

## SERMONS IN THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

*with a foreword and commentary*

by

Joseph Heinemann\*

The series *Sifriyat Dorot* seeks to comment on and explain anew Hebrew literature of past generations for the benefit of the present generation. Volume 26, edited by Joseph Heinemann, illustrates with twenty examples one of the central institutions of the Talmudic period: the public sermon delivered by sages (chazal) of that period.

A detailed foreword (pp. 7-28) takes up more than a quarter of the book. Section A, *The Sermon and its Setting*, (pp. 7-11) deals with the historio-social and liturgical place of the sermon. Section B (pp. 11-24) deals with *Forms and Structures of the Sermon*. The introduction concludes with Section C, on what the author calls *The Literary Homily* (pp. 24-28). A selective bibliography, (p. 29) is followed by twenty examples of homilies (pp. 31-103).

The examples come from the Babylonian Talmud (4); from Lev. Rabba (3); from Midrash Tanchuma (3); from Deut. Rabba (2); from Lam. Rabba (2); and from Gen. Rabba, Midrash Tanna'im 'al Sefer Debarim, Sifre, Pesiqta derab Kahana, Mekilta derabbi Ishma'el and the Midrash on the Psalms (one example each).

Each example is prefaced by an introductory note calling attention to its special features and taking up again the criteria of form and structure mentioned in the foreword. Since the foreword itself makes reference to the respective examples, the reader receives an instructive glimpse into the inter-relationship between formation of the theory and choice of examples. The formation of the theory is to be understood as a function of the choice of examples, and vice versa.

The present review seeks to limit itself to reproducing the main lines of the theory.

### A *The Sermon and its Setting*

Hellenistic influences since the time of Alexander the Great, the formation of political and religious sects, continual changes of rule, the

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conquest of Palestine by the Romans, the destruction of the Temple and of the Jewish state itself, religious persecutions, the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt and renewed religious persecution, all these had left Judaism in *Eretz Israel* in a state of spiritual uncertainty and hopelessness and less than ever a religiously and politically monolithic entity. The sages, the spiritual leaders of Israel, had to try and comfort the people, to strengthen them and give them new hope. To this end they utilized the only "national inheritance" which had survived the troubles of the times, namely the Scriptures. Their interpretation had, however, to be fitted to the needs of the moment. This is the historico-social function of the public sermon.

The sermon had its liturgical place in the services of feast- and fast-days and Sabbaths, its subject depending on the Bible text for the day. It is worth noting that at that time in *Eretz Israel* the lectionary was based on the so-called triennial cycle, with at least one hundred and fifty lessons.

## B *Forms and Structures of the Sermon*

Though the "classical" midrashim undoubtedly drew the bulk of their material from the tens of thousands of sermons actually preached in the synagogues of Palestine during the first four or five centuries C. E., they have hardly ever preserved these sermons in their original form. In many cases, they present mere outlines of actual sermons or of parts of them, while on the other hand they take sections from many separate sermons and weld them into new and larger units.

### *The Proem Type*

One of the rhetorical forms found frequently in practically all the old midrashim, the proem (*peticha*), undoubtedly had its origin in the live sermon. It opened with a quotation from Scripture, not taken from the text read on that day, but mostly from the Hagiographa. Through a series of aggadic interpretations and stories, the quotation was gradually linked up with the first verse of the pericope (or the prophetic lesson) of the day. Often the preacher intentionally chose a verse which seemed completely unconnected with the weekly portion, so as to arouse the curiosity of the audience and increase their interest. Sometimes the connection would be established by means of a play on words or similar rhetorical devices. Nearly always, the opening verse chosen expressed a general idea which was subsequently illustrated by the specific example provided by the contents of the pericope. Such proems served originally either as opening sections of a complete sermon or, more likely, were sermons complete in themselves and were preached, presumably, immediately before the reading from Scripture, serving as an introduction to the latter.

This need not mean that all of these more than two thousand proems were actually preached in public. It is quite possible that the editors of the midrashim have added their own proems to those handed down to them.

### *Opening by means of a halakhic question*

The sections opening with a halakhic question preceded by a formula such as *yelammedenu rabbenu* (may our master teach us), reflect the custom of introducing a sermon by a question posed by a member of the audience. The challenge to the preacher was not so much in finding the answer, for the questions usually referred to well-known halakhot – but to improvise a way of linking up both question and answer with the real subject matter of his sermon, concerned usually with an aggadic interpretation of the Bible reading for the day. It is, however, quite possible that the question posed to the preacher had been prompted and was known to him beforehand. Heinemann definitely rejects the opinion of Jacob Mann<sup>1</sup> that the halakhic questions (and also the choice of verses for the Proem) were of necessity connected with the Haftara of the day.

There is a form similar to the opening through a halakhic question, whereby, however, the whole sermon is developed from a simple halakhic question, the answer to which forms the conclusion of the entire sermon. Only a single example of this type, a sermon of Rabbi Tanchum, has been preserved (bTalmud Sabb. 30 ab).

### *Other forms*

In addition, there were sermons opening with a form of benediction, praising God for giving the Torah to Israel, and proceeding from this to the specific theme to be developed. Undoubtedly, other sermons took as their point of departure the first verse of the weekly portion itself.

If the opening of the sermon could take so many different forms, this would apply much more to the body of the sermon. Because of the lack of sources, little can be said about its form or structure.

The concluding section of homilies and midrashim mostly sounds the messianic theme, contrasting the suffering and troubles of “this world” with the joys of “the world to come”. It stands to reason that these sections also represent perorations of actual sermons. Other sermons appear to have ended in a prayer which either expressed thanks to God for the giving of the Torah, or requested the speedy coming of redemption, or both. One example of such a concluding prayer is the Qaddish. In one of its forms, which may be very old, the Qaddish also mentions the resurrection of the dead, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the restoration of the Temple and the obliteration of idolatry all over the world.

<sup>1</sup> J. Mann, *The Bible as read and preached in the Old Synagogue*, I Cincinnati 1940; II (ed. J. Somme), Cincinnati 1966.

### C *The "literary homily"*

In different times and places, sermons exhibited a variety of structures and patterns, Against this, in the so-called homiletic midrashim all homilies are constructed more or less in a uniform pattern; after a series of proems there follows the "body of the sermon" (whose structure is not clearly defined) and finally the messianic peroration. In certain midrashim, the parts mentioned are preceded by the section opening with a halakhic question. Such homilies do not represent single actual sermons as preached in public. Even if the proems are considered to be mere opening recitations, no preacher would have used consecutively a whole series of such introductions, independent of one another, in order to arrive again and again at the same point which he had already reached with the first one, i. e. the first verse of the pericope. Hence these homilies must be taken as creations of the editors of the midrashim who made use of a number of sections and combined them into a new form, the "literary homily", which must not be confused with the actual live sermon as preached in the synagogue (in a variety of forms).

As the literary homily could content itself with "selected topics", the editor of such a collection could express his own thoughts through the form of his selection. When one has to marvel at the rhetorical skill of the preacher in the public sermon, so, as regards the literary homily, must one marvel at the form of its composition by its editor.

It is a question – as we hope has become clear – of two different creative processes which, although they make use of similar material, nevertheless aim under their own respective conditions at different goals, and so also show different results, which on account of the complicated state of the sources will long remain a subject for research.

Reviewed by Johannes Wachten

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