

The Wisdom Literature of the Bible: The Book of Ecclesiastes

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The title Ecclesiastes appears first in the Septuagint. It is a Greek word, derived from *ekklesia* ('assembly') and ordinarily signifies a member of an assembly. But here it means rather the convener or president of an assembly, or the 'speaker' in the sense in which we talk of the 'Speaker' of the House of Commons, for it represents the Hebrew term *qoheleth*. This Hebrew term is akin to *qahal*, which also means 'assembly', and means 'one who gathers the assembly together'. It is a participial form, and (rather strikingly) is in the feminine gender. This has sometimes been explained by the argument that it is Wisdom personified that is viewed as convening the assembly (the Hebrew word for 'wisdom', *hokhmah*, being feminine); but this seems excluded by the opening words of the book, where 'the Preacher' (Heb. *qoheleth*) is identified as 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem' (and cf. Eccl. 1:12). It is more likely, therefore, that we have here what grammarians call the 'feminine of office', a phenomenon paralleled elsewhere in the O.T.

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As to the identity of 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem', Solomon is probably indicated, although later descendants of David have been suggested—notably Uzziah after his contracting leprosy, or Manasseh after his captivity and repentance. However, we shall refer to him by his self-chosen designation, Qoheleth.

The greater part of the book looks at life from a viewpoint which shuts out divine revelation. If God has not spoken, what is life? 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Solomon may excel in wisdom, may pile up riches, may enjoy all the delights of life, but he must die and leave all behind him, and what is the good of it all? Even in his lifetime he gets no real satisfaction in all these things; they bring him more anxiety than contentment. 'All is vanity and a striving after wind.'

If we bear in mind that Qoheleth's thought proceeds for the most part within these strict limits, we shall not be surprised at his very negative conclusions. 'Enjoy yourself while you can,' he seems to say, 'for you are going to be a very long time dead.' But what is the best form of enjoyment? Life is short, but how can it be made worth living for so long as it lasts? Several expedients are considered, but no real satisfaction is found in any. Qoheleth tries conventional wisdom, and attains pre-eminence in it, but finds that it leads only to sorrow (1:13-18). The wise man and the fool have alike to die at last, and their memory is equally forgotten (2:12-17; 9:13-16). Then he uses his vast wealth to acquire all the means of pleasurable enjoyment that his heart can conceive, and discovers that here too there is 'no profit under the sun' (2:5-11). A large harem, such as Solomon amassed, brought nothing but disappointment and disillusionment (7:27 f.; cf. 1 Kings 11:3). Even righteousness fails to bring the satisfaction one might expect; wicked men are encouraged because justice is so slow in operation, and the righteous and the wicked must alike die at last: 'there is one event' to both (8:10-9:6). Indeed, if a man would have a quiet life, it is best to avoid extremes:

excessive righteousness and wisdom are to be avoided as much as excessive wickedness and folly (7:15-18).

Nor can Qoheleth find any reassurance in the hope of a life to come, where good and evil will find their respective appropriate rewards. Who knows? So far as we can tell, man dies like the beast (3:19-22). 'A living dog is better than a dead lion' (9:4).

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The living know that they shall die,
But all the dead forgotten lie;
Their memory and their name is gone,
Alike unknowing and unknown.

So runs the Scottish paraphrase of Eccl. 9:5. It is amazing that such words were once considered suitable for singing at Christian burials!

Still, even if a man has no hope of personal survival, may he not find some satisfaction in living for the good of posterity? No, says Qoheleth. A wise man by his wisdom may acquire an estate of great value, and leave it to a fool to squander (2:18 f.). (Here we inevitably remember the folly of Solomon's son Rehoboam.) But as likely as not, the wealth that he amasses will take wings and fly through some mischance even while he himself lives, and he will die as poor as he was born (5:13-17).

What, then, is a man to do? He should get as much joy as he can out of the simple things of life—his daily work, the solid satisfaction that comes from a job well done, a healthy appetite for his food and drink, and domestic happiness. 'Eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart.... Let thy garments be always white; and let not thy head lack ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might' (9:7-10). This is Qoheleth's philosophy: it has been described as good advice for hard times. Yes, provided they are not too hard. What if a man is unemployed and cannot earn his daily bread? Or what if he is sent to work in a forced labour camp, and torn from his wife and family? On Qoheleth's premises, we have to bring in a verdict of 'Vanity of vanities' even against the simple things of life.

What then? Without God, life has no sense. It is simply one thing after another with neither rhyme nor reason; a meaningless recurrence of unending cycles.

No wonder that Jewish rabbis in earlier days and Christian theologians in more recent times have disputed the right of this book to a place in the canon of Scripture. It appeared to contradict Jewish orthodoxy so flagrantly that when the rabbis at Jamnia, towards the end of the first century A.D., reconsidered the whole question of canonicity, they justified the retention of Ecclesiastes only by bold and wholesale allegorization or by turning statements into questions (e.g., reading 2:24 as 'Is there

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nothing better for a man...?'). In later days many who have felt no such obligation to justify tradition somehow or other, have roundly denied its right to be classed as Holy Scripture and

have declared that its place in the O.T. canon might more profitably have been occupied by Ben Sira's *Ecclesiasticus*.

But whatever difficulties Jewish rabbis might find, the canonical status of *Ecclesiastes* can be soundly supported on Christian grounds. It poses questions about life to which Christianity alone gives the answer. Even Qoheleth himself points the way to something better than the wholly negative philosophy which is all that life can offer when God is left out. Bring God in, and meaning and purpose are brought in. 'Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth.' So runs the first verse of the book's last chapter, and the closing verse shows the wisdom of this advice: 'For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.' Qoheleth rises above the naturalistic philosophy which he has been expounding, for he 'is inwardly aware that life is bound up with realities which lie beyond those of nature, that natural realities are not the final conditions of human existence. Moral consciousness of God is as real to him as perception of the phenomena of nature. Men have their being in moral responsibility to God as Creator, and will for every action be accountable to God as Judge. Creation and Judgment—these are the two points, then, between which history completes its movement.'¹ And so we are released from the wheel of fate.

But even the twelfth chapter of *Ecclesiastes* can take us only so far. The final answer must await a fuller revelation. And we find it in the one passage of the N.T. which probably alludes to this book. 'The creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21). The redemption wrought by Christ, in its widest and ultimate scope, embraces all creation and sets it free from frustration and meaninglessness. And the guarantee that this will yet be so is found in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. If Christ be not raised, and if, consequently, there is no resurrection at all, 'let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die' (1 Cor. 15:32). Is

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this not exactly Qoheleth's argument? If death ends all, for good and bad alike, then 'there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour' (Eccl. 2:24). But now is Christ risen from the dead, and He has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

In the light of all this, how foolish it is to quote such a statement as that of Eccl. 9:5, 'the dead know not anything,' as though it said the last word about the state of the dead. Qoheleth here, as in the greater part of his book, is describing the conclusions to which he came in his quest for a satisfactory basis for life, without taking divine revelation into his reckoning. But if even Qoheleth found a more excellent way when he unfastened the shutters that excluded the light of the knowledge of God from his mind, how much more excellent a way is open to us, on whom the light of the knowledge of God's glory has shone in the face of Jesus Christ!

Not only in his last chapter, but in a number of 'asides' earlier in his book, Qoheleth indicates that there is a better way than that whose vain pursuit he describes in such detail. It is unwarranted to treat those occasional interjections as later additions made by a scribe or editor to render Qoheleth's argument more palatable to orthodox thought. The most remarkable of

¹ R. Rendall in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, April 1948, p. 88.

those 'asides' is probably Eccl. 3:11, 'He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end.' 'He hath set the world in their heart' is better rendered, as in the Revisers' margin, 'He hath set eternity in their heart.' And this is exactly why the quest for satisfaction apart from God must ever remain vanity of vanities. By setting eternity in the human heart, God has ensured that that heart can never be filled or satisfied with things that belong to time alone. So Qoheleth anticipates St Augustine: 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in Thee.' On what better note could we bring our studies in the Wisdom Literature to an end? For the man who has learned this truth has learned the highest wisdom.

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Table of contents for ecclesiastes. Brief Explanation of the Technical Resources Used in the "You Can Understand the Bible" Commentary Series .i. New International Version New Jerusalem Bible Old Testament Passing Guide by Todd S. Beall, William A. Banks, and Colin Smith Revised English Bible Revised Standard Version The Septuagint (Greek-English) by Zondervan, 1970 Today's English Version from United Bible Societies Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Robert Young Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia (5 vols.), ed. Therefore, we must strive to understand the purpose of the whole biblical book before we interpret the individual literary units. Ecclesiastes is an example of Old Testament wisdom literature, and it's the fourth book of poetry in the Bible. While Psalms is a collection of songs and Proverbs is a collection of principles, Ecclesiastes is mostly long-form poetic discourse: it poses one main question at the beginning and spends the next twelve chapters arriving at an answer. The book never mentions its author by name: and it's important to note that the author is not necessarily the Preacher. The original Hebrew word for this role only shows up in Ecclesiastes, and probably refers to someone who assembles wisdom and teaches the people. So why is this book traditionally attributed to Solomon? The Preacher gives us a few clues: He is a son of David (Ec 1:1). Ecclesiastes written c. 450-200 BCE, is one of the "Wisdom" books of the Old Testament. The title is a Latin transliteration of the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Kohelet (also written as Koheleth, Qoheleth or Qohelet). The unnamed author introduces "Kohelet" as the son of David (1:1); he does not use his own voice again until the final verses (12:9-14), where he gives his own thoughts and summarises the statements of "Kohelet".