But it is, on the other hand, true that there are cases where the text as it stands is quite impossible, and where either the ancient versions or reasonable new suggestions may help to find the true reading of a passage, and consequently to discover the right meaning of the same. Each case must, of course, be judged on its own merits, and, besides sufficient knowledge of the subject, illuminated by the requisite amount of critical insight, common sense (which is the reverse of artificiality) and the context of a difficult

verse or phrase should prove reliable and most helpful guides.

Preliminarily, again, to a criticism of the various emendations hitherto proposed, it seems convenient to direct full attention to the explanation in vogue of the clause: "And thus I saw the wicked buried." Starting from the clause commonly rendered: "and moreover that he have no burial" (vi. 3) as apparently containing the leading idea that the absence of burial rites is greatly dishonouring to the dead, the inference is drawn that in the verse before us the performance of burial rites indicates the bestowal of honour upon the departed wicked persons; and one commentator after another is found elaborating the same idea in his exposition of the verse. But what if all this is one huge mistake shared by many writers? It may be admitted that a connexion between the clause in vi. 3 referred to and the opening statement of viii. 10 seems at first sight quite natural; but a closer consideration reveals the fact that the word קְבִירָה in vi. 3 does not really mean "burial," but "grave" or "sepulchre." As a matter of fact, to only three instances of the fourteen occurrences of the word קְבִירָה is in the Oxford Hebrew and English Lexicon assigned the sense of "burial," whilst in the eleven other cases the rendering is "grave" or "sepulchre"; and the suggestion now made is that in Qoheleth vi. 3, which is one of the three instances referred to, the word also means "sepulchre" instead of "burial."

Let us, for the sake of clearing our minds about it, look at the entire verse in which the clause in question occurs. Is it likely that the man who begat a hundred children, and lived many years, though whose temperament was such that his soul was never satisfied with the good that he had, would receive no burial of any kind? Would—to put it on as low a consideration as you please—the wealth that he

left behind him fail to secure for him the most ordinary funeral rites practised among his people? Is it not far more natural to think that—unlike Joseph of Arimathea, to name but one instance among the Israelitish people themselves (see St. Matt. xxvii. 60 and parallel passages)—the man was so absorbed in vainly trying to get satisfaction out of the pleasures of life in order “to fill his soul with good,” that it never occurred to him to prepare for himself a sepulchre where his pleasure-loving body should finally cease from aching for something fresh? This surely is the right explanation of the clause containing the word קְבוּרָה, which accordingly must mean “sepulchre” instead of “burial.”

It is, indeed, devoutly to be hoped that no connexion between the two verses will in future be admitted by any critical writer; and it is, even apart from what has already been said, almost marvellous that any eminent student of the past should have failed to suspect the genuineness of a reference to absence of burial in viii. verse 10.

To make Qoheleth say that he had seen wicked men buried, would imply the assertion that in the normal order of things wicked people would not be granted burial among the Israelites in those days<sup>1</sup>; but if so, what becomes of the injunction given in Deuteronomy xxi. 23 that even the body of a criminal who had suffered the extreme penalty “shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt

<sup>1</sup> It would be different if Qoheleth had said: “I have seen wicked men buried in a particularly honourable manner”; but the received text only makes him say “buried,” and nothing more. Plumtre’s comment upon the word “buried” is that “it implies a public and stately ceremonial”; but to the question “Does it?” the answer must be “Decidedly not.” Barton’s note: “i.e. passed away in honour,” must clearly share the same criticism. What these writers do show is that they are aware of the difficulty implied by the inference drawn in the body of the article; and it is, in fact, mainly in the interests of younger students that the matter is here treated at some length.

surely bury him the same day" ? It seems almost absurd to offer detailed evidence of the strict and most careful attention paid by the Jews to the duty of burying the dead (however degraded their lives had been) from the earliest times down to the present day<sup>1</sup>; but it may be as well to draw attention to the fact that even the body of a *felo de se* was, as a matter of religious obligation, granted prompt burial. As an instance in ancient times the burial of Ahitophel (2 Sam. xvii. 23) may be cited; and the medieval Jewish law codices, based no doubt on immemorial religious practice, ordained that at the obsequies of suicides everything should be done that implies respect for the living (relatives), though the ritual included nothing that would indicate honour to the suicide himself.

Granted, then, that Qoheleth could not possibly have said: "I have seen the wicked buried," it now remains to consider the attempts at a solution of the problems offered by the verse before us by means of emendations which include the substitution of an entirely different word for קברים "buried." Students who may still be interested in schemes of altering the text which leave the word for "buried" where it stands, will find what they want in some of the older commentaries, to which they may add the emendations proposed by McNeile, Barton, and any others there might be. But for purposes of the present paper there are only two sufficiently radical efforts made in the desired direction to be dealt with, namely those of Grätz and Bickell.

In conformity with a Midrashic suggestion, Grätz adopts the reading קבוצים, "assembled" or "trouped together," in place of the word meaning "buried," and יתהללו "they

<sup>1</sup> A mere glance at such articles as "Burial" in Hastings' *Bible Dictionary* or *The Jewish Encyclopedia* should, indeed, where needed, amply suffice.

are lauded" is substituted by him for the word to be rendered "they go about"; he omits the copula standing in the text before "from the holy place," and adopts, with the LXX, etc., the reading: "and they are praised" instead of "they are forgotten."

In his hands the verse thus becomes, giving the equivalent English for his German: "And thus have I seen wicked men trooped together, and<sup>1</sup> they came from the holy place; lauded and praised in the city where they did so, etc."

Linguistically, the objection might be made that the form  $\text{קָבְּצִים}$  would imply a reference to a person or persons who assembled the wicked people together, and that the more violent emendation  $\text{נִקְבְּצִים}$  would be required to express the idea of "trooped together" (*zusammengerottet*) pure and simple. But the main argument against this reconstruction of the verse is its lameness and unintelligibility. Were they lauded and praised because they came in troops from the holy place? If so, what was the point of their coming in troops from the holy place, and what was the exact reason for their being lauded and praised for doing so? In what city, furthermore, were they lauded and praised? Was that city "the holy place" or the township to which they had migrated from the holy place? Also, what had they done besides coming away in troops from the place designated as holy?

Anyhow, even if the difficulties named should not be considered insurmountable, it would still remain to be considered whether the fresh reading (and consequently rendering) to be proposed presently is preferable to the emendations proposed by Grätz in 1871.

Now for Bickell's attempt at discovering the true reading of the verse, made in 1884. The present writer has before

<sup>1</sup> Grätz omits "and" in his translation, though retaining the conjunction in the text.

him Cheyne's reproduction (*Job and Solomon*, pp. 220, 276) of Bickell's reading, which is no doubt as reliable as the original from which he worked, though the student will discover quickly enough the misprint that has crept in on p. 276.

Bickell substitutes כְּבִדִים, rendered "honoured," for the word "buried"; he omits וַבָּאֵי (and they came), and reads "in the holy place" instead of "from the holy place," and וַיִּהְיֶה לְכוּ, rendered "had to depart," takes the place of the verb as it stands in the Masoretic text. We thus obtain the reading:—

"And in accordance with this have I seen ungodly men honoured, and that too in the holy place (i.e. the Temple; comp. Isa. xviii. 7); but those who had acted rightly had to depart and were forgotten in the city, etc."

Some demur might be made to the use of כְּבִדִים in the sense of "being honoured," though it cannot be declared inadmissible for the participle being so employed. In the only three places in the Old Testament (Job xiv. 21, Ezek. xxvii. 75, Isa. lxvi. 5), however, where the verb in the Qal has that meaning, the imperfect is used, and there is apparently no trace of any such form of the verb in that sense in later Hebrew. Having probably felt this difficulty, Bickell suggested נִכְבְּדִים as an alternative emendation, but the alteration from the Masoretic reading would in that case be further removed from its consonantal text.

It must also be considered that the supposition of the Pi'el of הִלַךְ being used to express the idea of departing from a place rests entirely on an assumed interpretation of the passage before us, there being no other instance of such a use either in the Old Testament or, as it seems, in later Hebrew.

But apart from the linguistic question, what is the meaning of "And in accordance with this"? In accordance



with what? Nor will, one may confidently affirm, the distribution of the verse over two different classes of persons, the wicked and the righteous, commend itself to as wide a circle of students as the interpretation which refers the whole of it to one class, the wicked.

In any case, again, it seems right to invite the investigator to a careful consideration of the fresh suggestion now to be made, and then to decide which of the different readings lying before him appears to offer the probably correct solution of the problem.

The proposal now is to make—besides adopting (with the LXX, etc.) the reading: “and they are praised” instead of “and they are forgotten”—the following two comparatively slight alterations in the received text:—instead of the word for “buried,” one obtains by changing  $\rho$  into  $\nu$  (a likely variation in taking down a passage from dictation)  $\nu\text{בְּרִים}$ , “like the pure (or clean) ones; and, furthermore, read (like Bickell) “and *in* the holy place” instead of “from the holy place.”

The following reading is in this way secured:—“And thus have I seen wicked men (making themselves look) like pure (or clean) ones, and they arrived and freely walked about in the holy place, and they were praised <sup>1</sup> in the city because they had done so; also this is vapour.”

It is, in fact, a case of the devil parading as saint which Qoheleth here places before us. Having practised their wickedness in one or more places previously, and probably thereby amassed a fortune to make it easy for them to adopt another method of personal prominence, they migrated and “arrived” at a sacred city (or, the sacred city, Jerusalem), and there, professing a life of public benevolence and personal sainthood, they acquired the right to walk freely about in the holy place. High praise was, as a consequence,

<sup>1</sup> Or, in the reflexive sense, “and they boasted (about it) in the city, etc.”

their portion in the city of their new residence (or, not realising that true saints do not boast, went about boasting about their latest course of life); but, adds Qoheleth, "this also is vapour."

In connexion with this emended reading and exposition of it, one may add—though rather diffidently—a suggestion on the interpretation of the last clause of viii. 9, as the little phrase "and thus" seems to link verse 10 with what immediately precedes. The proposal is to take the words "to his own hurt" ("at a time when one man ruled over another") to refer to the ruling man, and to explain it as meaning that the essentially wicked man sometimes finds it good policy to rule to his own injury, in the sense of detriment or loss. The connexion with verse 10 would thus be quite clear. The devil turned saint adopts saintly methods and allows himself in his rule over others to suffer personal injury in order to acquire the reputation of goodness which he is now bent on gaining. For a reference to early authorities also translating "to his own hurt," though in a different sense, see Ginsburg's Commentary, p. 398.

But even if the exposition of לָרַע לוֹ thus ventured upon be not favourably received, one may still urge the careful consideration of what has been said on verse 10. The transition from one passage to another in Qoheleth is often a very loose one, possibly (or probably) owing to the editor who put the different sayings together from the writings of Qoheleth that lay before him, so that no great insistence should probably be placed on the little word בְּרִבְּוֹ at the beginning of verse 10.

G. MARGOLIOUTH.