

KOHELETH – A SECULAR VIEW*

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IN the literature of the Judeo-Christian world, the book of *Koheleth* is among the first and most familiar expressions of what we think of today as the existentialist mind. More than any other text in the Old Testament, it is a human-centred work of observation, speculation and aphorism far nearer to philosophy than theology. No other biblical text so deals with human existence in terms of its meaning, purpose, duties and goals; no other book perceives the universe, even though it avows God as its creator and the cause of everything in it, as being so mechanistically obtuse to human concerns; while no other so spells out the human being's lot which is to be born, live out his life and die, with nothing that he may say, think or do diverting the elements of the universe by one iota from its circuits, or bringing anything new under the sun or, in the long haul, proving other than futile or absurd or vain.

Of course, the author Koheleth does not expect that a man's labours, pleasures, troubles or even prayers can have any effect on the sun, the rivers, the oceans or the wind moving in their circuits. Rather, in pointing to the cycles immutably following their ordered way oblivious to humanity on the ground, he is being every bit the artist consciously employing a literary device to dramatise to maximum effect a pained, cheerless, even tragic view of life. Against the infinity of the natural world, he is grieving over the finite and bemoans human oblivion, no less; he rues the ongoing extinction of all that a man has ever learned, done, aspired to, celebrated, fought for, created and loved in the days of his life; he deplores the fact that between a man's coming and departing on earth nothing new has been added under the sun; and he laments that even his quest to leave some signature in the world is vain. All that a man does is day-in day-out repetitive, routine, ephemeral and to no abiding purpose, while there are no signatures that may be left behind - not even by a philosopher-king who (and how this gripes him) must with the commoner face the same ignominious forgotten end.

As a philosophical position, this is all beguiling and powerfully seductive. The present writer was himself so seduced at a more vulnerable age, with Koheleth alongside Kafka, Sartre and Camus having had a formative and dangerously nihilistic influence upon him. But Koheleth grossly overstates his case, and the text does not accord with either immediate day-to-day or longer range historical reality.

While it is true that most of what takes place on earth is, in current parlance, ultimately trashed, a man may well leave behind veritable parts of himself and his labours: a name, for instance, a folklore, a discovery, an invention, a new religion, a philosophical school, or a wholly new stream of art, literature, music or architecture. This is demonstrably evidenced by King Solomon (identified by the text to be Koheleth himself), whom history records as creator of a greatly aggrandised empire centralised under his powerful rule, as architect of a formidable modernised army, instigator of a cultural and demographic transformation, and builder of a Temple and a royal palace, the effects of which endured long past his own time.

THE same authenticated reality, both then and since, puts paid to Koheleth's jaded if enticing mesmerising refrain, "There is nothing new under the sun." To allow him some benefit of any doubt, it may be said that in an essentially agrarian, pastoral and artisan society as existed in Solomon's time, little indeed may have seemed to change visibly from one day, or season or generation, to the next. Certainly the pace of change or appearance of new advances may have been slow. Hence, he may be forgiven the stress he places upon the prevailing sameness of things year after year of repetitive labour, of sowing and reaping, building and tearing down, waging war and making peace. But fact is that every generation is given to see genuinely new things under the sun - whether in times past in the harnessing of fire, the creation of the wheel, the devising of the catapult, the building of fortress cities or the erection of the Sphinx, or since then down to the present, through the creation of aqueducts, millennium-old pyramids, the astrolabe, the camera, the motor car, space exploration, quantum mechanics, the laser, the microchip or vaccines against smallpox and hepatitis (not to mention, more obviously, changing landscapes, cityscapes, shopfronts, streets, faces in the streets, and so on to the last possible detail). This may seem naive, but truth is that if the sun had eyes, it would, between any single transit across the world from sunrise to sunset, see new things continually taking place - and at what an exponential rate! - somewhere on its surface.

OSTENSIBLY written in the persona of one who himself made things happen and left new things under the sun, Koheleth's case is spurious. The tone of the text rings untrue. The book sits not at all well with the man of much-vaunted learning, wisdom, action, military prowess, contemplation and artistic refinement; a man so thoroughly involved in earthly affairs whose deeds, amply recorded, preserve him forever from historical oblivion. In our day, his major credos hold less forcefully than ever, if they are not in fact passé. It may well be true that to the making of books there is no end. But these are scarcely the stuff of the vanity he bemoans when so many of them - biographies, autobiographies, almanacs and encyclopaedias - are given precisely to preserving the past and recording the new. However, if

the text genuinely reflects the author's view, then if he is truly jaded, it is either because he has stopped looking rather than because there is truly nothing new to see, or he is in the hold of a black and brooding (arguably clinical) depression, or has possibly had a vision of death's abyss drawing ever nearer, these so distorting his view of lived reality that he can see only the bleak and be blinded to the redemptive.

RELECTING on this, it would be far more sane to listen to the physicist, say, or the astronomer, engineer, biologist, dress designer, and chef or to the writer, artist, composer and architect, all of whom are every day discovering or creating something new under the sun, than to any number of Koheleths. For, however repetitive and mundane as a man's daily labours may seem, yet does he advance knowledge, technology, taste, sensibility and spirituality and continuously push back the boundaries of the new, and bequeath a legacy to the future to assume the reins in its turn. More truly representative of earthly actuality than Koheleth's morose vision of cyclical changelessness and earthly ephemerality is that of the Greek Heraclitus: "One cannot step into the same river twice."

HAVING brought a Greek philosopher into this discussion, let us proceed from hereon along this newly opened path. While the book of Koheleth is by traditionalists and literalists attributed to King Solomon, contemporary scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish, tend with sound reason to date its composition to the mid-3rd century BCE.

One notable element of Koheleth's meditations is his prescription for right living which closes his work; a prescription identifiably in tune with the philosophic Hellenistic temper of the time in Greece, Alexandria and other cities in the Mediterranean Basin at the time. His "eat, drink and be merry" (8:15) almost replicates word-perfect the counsel for happiness and for wise and prudent living expressed by such Greek antecedents as Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE) and Epicurus (341-270 BCE). To Aristotle, for instance, happiness is a complete life, and happy is he who expresses complete virtue in his activities; while to Epicurus, it is a state in which one is neither hungry nor thirsty, in which one lives prudently, honourably and justly, and seeks calm communion with friends – a far cry from the stereotypic images of ancient Greek hedonistic abandon and high extravagance which, quite misrepresentedly, bear his name.

THIS is the sense in which Koheleth's counsel, too, may be taken. But what is striking about it is its distinct distance from all other biblical writings. Other than in *Koheleth*, one is much stretched to find anywhere a reference to a man's personal happiness being the prime and most desirable thrust in life. With the Torah being above all God's teaching, what Judaism commands is a total obedience to His laws and His will as its overriding directive. No two ways about it: "Thou shalt love God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and all thy might." (As an aside, with Koheleth hammering home the absurd seemingly purposeless repetitiveness of both natural events and human activity, he is at odds too with Judaism's seminal belief in the world's directed linear evolution towards eventual messianic perfection – but that is another subject altogether).

WHAT Koheleth does is to Judaize the Hellenistic happiness ideal prevailing in Greece, Alexandria and other Mediterranean cities where Jews lived around that time, doing so by integrating God in the work as a background given and appending to his counsel to eat, drink and be merry, the rider: "[and] fear God and keep His commandments: for that is the whole man" (12:13). Such ought to be a man's way of life, his motivation and his purpose. With that singular stroke, where Koheleth has until then, with a precarious veering towards nihilism, pounded home the vanity of all things, in the end he ventures a summary formula for right living pre-empting such modern-era religious existentialists as Soren Kierkegaard among Christians and Will Herberg among Hellenised or non-believing Jews in calling for a "a leap of faith". That same bridging stroke facilitated the book's acceptance into the Jewish scriptural canon, even if, like the Song of Songs allegorically interpreted, it won admission by the skin of its teeth.

This notwithstanding, accepting that Koheleth's counsel is apt in the circumstances, how untrue he is himself to that counsel! And doubly so. For, although he commends mirth, eating, drinking and merriment, there being no better thing under the sun, scant is the textual evidence that he himself derives any pleasure in them; while, although God laces his text throughout, Koheleth gives no sense that "fearing" Him and keeping His commandments bring him any observable pleasure, satisfaction, fulfilment or meaning to his life and his labours. Indeed, for one who supposedly trusts in God – such trust generally implying humble self-abnegation – Koheleth is not only wretchedly unhappy but also immodestly solipsistic in bemoaning his human lot.

THESSE quarrels with the book of *Koheleth* aside, to the secularist, the inclusion of God is immaterial to Koheleth's observations, meditations and guidelines for living. There is scarcely one verse that contains God that does not make sound sense without God, and the work reads not one jot less effectively as a fully secular text (confirmed to this writer when he once rewrote all of Koheleth omitting all theistic reference). Although Koheleth credits God with being the giver of life, labour, food, drink and pleasure, his say-so apart, he presents not one illustrative instance of God's intervention in human affairs which might implicate Him as a genuinely significant participant in the world (compare with God's personal revelation to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah); nor, unlike Job, does he reflect *why*, if God is in the world, is there such injustice, wasted wealth, wisdom and virtue, and why is all that men work at, and experience, enjoy, create, accumulate and rejoice over, even though he commends them, just a striving after wind. There is no sense that God's presence or absence – or God's existence or non-existence – would make any difference to the order of things. Which suggests – and is confirmed by all the evidence to be had on earth – that whatever directives Koheleth gives his readers, the negation of a deity does not preclude a man from living an intensely happy, useful, fulfilled and accomplished life, while worship of, and obedience to, a deity does not *ipso facto* guarantee one part of the same (*vide* Koheleth himself).

OF the two – the believer and secularist – the secularist probably has the harder task. The believer requires no persuasion; he knows his Master, his duties towards Him, his purpose; and, high-stationed or lowly, contented or beleaguered, he will manage his life in accord with God's will as he interprets it. For the secularist, however, spurning the believer's doctrinal certainties, religious guides for living – as distinct from humanist ethical ones – are denied him. By disowning supposedly divine directives, he must forge his own goals, purposes, values and meaning, and elaborate his own reasons for living and working and simply going on. Against this seeming difficulty, however, if it is meaning, purpose, duties and goals that a man is after, he need not look to the cosmos, to the sun, rivers, oceans and winds or to any god to find them. They are at his feet, on *terra firma*, lying squarely within the sphere of action in which he operates and not somewhere in some imaginary ether or wishfully fancied world to come. Down here, on earth, where a man's life counts most of all and where he has but one opportunity to make of that life the best he can, both for himself and for others – as

Koheleth himself rightly intimates (9:10) – he must (apart from eating, drinking and being merry) occupy himself *somehow*. Hence, even if the fruits of his planting are daily consumed, or the sources of his rejoicing run dry, or his invention becomes superseded, or his palaces crumble, or his name evaporates in time, there is none who from the sides may call his labours vain if they have yielded him the pleasure, gains, achievements and fulfilment he has wished for in his lifetime.

SO AT, drink and be merry – yes; but to do even this as a minimum a man must work and earn for himself the wherewithal for it. Regardless, therefore, of cosmic cycles, nature's circular patterns, human forgetfulness and Koheleth's melancholy dirge, the rightful way for the individual is (with all notions of absurdity, vanity, oblivion and God cast to the wind) to determine where his heart draws him most and then pursue what draws him with all his heart – a position that at once transcends and cuts across all contending theologies towards a common universal and individual good.



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