

The Contribution of Ecclesiastes to Biblical Revelation

Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes presents the Biblical scholar with a baffling range of problems. Not only are we faced with the common problems of date, authorship and historical background, here we are also confronted with the far more radical question of the meaning of the book as a whole and why it exists at all within the pages of Sacred Scripture. No other book in the entire Bible presents us with such acute problems.

In the book of Job there are similar tensions and wrestlings between the faith of the Old Testament saint and the brute facts of life in this world, but there at least we are allowed a glimpse behind the scenes; there we see that God is not the only power in the affairs of men but that Satan has real, if strictly limited, authority. Furthermore, in the book of Job the tensions between the harsh realities of life, and faith in a just and all powerful God, are not left completely unresolved: God does not leave Job in his perplexity, but appears personally upon the scene to answer Job and to extinguish his doubts by the manifestation of his almighty presence.

Again, in the Song of Songs we may have an entirely 'secular' book; but here, the theme of love, even sexual love, is not foreign to Old Testament faith, but is part of the affirmation that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." But in Ecclesiastes we have a 'secularism' which cannot be reduced to man's enjoyment of God's creation; here the world is a place of toil and death.

In Psalm 73 we have a similar complaint from the lips of a man of God. The world seems a place of manifest injustice and appears to exhibit no moral rule. But in this psalm, all doubt and complaint is quietened when the psalmist enters the sanctuary of God and perceives the end of the wicked. For the author of Ecclesiastes, the brute facts of existence cry out against the justice of God, but there is no divine answer. God remains hidden and silent and there is no place of meeting where doubt and tension can be resolved. In consequence, the things that the psalmist dared not say for fear of causing God's people to stumble (Ps 73:15), are here voiced openly and without any Divine answer to silence them in shame.

Why then is such a book to be found within the pages of the Old Testament? Is it an interloper which has only been included by historical accident, or does it have a proper place and function within the verbal self-revelation of God which is Scripture?

In this article we do not intend to look at the historical circumstances which surrounded the inclusion of this book in the canon of the Old Testament. We intend to tackle the question from the other end (so to speak). Here we shall seek to answer the questions, "What is the message of the book of Ecclesiastes?" and, "(How) does it speak to us as word of God?"

Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

Traditional Jewish interpretation regarded Ecclesiastes as the work of the aged Solomon, written to demonstrate the vanity of all that is earthly, both possessions and fleshly joys, and to demonstrate that the happiness of man consists in fearing God and obeying his commandments. This, in many modified forms (depending largely upon the amount of Platonism imported into the interpretation) became the standard Christian interpretation of the book. Gregory Thaumatergos wrote a paraphrase of the work, "to show that all the affairs and pursuits of men are vain and useless, in order to lead us to the contemplation of heavenly things." Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome followed with allegorical expositions. According to Jerome, the purpose of the book is to show the utter vanity of every sublunary enjoyment, and hence the necessity of betaking oneself to an ascetic life, devoted entirely to the service of God.¹

¹These quotations are taken from the introduction to the *International Critical Commentary on The Book of Ecclesiastes* by G.A.Barton

This interpretation, though again a little modified, was that adopted by the Reformers and became the common interpretation of the Protestant church. Luther argued that the main purpose of the book was to teach the vanity of earthly things and so direct man to faith in God. William Whitaker (1547-1595), one of the English Reformers, wrote that,

"In Ecclesiastes, Solomon does not allure men to enjoy the pleasures and blandishments of the world, but rather deters them from such pleasures, and exhorts them, with a divine eloquence, to despise and condemn the present world ... And so (after having disputed through the whole book against those who pursue these pleasures so greedily, and desire to satisfy themselves with such goods, whatever they are) he at the close teaches that happiness consists not, as so many suppose, in things of this kind, but in true piety, and thus concludes, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."²

This became the commonly accepted interpretation of Ecclesiastes among Evangelicals. John Wesley in the eighteenth century, having begun to preach from Ecclesiastes, writes in his *Journal* that it was, "all tending to prove that grand truth that there is no happiness out of God."³ In the last century, Charles Bridges wrote a commentary in which he interprets Ecclesiastes from this perspective. Bridges writes that the purpose of Ecclesiastes,

"is to bring out into clear view the chief good - the true happiness of man, *in what it does not consist* - not in the wisdom, pleasures, honours, and riches of this world - *in what it does consist* - the enjoyment and service of God."⁴

This same basic interpretation continues to be popular today among conservative scholars. E.J.Young summarises the message of the book thus:

"Life, however, in all its any aspects is completely without meaning apart from God. That is the grand theme of the book. Life apart from God can have no meaning, for God alone can give life meaning. To state the matter in a slightly different way we may say, God is the ultimate standard and point of reference by which every aspect of life must be interpreted. If man or the world be regarded as the ultimate standard and point of reference, all is vanity. All then becomes without meaning, and can only lead to despair. The only possible interpretation of the world then is to regard it as the creation of God and to use and enjoy it for His glory."⁵

And R.K.Harrison, writing of Ecclesiastes in his *Introduction to the Old Testament*, says that, "the basic proposition of wisdom, therefore, is that life in its manifold aspects is utterly devoid of meaning without God."⁶ Chester K. Lehman, in his two volume *Biblical Theology* argues that Ecclesiastes is Solomon's own evaluation of his sinful life, written after he had repented of it and turned back to God. It was written to warn against the deceptive pleasures of sin and to encourage fear of God and obedience to his commandments.⁷ Lastly, a similar view is advocated in Derek Kidner's book, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*, in which he argues that the author of Ecclesiastes (here called by his Hebrew title Qoheleth, 'the preacher', see 1:1), assumes the guise of a humanist to push this philosophy to its *reductio ad absurdum*. Kidner quotes with approval the verdict of G.S.Hendry in the introduction to Ecclesiastes in the *New Bible Commentary Revised*:

"Qoheleth writes from concealed premises, and his book is in reality a major work of apologetic... Its apparent worldliness is dictated by its aim: Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity. This is further borne out by

²*A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, Parker Society reprint, pp 31,32

³Entry for January 2nd 1777

⁴*An Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, 1960 Banner of Truth reprint of 1859 edition, p. xii.

⁵*Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 371

⁶p. 1083

⁷vol. 1, pp. 446-451

his characteristic expression, "under the sun", by which he describes what the NT calls "the world"... His book is in fact a critique of secularism and of secularised religion."⁸

So then, the traditional interpretation of Ecclesiastes argues that there are two elements to the message of this book. Firstly the author shows the vanity of earthly things. This he does either by recounting his past experience and disappointments, or, according to another view, by (hypothetically) putting himself in the position of one who experienced all that the world had to offer and yet found that none of these things could offer lasting satisfaction. Having described the vanity of the earthly, the author then turns to demonstrating that man finds satisfaction and meaning to his existence only in reverence towards God and obedience to his commandments.

Now it is our conviction that there are serious weaknesses with this interpretation. It does not appear to us that Qoheleth does use his observations on the vanity of the world as an apologetic or pre-evangelistic lever to encourage men to faith in God. The book never does turn from the theme of vanity to present us with an answering world view from the perspective of faith, neither does Qoheleth ever get round to telling us that, to the man of faith, the world is a place of satisfaction. Several commentators point out that the book begins with "vanity of vanities" and ends with "remember now your Creator", and "fear God and keep his commandments". They suggest that this demonstrates some progress in the author's argument, from the vanity of the world to faith in God. But this is to impose a structure upon the work which it really will not bear. In fact, apart from the epilogue (12:9-14), the work ends exactly as it begins, with "vanity of vanities says the Preacher, all is vanity" (12:8 as 1:2). Although the epilogue exhorting us to fear God and obey his law comes after this final cry of vanity, it cannot be supposed that this demonstrates an overall tendency to move from vanity to faith, for the final cry of vanity and the call to faith each permeate the whole work, they exist throughout, alongside one another so that the cry of vanity is not extinguished at the emergence of faith.

From these observations we draw two conclusions. Firstly, the affirmations of faith which occur throughout the book of Ecclesiastes cannot be seen as *answers* to the problem of the perceived vanity of the world. The problems raised in the mind of the author by the conditions of the world as he perceives them - problems with which he wrestles throughout the book - are not resolved by faith. The affirmations of faith and the problems of the world stand alongside one another and in tension with one another. In fact, as we shall see below, it is precisely this tension - the tension between faith and experience - which is the subject of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the above, it is quite incorrect to view the problem of vanity as a problem confined to the unbeliever, for the cry of vanity is not extinguished with the emergence of faith. It is therefore quite impossible to view these observations on the vanity of the world as pre-evangelistic arguments proving the vanity of all earthly things *without God*. The cry of vanity in the book of Ecclesiastes is a cry which proceeds from the man of faith; it is not the result of a (genuine or assumed) humanistic outlook upon the world, but is the response of the man of faith to the world in which he finds himself.

We shall return to examine these themes more closely below when we offer an alternative interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes.

A second, and rather different interpretation of Ecclesiastes is that presented by the commentator Franz Delitzsch in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*. Delitzsch acknowledges that the view of the world evidenced in Ecclesiastes is a view that proceeds from faith. However, he argues that this faith is Old Testament faith. God's revelation of himself has been progressive, and therefore, under the Old Testament, it was only partial. The author of Ecclesiastes had no knowledge of a future life, and this explains the pessimistic flavour of his book. The faith of the author of Ecclesiastes is limited faith. In the words of Delitzsch:

"The book of Koheleth is, on one side, a proof of the power of revealed religion which has grounded faith in God, the All-wise Creator and Governor of the world, so deeply and firmly in the religious consciousness, that even the most dissonant and confused impressions of the present world, are unable to shake it; and, on the other side, it is proof of the inadequacy of

⁸*New Bible Commentary Revised*, p. 570. Kidner, p. 23.

revealed religion in its O.T. form, since the discontent and grief which the monotony and confusion, and the misery of this earth occasion, remain thus long without counterbalance, till the facts of the history of redemption shall have disclosed and unveiled the heavens above the earth. In none of the O.T. books does the Old Covenant appear as it does in the Book of Koheleth, as "that which decayeth and waxeth old, and is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13). If the darkness of the earth must be enlightened, then a New Covenant must be established ... The finger of prophecy points to this new era. And Koheleth, from amid his heap of ruins, shows how necessary it is that the heavens should now soon open above the earth."⁹

Thus, while Delitzsch views the cry of vanity as a genuine cry of the man of faith, it is a cry which springs from partial revelation.

"A N.T. believer would not be able to write such a book as that of Job, or even as that of Ecclesiastes, without sinning against revealed truth; without renouncing the better knowledge meanwhile made possible; without falling back into the O.T. standpoint."¹⁰

The problem with this view of Delitzsch is that it sees the message of the book of Ecclesiastes largely in negative terms. In contrasting Ecclesiastes with the revelation which comes in the New Covenant - the revelation which is made known in Christ - he tends to make too strong a distinction between the content of Ecclesiastes and revelation as such. In what sense then is the book of Ecclesiastes revelation? In what way does it speak to us as word of God and not simply the confused testimony of man (albeit a man of faith)?

This leads us to a third interpretation of this book, which, for lack of a better term, we will call the liberal interpretation. According to this view, Ecclesiastes is precisely and wholly the word of man. Those statements within the book which seem to reflect orthodox belief (such as 2:26; 3:17; 4:5 etc., and especially the epilogue of 12:9-14), are not part of the original work since they represent a totally different philosophy; they are additions by later hands, inserted to make the book more acceptable to the orthodox reader.

Commentators of the critical school therefore argue that the author of the original work rejects the faith of his fathers and propounds a completely different world view or philosophy - perhaps with some dependence upon Greek thinking. R.B.Y.Scott in the *Anchor Bible* commentary on *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* is representative of this interpretation when he writes,

"In Ecclesiastes God is not only unknown to man through revelation, he is unknowable through reason, the only means by which the author believes knowledge is attainable. Such a God is not Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. He is rather the mysterious, inscrutable Being whose existence must be presupposed as that which determines the life and fate of men, in a world which man cannot change, and where all effort and values are rendered meaningless. Thus, in place of a religion of faith hope and obedience, this writer expresses a mood of disillusionment and proffers a philosophy of resignation. His ethic has no relation to the divine commandments for there are none. It arises rather from the necessity of caution and moderation before the inexplicable, an acceptance of what is fated and cannot be changed, and finally a grasping firmly the only satisfaction open to man - the enjoyment of being alive."¹¹

The original book of Ecclesiastes, purged of the more orthodox glosses, is therefore a purely human work - it makes no claim to be anything else. We may treat it as a fine piece of literature, even inspiring in a purely human sense, but when all is said and done it is no more than human. Robert Gordis combines such admiration for Ecclesiastes with a belief in its complete humanity when he sums up its message saying,

"This is a cry of a sensitive spirit wounded by man's cruelty and ignorance, this distilled essence of an honest and courageous mind, striving to penetrate the secret of the universe, yet

⁹op. cit. p. 184

¹⁰ibid. p.182

¹¹op. cit. p. 191

unwilling to soar on the wings of faith beyond the limits of the knowable, remains one of man's noblest offerings on the altar of truth."¹²

The only conclusion proper to this view is that drawn by Th. Vriezen when he writes, "One may love such parts of the Bible and admire them as classical monuments. psalm 137 is, humanly speaking, one of the most moving of psalms, Ecclesiastes a pearl of human wisdom, and the Song of Songs a delightful book; we should be loth to miss these elements in the collection of the OT writings, but one cannot call them a message, a revelation of God, or find in them a trace of that activity of the Holy Spirit which was revealed in Jesus Christ."¹³

Here then is the problem which faces us when we approach the book of Ecclesiastes: the cry of vanity cannot be considered an apologetic device by which the humanist or hedonist is to be persuaded of the error of his ways and prompted to faith in God and obedience to his commandments. But, if it is part of the central message of the book that the world really is a place of vanity, how can the book be treated as Scripture, part of God's revelation to man?

It is the purpose of this present study to propose an answer to this difficult question.

The Wisdom Literature and its Place within Special Revelation

Ecclesiastes is part of a larger body of literature within the Old Testament commonly called the wisdom writings or just 'wisdom'. Not only do we have the wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and perhaps the Song of Solomon, but wisdom material is also to be found within other books that make up the Old Testament. Some of the psalms are classified as 'wisdom psalms' (e.g. 49 and 73), and certain passages in the prophets (such as Isaiah 28:23-29 and 32:5-8), are also thought to have a wisdom background. Ecclesiastes must therefore first be viewed as part of this wisdom literature. If we are to answer the question of the function of Ecclesiastes within redemptive revelation, this cannot be done apart from the question of the character and function of wisdom literature within the Old Testament and the place and function of Ecclesiastes within the wisdom literature.

Wisdom is not an exclusively Biblical phenomenon but was a particular type of thought and of writing which was common to the world of the Ancient Near East. For a man's life to be prosperous and happy it is necessary that he should know something about the world in which he lives, the way in which it functions and the laws by which it is governed. The wisdom of the Ancient Near East is therefore not an abstract philosophy but a system of practical rules for life. It is concerned with the way in which a man must act in order to live well in the world and to prosper.

Wisdom therefore begins with careful observations on the world, the world of men and the world of 'nature', and through observation seeks to learn something of the way things work. At the most basic level, man observes that there are regularities in the processes of the world and that to prosper one must recognise these and conform one's behaviour to the demands of the physical world. So Proverbs 24:30-34 says,

I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgement;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and I learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest -
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

¹²*Koheleth - The Man and His World*, p. 132

¹³*An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, p. 89

The man who fails to tend the ground properly will fail to get a crop (see also Prov. 20:4, "A sluggard does not plough in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing."). The wise man observes the ways of the world and from these constructs rules for life such as, "he who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty" (Prov. 28:19).

That is not to say that wisdom is only concerned with material prosperity, for it has a far more profound view of that which constitutes life and well-being. Any pretended wisdom which is concerned only with material wealth is to be rejected, for it will only make man's life a misery as he seeks constantly for what he cannot obtain; as Proverbs 23:4-5 remarks,

Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
have the wisdom to show restraint.
Cast but a glance at riches and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off into the sky like an eagle.

There are certain things which are more valuable than riches, certain things which contribute more to man's well-being:

Better is a meal of vegetables where there is love
than a fatted calf with hatred. (Prov. 15:17)

and again,

Better is a dry crust with peace and quiet
than a house of feasting, with strife. (Prov. 17:1)

But Biblical wisdom is different from other wisdom of the Ancient Near East in that it does not stop at practical observations about life but dares also to make theological pronouncements. The Biblical wisdom writers stand from the standpoint of faith in the revealed word of God and depict true wisdom in terms of obedience to God's law. G.E.Wright comments:

International wisdom was radically shifted when it was brought into Israel. The good and the bad are not those who maintain or disrupt the harmonious integration of society as in Egypt, they are rather the righteous or upright and the wicked or foolish. A standard of evaluation is used which can only be the law of Yahweh. Yahweh is the true source of wisdom.¹⁴

For the Biblical wisdom writers, wisdom begins with the fear of God (Prov. 1:7) and is pursued by obedience to the law of God: the path of wisdom is the path of righteousness.

Moreover, the wisdom writers of the Bible affirm that the way of righteousness is the way of prosperity:

Yahweh's curse is on the house of the wicked
but he blesses the home of the righteous. (Prov. 3:33)

Solomon instructs his pupils in the way of godly wisdom saying,

Keep my commands in your heart,
for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity. (Prov. 3:1,2)

In making such affirmations, Biblical wisdom steps quite beyond the bounds of practical observations about the world to make clear statements of faith, the ground of which is nothing other than God's word of revelation. It was not through observation that the Israelites had concluded that there was some connection between obedience and prosperity, for all too often observation suggested quite the contrary (see Ps. 73:3-14 etc. where the complaint is precisely that the wicked prosper and the godly suffer). The basis of such affirmations is not experience but God's promise. Over and over again in the giving of the law God declares that the well-being of his people depends on their obedience (Lev. 26:14-16, 34,35; Deut. 4:1-4, 25-28; 5:33; 6:16-19; 11:16,17; 32:46,47; Josh. 23:11-13, 15-16; 1 Sam. 12:14; 1 Kings 11:11-13, 37-39; Ezra 9:12 etc.) This is part of God's revealed word and hence is part of the faith of the man of God. On this basis - on the ground of God's revelation - the wisdom writers affirm that the wicked shall not prosper, but that blessing is reserved for the righteous.

¹⁴*The God Who Acts*, p.103

The connection between the revelation of God in the law and the affirmations of faith of the wisdom writers is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Proverbs 2:20-22. Here Solomon is speaking of the benefits of attending to the voice of wisdom, and he says,

Thus you will walk in the ways of good men
and keep to the paths of the righteous
For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;
but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it.

The wise are the upright and their reward will be life in the land while the foolish - the wicked - shall be destroyed from the face of the earth. This is clearly an affirmation based on the redemptive promise of God in which the land of Canaan is promised to his faithful people, while disobedience is to be punished by loss of the land. The promise of the land is part of the redemptive revelation of God (see for instance Ex. 20:12).

To sum up this brief survey of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we see that Biblical wisdom is concerned with practical instruction on the way of prosperity, a prosperity not simply physical but encompassing every aspect of man's life and well-being. These practical instructions may broadly be divided into two types (though it is impossible to separate these two completely). On the one hand there are practical everyday observations concerning the way things happen in the world: the man who does not plough and sow his seed will go hungry in harvest time; wisdom therefore demands of a man that he work hard to prosper. On the other hand there are affirmations which are grounded not in observation or in everyday experience but are based upon God's revealed law: those who pursue wickedness shall find no profit in it, but those who pursue righteousness will prosper in the land. These two kinds of affirmations are woven together in Biblical instruction concerning the way of the world.

Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom Literature

It is commonly argued by those belonging to the critical school of interpretation that Ecclesiastes is rather different from the rest of the wisdom literature. Orthodox wisdom begins from the standpoint of faith in the revealed word of God, but the author of Ecclesiastes, we are told, looks at the world from a very different perspective:

He is boldly critical of the traditional orthodoxy of the wisdom schools. The tenor of his disquisition is not faith but discovery, the testing of the truth of a matter by reference to life and to experience.¹⁵

It is even suggested that the book of Ecclesiastes is a deliberate attempt to debunk the neat affirmations of orthodox wisdom by showing that the world simply does not live up to the orthodox theories.

The traditional conservative interpretation of Ecclesiastes is really little better on this point; here again, the world view expressed by Qoheleth in the greater part of his book is interpreted as the seeming vanity of the world *without God*. H.C.Shank has written an excellent article on the interpretation of Ecclesiastes called, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in his Recurring Phrases". In this article, Shank comments on the deficient interpretation of Ecclesiastes among conservative scholars:

Although these conservative writers have different emphases and methods of interpretation, they will all agree on one crucial ethical area, namely the situational perspective of Qoheleth. Qoheleth is a man who, though he does fear God and stresses the keeping of his commandments (12:13), looks at the world about him from the standpoint of reason that has very little relationship with his "blind faith" in the Creator.¹⁶

Shank is very critical of this approach, and in our view, rightly so.

It is our argument that the problems with which Qoheleth is wrestling are problems for him *precisely because he does view the world from the standpoint of faith*, from the same standpoint as orthodox wisdom. The confused state of the world and its circular processes are no problem to the polytheist:

¹⁵Rankin, *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5, p. 12a

¹⁶*Westminster Theological Journal*, vol.37, no 1 (1974), pp. 60,61

for him, such a world only manifests the conflict between the gods with their endless cycles of power and defeat. Neither is the state of the world a *moral* problem for the humanist: he might find it frustrating and wish that it were other than it is, but after all there is no reason why it should be any better; that's just the way things are. But the real problem occurs precisely for the man of God who believes the word and the promises of God. God has declared that the world is not just a jumble of contrary forces, it is ruled by him and is under his day to day control. God has declared that the affairs of men and the course of history are not arbitrary and without purpose but are actively being directed by him towards an end which he has ordained. It is precisely for the man who has faith in this revealed word of God that the world presents so many problems. All too often it does appear a jumble of forces, and man's lot does seem to bear little relation to his moral behaviour. The problem of the world, as it is portrayed in Ecclesiastes, is a problem which is experienced most acutely by the man of faith.

It is precisely against the background of faith in the sovereign God (such as is expressed in 2:26; 3:14,15; 5:7; 7:18; 8:11-13; 12:13), that Qoheleth tries to make sense of the world. God's word declares that man's state is morally conditioned, such that the way of righteousness is the way of prosperity, but Qoheleth finds that the world is a place of vanity where men gain no profit from their labour, and the righteous perish along with the wicked - and often sooner. God's word declares that the world is not ruled by amoral laws but by his active and holy power, but Qoheleth finds himself unable to comprehend the ways of God from the world in which he lives. The simple message of the book of Ecclesiastes is that the world is not what it ought to be - the times are out of joint. There is a profound disparity between the revealed word of promise and the realities which make up life in the world. Above all, the world is a place of hardship, toil, misery and death, evils that are visited upon all alike without reference to their righteousness or wickedness. Under this burden, wisdom finds itself perplexed; what can wisdom now declare about the way of prosperity? What can it say about the ways of God in the world?

In the face of the disparity between the word of promise and the realities of life, Qoheleth calls the faithful to accept their present state and to enjoy whatever blessings it brings as gifts from God (2:24,25; 3:12,13,22; 5:18-20; 6:6). Man's present duty is simply to fear God and to keep his commandments (12:13,14). This is not presented as any solution to the problems of the world, the disparity between promise and experience remains, but it *is* to live by faith in the face of present perplexity.

The traditional view of Ecclesiastes sees the book as a demonstration that, *without God*, the world can only be a place of vanity. This view fails to do justice to the real and agonising problem of the author. It might be very Platonic to argue that the world is a place of misery and imperfection and that one should therefore look to transcendent realities, but this is hardly Biblical. To the man of faith the vanity of the world is a tremendous anomaly: it is contrary to all that the world should be as God's creation; it is contrary to all that it should be according to the promise of redemption whereby God's faithful people are to enjoy prosperity in the land. The message of Ecclesiastes is that, to the man of faith, the world is a burdensome perplexity; it is an anomaly which burns deep into his soul.

In the book of Ecclesiastes there is no resolution to this problem. For a resolution we need to look to the rest of the Biblical testimony. It is only as we do this that we appreciate the place of Ecclesiastes in redemptive revelation.

The Place of Ecclesiastes in Redemptive Revelation

We have stated above that the problem of the world expressed in Ecclesiastes, the problem of the apparent contradiction between faith and experience, receives no resolution within the pages of that book. But that is not to say that the problem is not resolved within the total revelation which is Scripture.

It is our intention here to show how Ecclesiastes fits within the context of revelation and to show how it functions as part of God's word to man. In so doing, it must be recognised that we are no longer looking at the problems simply from the viewpoint of Qoheleth, neither is our solution one that was perceived and embraced by him. Nevertheless, we believe that if we are to understand what *God* is saying to us through this book then we cannot be satisfied only with the mind of the human author: the

book has to be understood within the broad sweep of the redemptive revelation contained in Old and New Testaments.

We believe that the message of Ecclesiastes is to be understood against the background of the narrative of the fall in Genesis three. In particular, in Genesis 3:17-19 God declares the punishment which man is to bear because of sin:

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life."

Here we notice that because of man's sin, God's curse is pronounced upon the earth. The earth is to mediate God's judgement upon man as its thorns, thistles and fruitlessness subject him to a life of profitless toil ending only in death.

The apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-24 speaks of the way in which the world presently groans under God's curse, but then goes on to speak of the day when the redemptive work of God will be complete and man and creation will be free from curse. Paul begins by speaking of the various sufferings which encompass the life of the Christian:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to vanity, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pain of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

Here Paul declares that the whole creation has been subjected to *vanity* by God. By this statement Paul can only be referring to the passage quoted above from Genesis 3. The creation is no longer what it was at the beginning, when God declared it to be very good; it is no longer what it was created to be. Creation groans under God's wrath and waits to be liberated. The redeemed man of God, by the Spirit (see v. 26) enters into the groaning of creation as he also waits for the consummation of redemption. The redeemed man knows that the world is not what it ought to be and he groans as he longs for the day when it will be renewed as the righteous dwelling place of God with his people. At present the redeemed find that there is a tension between faith and experience: by faith we look for a new heaven and a new earth which shall be the home of righteousness - this is anything but the world which we presently see around us.

The book of Ecclesiastes, in all probability, was written during a troubled period of Israel's history. The splendour of Solomon's kingdom had passed away and now the people of God were subject to the misrule of foreign powers (see particularly Hengstenberg's introduction in his commentary, *Ecclesiastes*). Qoheleth, as one who rests on the promises of God, feels the agony of God's people in bondage; their life in the earth is not what it ought to be according to the promise of God. But Qoheleth's complaint stretches far beyond the historical circumstances in which he lived, and thus it is relevant not only to his own age. It is a complaint against the very structure of the world as presently constituted; it is his complaint that even in Solomon's day the earth was not a place of unspoiled and paradisaical blessing. Creation is not as it ought to be is the pained cry of this man of faith.

From this, it is quite plain that Qoheleth, far from presenting us with a pagan or humanistic world view, looks at the world in profoundly Biblical terms. The theme of a world out of joint is not confined to the book of Ecclesiastes, it runs right through the Bible. The world at present lies under curse and is in bondage to vanity. It is this which makes it so different from the world that ought to be, the world that God created at the beginning. But at the same time, the world is not what it shall be at the last. The cry of Qoheleth is the cry of a man of faith living in a world under curse; his cry is one with the groaning of creation itself as it waits with longing for the consummation of God's redemption and the advent of the day of promise.

The groanings of a world subject to vanity, and of the man who feels the anomaly and burden of that vanity, do find an answer in the message of the Gospel. The vanity of this world is answered by the

Gospel promise, "not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). But this does not mean that the Christian, because he has the answer to this world's vanity, no longer groans under its burden. On the contrary, as we have seen from Romans 8, it is precisely the Christian man who must feel the vanity of the world most deeply. Sierd Woudstra makes this point well:

However, this New Testament period is not the final era either; it is an era of transition, standing midway between the shadows of the Old Testament and the full light of the age to come, and partaking to some extent of the characteristics of both. Even though Christ cried on the cross, "It is finished", all of the consequences of sin and the curse have not yet been fully removed; this will not happen until the second coming of Christ. Therefore Koheleth's question "what profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboreth under the sun?" still finds its echo, not only in the soul of the unbeliever but also in the souls of the children of God. In principle this earth and the works done on it have been delivered from vanity, but the full fruits of the redemptive work of Christ will not become manifest until the last day when this present earth with the works done on it will be purified by fire and become the new earth.¹⁷

The Christian stands beside Qoheleth, filled with pain at the sight of the creation presently suffering under man's sin and God's curse. He of all people knows that the world is not what it ought to be, and he longs for the day when vanity will be put away and curse will be no more.

In closing, we return for a moment to look again at the conservative interpretations which have been given to the book of Ecclesiastes. The traditional interpretation believed that the theme of Ecclesiastes was the vanity of all earthly pursuits without God. To a certain extent this *is* part of the message of this book. But as we have stated above, Qoheleth does not suggest that the vanity of the world is simply the experience of the God-less man and that the world is different for the man of faith. The fact is that the vanity of the world is not just its subjective appearance to the unbeliever, but is its objective state under the curse of God; this the man of God feels most keenly. The theme of Ecclesiastes is therefore not simply the vanity of all worldly pursuit without God, but rather the vanity of all worldly pursuit while the earth lies under God's curse. The traditional interpretation tended to assert that the purpose of the writer was to point us to God and to faith in him. In fact, the purpose of the writer is not expressed, but the result of his extended discourse on the vanity of the world *is* to turn us to hope in God's redemptive action, and to make us wait with longing, even groaning, for a world released from its bondage to curse, a world where the promise of God is perfected and justice is fulfilled.

A second interpretation of Ecclesiastes was that given by Delitzsch. Delitzsch argued that the pessimism of Ecclesiastes was evidence of the partial revelation of the Old Testament. Again, this view is not so much incorrect as it is only partially true. It must not be forgotten that Ecclesiastes has a revealed and not a 'natural' world view, neither must it be forgotten that the cry of vanity is just as much part of the New Covenant as it is of the Old (Romans 8:20); it remains the cry of the man of God until, with the return of Christ and the consummation of God's redemptive work, vanity is put away from creation. Nevertheless, there is a progression in the revelation of the redemptive work of God, and it is quite proper to see that the cry of vanity receives its answer in the work of Christ. But the theme of Ecclesiastes is not thereby the insufficiency of Old Testament revelation, but rather the hopeless confusion and emptiness of the world under curse, and the desperate need for redemption and liberation.

Ecclesiastes is part of the Old Testament and speaks to us not merely as the voice of man but as the word of God. Qoheleth, perhaps unconsciously, expounds for us in the most powerful way what it means for man to live under the curse of God - that is, for man to live in this present world. His writing does not contradict the rest of Scripture but enriches and augments its teaching. It is true that within the compass of redemptive revelation the function of this book is largely negative, yet it is none the less revelation, and revelation which we need to hear. All too easily the faith of the Christian can slip into the simplistic assertion, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world" - all the more easily for western man in comfortable middle-class society. Qoheleth calls us back from such naiveté to a more realistic, and at the same time more profoundly Biblical view of life in this world - a world under curse, a world subject to vanity. Qoheleth calls us to feel the burden of the fact that this world is not

¹⁷*Koheleth's Reflections upon Life* (Unpublished M.Th. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959) pp.101,102

what it ought to be, and he prompts us to look with renewed longing for the day when our Lord Jesus shall return from heaven and our bodies, and this world, at present subject to vanity, corruption and death, shall at last be changed, renewed and decked with glory.

History

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