

An Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes

THE BOOK ITSELF

At first sight the Book purports to be written by Solomon, king of Israel, and appears to be his accumulated wisdom which he desires to pass on to his readers. For many centuries this was the view of most scholars, and is still the view of many of them. Other scholars--and many of them conservative--believe, because of linguistic and other reasons, that the Book is of comparatively late origin, B.C. Some see linguistic similarities between Malachi and Ecclesiastes, so that either it must have been written about this date, or was revised by someone of the Malachi era. Whilst the book was generally accepted as canonical by the Jews, yet later Jewish pietists, such as those of the narrow exclusive school of Shammai, objected to it because it maintained that 'the creatures of God are vain'. We will see that the reading of this book could lead many to think of it as sceptical and pessimistic, whereas, in fact, it is far from being that. It is not to be wondered at that Christians too have questioned its inclusion in the canon of Scripture. That it has nevertheless been included in both Jewish and Christian canons testifies to the quality of the book.

THE AUTHOR OF ECCLESIASTES

The word 'Ecclesiastes' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title '*Koheleth*' or '*Qohelet*', and has been translated (i.e. transliterated) into English from the Greek of the LXX (the Greek Old Testament). The word *Koheleth* means 'Preacher'. It has been debated whether the word means 'one who gathers', or 'one who is gathered', although the former seems the best meaning. The word derives from the Hebrew *qahal*, which in Greek is *ekklesia* and which means 'congregation', and is technically the 'called out' or 'called together' people. The Preacher was one who spoke to the *qahal* and so was called *Qohelet* or *Koheleth*. We will use the latter English spelling--*Koheleth*--from this point onwards.

Who, then, was the Preacher? It is about the person of the Preacher that the debate ensues. A preacher of this kind, i.e. a *koheleth* was one who lectured or taught an assembly of people. The preacher of this kind was not a priest as such, and so was not concerned with the opening up the truth as a priest might teach it, i.e. from the given Scriptures that obtained at the time. Such a *koheleth* would speak in the outer court, as being one of the people, and address them with ideas and exhortation that would be helpful to them. He was a non-priestly person, speaking to his fellow creatures.

Those who hold that this *Koheleth* was Solomon believe this was the king in his old age. We know from history that Solomon was a man deeply involved in idolatry, especially through his foreign wives. It is thought that Solomon repented in his later years, and in fact this sermon--or series of sermons--springs from that repentance, and is, in fact the confession of

his sin, and an exhortation to others not to follow his way. It is doubtful that any repentance can be found within the text. Certainly there is no indication of it in the Books of the Kings or Chronicles.

Others assume that the Preacher is not Solomon but one who stands in Solomon's place, much as Shakespeare has dramatized the life and sayings of kings such as Richard II, Henry V and Macbeth. It is not that the dramatist is falsifying history but he is using the situation of a famed person to give forth the richness of that one. Indeed it is difficult for us to see the great personages that Shakespeare has dramatized other than as he has portrayed them, and we are the richer for his creative portrayal of them.

Whatever may be the views of various scholars, the fact is that a person who is the Preacher-whoever he may be-presents a most powerful sermon to us. Doubtless the Preacher is strongly manifested to us by the sermon, as also the sermon is by the Preacher, and it is not difficult to trace the life of the Preacher from the many autobiographical details he has given. Indeed no other books-not even the Psalms-present such autobiographical detail.

THE MESSAGE OF THE PREACHER

As we have indicated, the message of this sermon springs from the experience of the Preacher. It is interesting to note the many criticisms of the sermon. Some criticisms arise because the material is read superficially, but others because the exhortation itself provokes a reaction which can only be said to indicate the mind of the reader. Thus the Preacher has been accused of a secular mind, of being cynical, disillusioned with life and pessimistic-a nihilist in fact. He is supposed-by some-to be satiated with life, but seeking as an Epicurean to squeeze the last drops of pleasure from it. The Preacher is supposed to be a sceptic, preaching despair, because constantly he says, 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!'. He seems to say there is nothing good under the sun, and pleasure will only, ultimately, bring pain and dissolution of the human body, with no goal for the next life. Indeed for him-it would seem-there is no next life! And so on. None of these interpretations is correct.

The sermon is nothing if not realism. The term 'under the sun' speaks of the universal experience of man. It is not confined to the spiritual idealism of a regular preacher. The speaker is facing life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. He obviously has no illusions as to what life can bring or destroy, yet he is not disillusioned with it. In fact we gather that his audience itself might be a gathering of sceptical, disillusioned and cynical persons who being religious have not yet understood life. Indeed their religiosity is itself a form of secularism. Note the fact that they purport to be religious for they are in the Temple court and are worshipping adherents and are listening to a well-known Preacher. Is he exhorting them to religious practices? Yes, and no, for it is they were who are secular, they who see life sourly-with all their experience of material success. He is exhorting them to see the false views they hold as a result of their experience of life to renounce such views and practices, and to break through to a richer understanding of all things.

It is best to see the sermon as a realistic probing of life, as a discerning of what is the true and false way of approaching God, the creation and man. If the whole of man is to 'fear God and keep His commandments', then there can be little in the Preacher's thinking that is deficient. If we are troubled by his seeming pessimism when it is only realism, and if he refuses idealism because it is an evasion of the facts of life and a hindrance to the true ways of living, then we will have missed the value of the wisdom of *Koheleth*.

For the rest, we shall seek to understand this wisdom as we study closely the Sermon itself.

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Koheleth's Teaching

What is Koheleth teaching in his sermons and book? After a thorough reading of the book the elements of his instruction emerge and can be formalized. They are as follows:

- (i) *The created world cannot be an end in itself, and must not be seen as thus.* Therefore any examination of it along these lines cannot succeed. Human knowledge has God-given limits to its exercise (8:7; 10: 14); man is mortal (Eccl. 3:19-22 12:7; cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:21-25) and is limited, e.g. life is tiring in its toil (1:3; 2:22). Man can never be sure what might happen-it evades his categorizing predictive wisdom, as in 10:5-15.
- (ii) *Creation is not God, so we cannot know God by looking at the creation,* even though the *action of God* in creation and providence may be seen within the creation (cf. Ps. 19 where creation declares God, and Rom. 1: 19-20 where God is made known to the man who already knows God-1:23). Our proneness is to absolutize the creation, or things within it, and then to work upon, and by what we think to be absolute. When we try to do that then the thing becomes futility.

Examples of absolutizing are:

- (a) nature (1:5-7),
- (b) history (1:8-11),
- (c) knowledge (1:12-18),
- (d) pleasure (2:1-3),
- (e) wealth (2:4-11), and
- (f) work (2:18).

All of these lead to, and prove to be, vanity.

- (iii) *If we view creation 'on the horizontal', then we do not understand it.* By 'on the horizontal' we mean 'under the sun' and 'under heaven'. The pattern of man's thinking is to obtain all the knowledge he can, all principles by which things appear to work, and so with this so-called knowledge man accumulates a certain wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to live and move in this world to the best advantage, but it is still wisdom 'on the horizontal'. This can be seen in Koheleth's deliberate experiences, i.e. of his world (1:12-2:18)--experiences that to be done with his mind.. He ends up by hating everything.
- (iv) *Man is not meant to see everything as only 'under heaven', i.e. 'under the sun', for God has 'put eternity into his heart' (3:11),* therefore his orientation is not wholly horizontal, though it always must relate to it. His orientation must also be vertical, i.e. arrive at some revelation of the transcendental God, who-as other Scriptures tell us-is also immanent.

On this score nature, history, knowledge, pleasure, wealth and work have their place. In the horizontal-vertical orientation man can enjoy this life if he is essentially creaturely, i.e. fears and pleases God (8:12; 12:13; 2:26). He can enjoy what is given to him in this world (2:24; 3:12; 5:18-20; 9:7-10). This is because God is in the action and man has not determined it.

Man cannot understand all happenings when he looks at things on the horizontal, but (a) all that God does endures for ever (3:14), (b) this fact causes man to fear God (3:14), (c) no man can alter what God does (3:14), and (d) everything happens under God's determination 'in its own time' (3:1-9). When man looks horizontally at what God does it baffles him, he feels caught up in a fatalistic set of actions, feels helpless, and hates 'everything under the sun'. This is because he (a) cannot order it, and (b) cannot cause it to be as he thinks it should happen in accordance with his (horizontal) wisdom. This to him is unscientific, or the premises he has used are false.

(v) *From the vantage point that is 'under the sun' man is no better than the animals (3:19-22).*

Koheleth would seem to be pessimistic. The fate of beasts and man is the same—death, the loss of vital breath, crumbling back to dust. This is brought out in Psalm 49:10-14, but in that Psalm-verse 15—the writer says that God will ransom him from the grave. In Ecclesiastes 3:17; 11:9; 12:14; cf. 8:12-13, God will judge men, and such judgement has little sense apart from life beyond death. Likewise man is not a brute though his end seems to be the same. Again, for Koheleth to speak of 'vanity' is to posit a situation which is not vain, e.g. 3: 1-11.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude, then that Koheleth has great faith in God, and in God as Creator (cf. 12: 1 ff.). He wants to show that man's search for rationality and purpose by an 'under the sun' wisdom, will always lead him to futility. If, however, he sees God as Creator, and King over all things, then he will have a humility, a fear and a dependence which will give him another view of life altogether. He will see life as under God's hands, and in spite of the many strange things which happen within human existence he will not be appalled, disillusioned but will enjoy what God has given him, and the close of his life will not be desultory but rich. Koheleth is warning his listeners against absolutizing anything in this world, this creation, for creation must always be contingent upon the Creator. God has true wisdom. Man cannot devise a key to his situation. He must let God open His 'mystery of godliness' to us, and if the Preacher in any way be God's locksmith, then they ought to listen to what he has to say.

We could do no better than close with a reading of Proverbs 30:2-4:

Surely I am too stupid to be a man.
 I have not the understanding of a man.
 I have not learned wisdom,
 nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
 Who has ascended to heaven and come down?
 Who has gathered the wind in his fists?
 Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?
 Who has established all the ends of the earth?
 What is his name, and what is his son's name?
 Surely you know!

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THE GENEALOGY OF TWO FAMILIES

The following excerpts regarding the genealogies of two families are taken from *The Family: Here Today ... Gone Tomorrow?* by Donald Howard (Covenant Book Shop, Croydon, NSW, 1975, p. 86-87, 139-140):

Over 300 years ago in America's New England, Richard Edwards married Elizabeth Tuttle. They had a son Timothy Edwards, a founder of Yale and father of Jonathan Edwards, the well-known preacher and philosopher who in turn married Sarah Pierpont. This family with godly beginnings and a godly line for many generations has produced:

265	college graduates
12	college presidents
65	professors
60	physicians
100	clergymen
75	army officers
80	prominent authors
100	lawyers
30	judges
80	public officers
3	congressmen
2	U.S. senators
1	vice-president of the United States of America.

In the same area at the same time a man called Max Jukes married. Described in those days as 'a vagabond type', in the 1870's he had 1.220 descendants:

300	died in infancy
310	professional paupers
440	crippled by disease
50	prostitutes
60	thieves
7	murderers
53	committed other crimes ³¹

From figures compiled in 1916, we know that many in the Jukes family have through God's common grace started to 'lifted themselves up'. Perhaps there has also been some disappointment in the descendants of the Edwards family. Nevertheless this is a graphic illustration of the contrast between a godly and a godless home.

³¹ The figures on the Edwards family were compiled in 1900 by A. E. Winship, who tracked down 1400 of their descendants. The Jukes family (the word means 'to roost' and was used to protect their identity) all originated with one immigrant who settled in upstate New York in 1720 and produced a tribe of 'idleness, ignorance and vulgarity'.

A descendant of the Edwards family, R. L. Dugdale, presided over the New York Prison Commission in 1874 when it conducted an enquiry into the Jukes matter. only 20 of the 1200 Jukes had ever had gainful employment. A follow-up study of the Jukes in 1916 showed that while degeneracy and defectiveness were still rampant among them, many had become established as honest, hard-working citizens, some even 'superior' . . . Amram Scheinfeld, *Your Heredity and Environment* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1966), deals with the family, pp. 643ff.

It would be interesting to see later figures of both families.