

Those who are persecuted because of righteousness, are those who pursue righteousness: an examination of the origin and meaning Matthew 5:10

Charles R. Day¹

Abstract

Standard renderings of the eighth beatitude, Matthew 5:10, such as the NIV's 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', fail to convey the subtlety of Jesus's point adequately. In Aramaic, that saying contains a pun based on the fact that the Hebrew/Aramaic word for 'persecute' also means 'pursue'. The article begins by attempting to reconstruct the beatitude in Aramaic, and then draws on evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targums to support the contention that Matthew 5:10 contains allusions to Deuteronomy 16:20 and Isaiah 51:1. The key to understanding and translating the beatitude lies in appreciating the double meaning of the Hebrew verb פָּרַד, which helps us to appreciate that being persecuted for righteousness' sake is the result of pursuing righteousness. The idea can best be captured in translation by paraphrasing the verse, such as 'Blessed are those whose pursuit of what God requires causes them to become persecuted, for they receive the kingdom of heaven.'

1. Introduction

The beatitude of those persecuted for righteousness must be understood as an allusion to both Deuteronomy 16:20 and Isaiah 51:1. Jesus is making a pun based on the fact that the Hebrew/Aramaic word for 'persecute' also means 'pursue'.

¹ Chuck Day holds a DLitt (Biblical Languages) from the University of Pretoria. He has served as a missionary and lecturer in South Africa for many years. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

2. Reconstructing this Beatitude in Aramaic

Let us start by reconstructing the Greek text of Matthew 5:10 into Aramaic.

Greek: μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.
Aramaic: טוביהון דרדפין לקושטא דדלהון מלכותא דשמייא

2.1. Reconstructing ἕνεκεν

For reasons of accent, Burney (1925:168), in his reconstruction of the Beatitudes, suggested that οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης goes back to לרדפין לצדקה. He also theorized that the original beatitude was addressed to those ‘who pursue righteousness’ and that the ל prefix was ‘misunderstood in the sense “for”’, causing the active participle רדפין (‘pursue’) to be understood as רדפין (pursued, persecuted). In this he, may have been half right.

2.2. Reconstructing δεδιωγμένοι

One thing all the ancient Aramaic versions agree on is that the word δεδιωγμένοι should be rendered in Aramaic using the verb רדף. A quick look at BDB (1999, s.v. רדף) reveals that there are several scriptures that combine the word ‘righteousness’ with this verb. The two most important ones will be examined here.

2.3. An allusion to Deuteronomy 16:20

The first is Deuteronomy 16:20, which reads: צדק צדק תרדף למען תחיה ונרשת. אֲתֵּהֱאָרֵץ אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ (‘Righteousness, righteousness, you must pursue, thereby you will live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you’).

The themes found in Deuteronomy 16:20 fit in well with the Beatitudes. If it were suggested that the command to ‘pursue righteousness’ were changed to the statement ‘you will be persecuted because of righteousness’, the altering of the wording would bring out an eschatological interpretation very useful for a community experiencing persecution.² It would indicate that those formerly commanded to ‘pursue righteousness’ are now in the present dispensation

² That this beatitude was created for a community going through such crisis has been suggested (e.g. Derrett 1978:195)

'persecuted (pursued) because of righteousness', and by staying true they win the reward of eternal life, they 'inherit the kingdom of heaven'.

The lack of direct allusion to the Pentateuch mitigates against Deuteronomy 16:20 being the sole inspiration of this beatitude. All previous Old Testament allusions in the Beatitudes come either from Isaiah 61 or another scripture from Isaiah used in conflation with Isaiah 61. So, the question is: is it possible to find an allusion from Isaiah that both fits this beatitude and could also be considered an allusion to Deuteronomy 16:20? This is a tough enough problem, but to this must be added the criterion that such an allusion must also show that it has in some way been joined or linked with Isaiah 61 in ancient times.

2.4. An allusion to Isaiah 51:1

A possible candidate which meets the criteria above is Isaiah 51:1. This verse reads: שְׁמַעוּ אֵלַי רֹדְפֵי צֶדֶק מִבְּקֹשֵׁי יְהוָה הַבֵּיטוּ אֶל-צוּר הַצִּבְּתֶם וְאֶל-מִקְבַּת בּוֹר נִקְרַתֶּם ('Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn', NIV).

It is possible that the use of רֹדְפֵי צֶדֶק by Isaiah is an allusion to Deuteronomy 16:20, but there is nothing in the context to prove it. Nonetheless, the specter of Deuteronomy 16:20 may have 'hovered' over this idiom in the minds of first-century Jews, thus allowing an allusion to Isaiah 51:1 to also be an allusion to Deuteronomy 16:20.

Aside from an allusion to Deuteronomy 16:20, is there evidence that this chapter (particularly the mention of the רֹדְפֵי צֶדֶק in verse 1) was linked by ancient Judaism with Isaiah 61? Like Isaiah 61, chapter 51 concerns the final consummation in which the salvation and judgment of God are both revealed.

2.5. Evidence from 4Q298

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, a definite allusion to Isaiah 51:1 can be seen in 4Q298. The text begins in a normal Hebrew script, but after the address³ changes to a cryptic script (Eisenman and Wise 1992:165). The allusion to Isaiah 51:1 comes at the start of this cryptic script. It amounts to an enlargement and expansion of the first half of this verse.

³ The first words of line one are, 'The words of the Maskil (Teacher) that he spoke to all the sons of Dawn' (Eisenman and Wise 1992:165)

4Q298 1:1b-2

1. האזי[נו לי כ]ול אנשי לבב
 2. [ורו]דפי צדק חבי[ב]ו במלי ומבקשי אמון ש[מע]ו למלי
1. Listen to me all men of heart,
 2. and those who pursue righteousness: understand my words! And those who seek Faith: hear my words!

That speaking of the רְדִפֵי צֶדֶק may also have brought to mind Deuteronomy 16:20 can be concluded by the fact that later in this text those termed אנשי אמת ('men of truth') are told רדפו צדק ('pursue righteousness') (4Q298 3:7). In addition, the third line on the first column (which is so fragmentary that very few whole words are found at all) has an admonition to 'obtain a long life'⁴ (Eisenman and Wise 1992:164), which fits nicely with Deuteronomy's 'you will live'.

2.6. רְדִפֵי קוֹשָׁטָא = רְדִפֵי צֶדֶק

Knowing that there is precedent for the use of רְדִפֵי צֶדֶק as an allusion to Isaiah 51:1 allows a certain amount of confidence to proceed. Targum Jonathan translates Isaiah 51:1's רְדִפֵי צֶדֶק as רְדִפֵי קוֹשָׁטָא. In this Jonathan is being consistent with the targumic tradition surrounding Deuteronomy 16:20. Observe Deuteronomy 16:20a:

- Hebrew: צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדֹּף
- Onkelos: קוֹשָׁטָא קוֹשָׁטָא תִּרְדֹּף
- Neofiti: קוֹשָׁטָא קוֹשָׁטָא תִּרְדֹּף
- Pseudo-Jonathan: דִּין קוֹשָׁטָא וְדִין שְׁלָמָא בְּקוֹשָׁטָא תִּרְדֹּף

At no time do any of the targums suggest that it is צֶדֶקָא which must be pursued; it is consistently קוֹשָׁטָא that is to be pursued, and this becomes the basis for the reconstruction of this beatitude.

Burney suggested that the words 'those who pursue righteousness' were somehow changed into 'those who are pursued because of righteousness'. It is unnecessary to suggest that this beatitude arose from misinterpretation, mispronunciation, or haplography. It would have been possible to take the words רְדִפֵי קוֹשָׁטָא and interpret them to mean both 'Blessed are those

⁴ The reconstruction of these words presented by Eisenman and Wise (1992:164) is השינוי [אורח] היים.

⁵ 'A judgment of righteousness (or: a true judgment) and a judgment of peace (or: a perfect judgment) in righteousness you will pursue.'

who pursue righteousness' and 'Blessed are those whom they pursue because of righteousness'. This ambiguousness would allow the active Aramaic participle to be translated in Greek as a passive.

A theoretical example of the way an ambiguous sentence can be taken two different ways can be demonstrated by the difference between Matthew's and Luke's versions of (what seems to be) the same Aramaic words. Notice the similarities and differences between the following half verses.

Matthew 5:12b: οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν ('For thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you').
Luke 6:23b: κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ γὰρ ἐποίησαν τοῖς προφήταις οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν ('For thus their forefathers did to the prophets').

Both could have been a reasonable translation of the Aramaic words: צְבַדְךָ וְצְבַדְךָ אֲנִי וְצְבַדְךָ אֲנִי. The word אֲנִי וְצְבַדְךָ literally means 'those who preceded', and can not only refer to the prophets, but can also be construed to mean 'forefathers'. The וְ prefix can be taken not only as a relative pronoun (i.e. 'which'), but can also denote a genitive (i.e. 'those belonging to'). In the latter case, אֲנִי וְצְבַדְךָ is then the subject of the verb צְבַד, producing 'thus those of the forefathers did to the prophets'. It is the nature of translators faced with something indistinct in one language to seek a translation which clarifies the ambiguity. Matthew's use of διώκω reflects a need to make the somewhat ambiguous verb צְבַד more specific.

2.7. Reconstructing δικαιοσύνης

The Targum to Isaiah clearly prefers to use the word אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה⁶ to either צְדָקָה or אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה when translating the Hebrew word צְדָקָה. Why is this important? It is because the word אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה means not only 'righteousness' but it also means 'truth'. Jesus exploits the fact that אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה can take in the meanings of both Hebrew צְדָקָה and אֱמֶת when he gives application to this beatitude. The dual use of this word can be demonstrated, appropriately enough, from the Targum to Isaiah 61. The word אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה is used (to translate צְדָקָה) in verse 3. In verse 8, the similar אֲשֶׁר אֱמֶת is found as a translation of אֱמֶת ('truth').

2.8. An allusion to David

The concept of pursuing/persecuting those who are righteous was often connected to the story of Saul and David. David asks Saul (1 Sam. 24.15): אֲחֵרִי

⁶ Also written אֲשֶׁר צְדָקָה. Jastrow (1992:1429) considers these to be two spellings of the same word.

רַדְּף מִי אֶתָּה רֹדֵף ('against whom are you pursuing/persecuting').⁷ Saul also confesses to David (1 Sam. 24.18): צָדִיק אֶתָּה מִמֶּנִּי ('you are more righteous than I am'). Combining both the theme of *pursuing righteousness* and David, *Midrash Tehillim* to Psalm 58 quotes David as asking Saul and his men: בְּצַדִּיק רָדַפְתָּם אֶחָדִי ('In righteousness did you persecute me?'). Thus, David was considered to be an example of one who was persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Ancient Judaism recognized that God cares for those who are persecuted. Ecclesiastes 3:15 says: יִבְקֹשׁ אֶת־נִרְדָּף ('He (God) will seek the persecuted'). Commenting on this verse, *Leviticus Rabba s 27* says that the Lord always demands the blood 'of the persecuted from the (hands of) the persecutors' (הַנִּרְדָּפִין מִן הַרֹדְפִין). Similarly, *Sanhedrin 72b* suggests that God will save the life (blood) of the persecuted at the expense of the persecutor (Jastrow 1992:312).

The promise of the kingdom of heaven is given to those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness just as it was for the poor in spirit. This is not merely for literary style. Each beatitude has a promise in its apodosis which has been suggested by a certain logic. Perhaps the story of David and Saul has suggested this apodosis. Consider how David, the persecuted, is promised a kingdom in 1 Samuel 24.21: כִּי מֶלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ וְיִקְמָה בְּיָדְךָ מַמְלַכֶּת יִשְׂרָאֵל ('For you will surely be king and the kingdom of Israel will be established by your hand').

In this way, the eighth beatitude has brought together the imagery of the saints receiving a kingdom in Daniel 7 and identified them with David. Jesus uses David as a type in his teaching on life, privilege, and authority in the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 12:3-4 (referring to David and his companions eating the shew-bread in 1 Sam. 21:1-6).

3. Jesus's commentary on the eighth Beatitude

Goulder (1974:280) is undoubtedly correct in supposing that Matthew 5:11-12 is part of the explanation Jesus gives to the eighth beatitude. Being persecuted ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης ('for the sake of righteousness') is equated with being persecuted, and lied about. ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ ('for my sake'). Jesus speaks, not of David, but of τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν ('the prophets who were before you'). One reason for this may be to cause the disciples to infer that their

⁷ This comes out in the story of the conversion of Paul. Jesus appears to him as he is on his way to Damascus and says: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' When Paul asks him who he is, he replies: 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.' In this last line, Jesus appears to be quoting 1 Sam. 24.15.

commitment to Jesus includes a call to be willing to pay the price of martyrdom. As opposed to David, who was not persecuted to death, some of the prophets were killed by their persecutors. Not the least of these was Isaiah who was popularly believed to have been sawn in half by Manasseh while he hid in a tree (cf. Heb. 11.37).

That Jesus has addressed those who are *לְקוֹשְׁטָא* (rather than *לְצַדִּיקָא*) is demonstrated by the fact that (as mentioned earlier) *קוֹשְׁטָא* can mean either 'righteousness' or 'truth'. Thus, we see in the comments on this beatitude in Matthew 5:11-12 that the persecution to be expected includes people speaking falsely. The contrast is not only between *δικαιοσύνη* and *πονηρός*, but between *δικαιοσύνη* and *ψευδόμενος*. In like manner, Luke, in the parallel passage (6:22-23, 26) contrasts the treatment given to the *προφήται* as opposed to the *ψευδοπροφήται*.

Jesus's comments about salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16) are also applied to the persecuted. The first (Matt. 5:13) is an admonition to faithfulness despite the persecutions involved. The idea that those who fall away will not be able to be readmitted into the kingdom is suggested by the question asked, rhetorically: how will salt which has lost its flavour become salty again? Salt losing its saltiness is also a figure known from other rabbinic passages. Thus, *Bechoroth* 8b says: *מִלְּהָא כִּי סָרִי*, 'when salt becomes unsavory, wherewith do they salt it?' (Jastrow 1992:788).

In Matthew 5:14, Jesus speaks to those who want to be secret disciples. The illogic of such a situation is brought out by the similes of a city on a hill being unable to be hidden (5:14) and the uselessness of a lamp put under a basket (5:15). Jesus ends by commanding them to 'let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven' (5:16, NIV). This last clause, *καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς* (literally, 'glorify your Father in heaven') is a euphemism for 'they may repent' (cf. Rev. 11:13). It represents the Hebrew idiom *שִׁים-נָא כְבוֹד לַיהוָה* found, for example, in Joshua 7:19, in which Joshua tells Achin to repent and confess his sin. This idiom is found throughout Jewish literature. Thus, for example, even in the Testament of Naphtali (8:1) we find: 'Do what is good, my children. Then men and angels will praise you and God will be honored among the heathen' (Newman and Stine 1988:125).

A possible reference to the story of David and Saul may be lurking in the background here. This possibility should not be pressed too heavily, but in 1 Samuel 24.20 Saul blesses David for his good deed of sparing his life, saying: *וַיְהוֹה יִשְׁלַמְךָ טוֹבָה תַּחַת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ לִּי* ('So may the LORD reward you with

good for what you have done to me this day', RSV). Two chapters later, David again spares Saul's life, stealing his spear and water jug instead. When presented with this evidence of David's good deeds Saul repents, saying, *חָטָאתִי* ('I have sinned', 1 Sam. 26.21).

4. How is this Beatitude to be understood?

This is one of the beatitudes which is not so much misunderstood as not fully understood. The lack of acquaintance with the allusions involved (particularly Deut. 16:20) causes a failure to appreciate that being *persecuted for righteousness' sake* is the result of *pursuing righteousness*. This goes beyond translations, such as Today's English Version, where *for righteousness' sake* is translated as 'because they do what God requires'. This translation has correctly emphasized that in this context righteousness is related to right actions and godly living. But, 'doing' is not a strong enough verb to help readers grasp the inherent play on words here. A better word to use in translation would be 'pursuit'. A more accurate understanding of what this beatitude is supposed to mean can only come from wording which expresses the double meaning of the Hebrew verb *רָדַף*. Perhaps, a translation is not as helpful as a paraphrase of this beatitude, such as, 'Blessed are those whose pursuit of what God requires causes them to become persecuted, for they receive the kingdom of heaven.'

Works cited

- Brown F, Driver SR, and Briggs CA 1999 [1906]. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English lexicon: with an appendix containing the biblical Aramaic*. Peabody: Hendrickson.
- Burney CF 1925. *The poetry of our Lord*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Derrett JDM 1978. *Studies in the New Testament* (vol. 2). Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Eisenman R and Wise M 1992. *The Dead Sea Scrolls uncovered*. Dorset: Element.
- Goulder MD 1974. *Midrash and lection in Matthew*. London: SPCK.
- Jastrow M 1992 [1903]. *A dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. New York: Judaica Press.
- Newman B and Stine P 1988. *A handbook of the Gospel of Matthew*. New York: United Bible Societies.