

Exegesis on Qoheleth 3: 2— being born... dying

Moments and the passing of moments—this is life. There is a suffering nature to this flow; there is no escaping either sorrow nor joy. This pair epitomizes events that are beyond human control. Their “times” are not specific dates on which one is born or dies, but rather the right or normal occasions for them to happen. Thus, the “time for being born” means when the embryo is mature and visible, in other words, after nine months of gestation in the case of humans (Qohelet Rabbah 3: 2).

Similarly, the “time for dying” is the time when a person is ripe for death. One who expires, perhaps as the Psalmist speculates at 70-80 years old (Psalm 90: 10), is then dying “in their time”. One who dies prematurely may be said to perish” or “not in their time”. Sinners, according to a prevalent belief, are snatched away “before their time” (*we’lo ‘et*) (Job 22: 16). Even though this is the just time for them to die, it is still not “the time for dying”. Qohelet knows that people do not necessarily die when the time is right for them (8: 12-14).

“Being born” and “dying”, modern and ancient interpreters often say, indicates that everyone has a predestined life span. Some modern exegetes read this as a strong fatalism: one is born and dies on the dates predetermined for that person. But a rigid fatalism is foreign to the Bible, Qohelet, and later Jewish thought. On the other hand, the notion of a predetermined by alterable life span is well attested. According to Rabbi Akiva (Qohelet Rabbah 3: 2), a person is allotted a certain life span at birth. If one is righteous, one will fulfill it; if one is not, one will die prematurely. Another opinion of the exegesis in Qohelet Rabbah is that righteousness can extend one’s life span... (JPS, 20-21).