

QOHELETH'S WORLD AND LIFE VIEW AS SEEN IN HIS RECURRING PHRASES

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WITHIN the scope of Old Testament ethical problems falls the viewpoint of Qoheleth, or the Preacher, of Ecclesiastes. A superficial reading of the book reveals a man who definitely has a negative viewpoint of life in its many facets. If indeed the book is a unity, composed by one wise man, then the theme of pessimism or cynicism becomes a suggested option. But the ethical questions arising from such an understanding of the book become crucial. Can a thoroughly pessimistic view of life have any place in the canonical books of Scripture? What exactly is the goal of Qoheleth's ethics? Further, what does the God of Qoheleth really have to do with his life and standards of conduct? Again, does not the recurring theme of "there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (cf. 2:24; 3:12,13, etc.) denote a sort of Epicurean sentiment?

A. QOHELETH'S ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE: CRITICAL VIEWS

Of course the modern critics of the Bible have seized upon the pessimism-cynicism suggestion with a vengeance. Morris Jastrow has suggested that the book teaches an ethical cynicism, where, in the face of no real goal to life, good humor is still to be maintained.¹ A popular view, held until recently, noted the phrase "Vanity of vanities" and attempted to draw certain parallelisms in thought and perspective between Qoheleth's notion of "vanity" and Heraclitus's view that "all is flux".² However, most critical

¹ Cf. Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1919).

² Cf. Carl Knopf, "The Optimism of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XLIX (1930), 195-199.

scholars today reject this argument as unconvincing. The recognized modern critical writer, G. Von Rad, has related the book to a supposed stage in Israel's religious evolution at which "belief in Yahweh's action in history grew weak" and Ecclesiastes "fell back on the cyclical way of thinking common to the East."³ D. Kidner comments that Von Rad's argument rests on "precarious assumptions". Along with the questionable premise that the thinking of the Ancient Near East was "cyclical", the dating of the book still remains too much of an open question to make definite conclusions concerning the strength of belief "in Yahweh's action in history".⁴

R. B. Y. Scott, in the *Anchor Bible* series, suggests the following concerning Qoheleth's ethic:

His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none. It arises rather from the necessity of caution and moderation before the inexplicable, on the acceptance of what is fated and cannot be changed, and finally on grasping firmly the only satisfaction open to man -the enjoyment of being alive. The author is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist and a fatalist (the terms are not used pejoratively !).⁵

Scott adds that Qoheleth teaches "philosophical nihilism" and has no real "religious" point of view. In response to such a characterization of Qoheleth's ethics, we note that Scott, along with Von Rad, assumes the non-Christian ethical construct of a God, hidden behind an "impenetrable veil", and One who can offer no clear revelation to Qoheleth. Qoheleth's "God" is the Great Unknown of neo-orthodox theology.⁶ Qoheleth's wisdom lay in "recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and

³ G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 454.

⁴ Derek Kidner, "Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament," *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (Waco: Word Books, 1970), p. 125.

⁵ R. B. Y. Scott, *Qoheleth*, in the *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 191-192.

⁶ This is substantially true of the view expressed in G. A. Buttrick, et al. (eds.), *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. V (New York: Abingdon, -1956), p. 22: "He (Qoheleth) does not doubt the existence and sovereignty of God, but his God is absentee, lost in the distance, not only apparently careless of mankind but at variance with it."

power"⁷ affirms Scott. Consequently, man cannot have an absolute good in the universe; he must remain satisfied with the *relative* good found in "relishing being alive".⁸ It does seem that Scott relies upon some kind of Kantian noumenal-phenomenal distinction at this point. At the very least, his scheme is based upon a faith-knowledge dialectic where Qoheleth's faith (if he possesses any) has nothing to do with his intellectual comprehension and explanation of the world about him.

Is indeed the goal of Qoheleth's ethics some deterministic yet strangely "hidden" and silent Elohim-God, who barely resembles Israel's covenant Yahweh? Is Qoheleth's situation that of an ethical dilemma arising from hopeless pessimism? Must we finally agree with the non-Christian ethical view that since it is hopeless and foolish to look for perfection in this world and since, after all, God and man on Qoheleth's model are subject to certain limitations it is best to seek to improve conditions to some extent, at least? Must we conclude that man should enjoy himself (2:24; etc.) and work with all his might (9:10), whatever God may say?

B. QOHELETH'S ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE: CONSERVATIVE VIEWS

In response to critical views, evangelicals have attempted in various ways to justify Qoheleth's seemingly negative attitude about life. For the most part, they have recognized the distinctively recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes.⁹ However, it seems to me that they have not really dealt honestly with them.

Leupold analyzes the phrases "under the sun", "vanity of vanities; all is vanity", and suggests that Qoheleth deliberately concerns himself only with the things of this world. Revelation and the world to come are, for the sake of argument, temporarily ruled out. It is by this "as if" technique that Leupold explains Qoheleth's seemingly negative outlook on the world.¹⁰ Actually,

⁷ Scott, p. 206.

⁸ Ibid., p. 196.

⁹ There are six of these recurring phrases in the book of Ecclesiastes; the phrases and Scriptural references are listed in this section.

¹⁰ This is especially apparent in H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1952), pp. 92-93.

however, Qoheleth really does "fear God and keep his commandments."

Even Hengstenberg, though he has some valid penetrating remarks on the message of Ecclesiastes, points out that the theme, or themes, are difficult to delineate. In fact the whole book, including these recurring themes, is "unintelligible except on the historical presupposition that the people of God was in a very miserable condition at the time of its composition."¹¹ The Persians held dominion over the people of God. They were in a state of deepest misery and had consequently fallen prey to vanity. The radiant glory of Solomon's day was no more (1:12-18), and this was a time of persecution.¹² The date of composition was either contemporaneous with or after the time of Malachi. Thus, Qoheleth, in demonstrating the utter vanity of this life, would enable the people to appreciate fully the "fear of God" and "what a precious treasure man has in God".¹³ Yet, even if one accepts a late, post-exilic dating and non-Solomonic authorship, both of which are unsettled in scholars' minds, what about the seemingly "obvious" tone of resignation demonstrated over and over again in these phrases? Even on the historical construct of Hengstenberg and others they may still seem to portray Qoheleth as a man of "questionable" or "confused" ethics.

The frankness of the introductory note to the Scofield Bible concerning the recurring phrases and the entire book plays havoc with conservative "glossing over" or "dressing up of" the thought of Qoheleth.

This is the Book of man 'under the sun', reasoning about life; it is the best man can do, with the knowledge that there is a Holy God, and that He will bring everything into judgment . . . Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man's.¹⁴

The spectre of pessimism once-more appears on the horizon of Qoheleth's thought.

Although these conservative writers have different emphases

¹¹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Smith, English, and Co., 1860), p. 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Quoted in J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *The Evangelical Quarterly* (1946), pp. 20-21.

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. A distinct dichotomy between faith and reason can be clearly seen in Leupold, Delitzsch, and Scofield when they deal with the recurring phrases. Even Hengstenberg does not totally escape this faith-reason dialectic. He mentions that Qoheleth's pervasive use of the name Elohim shows that "the problem before the writer is considered from the point of view of Natural Theology with the aid of experience, and of reason as purified by the Spirit of God."¹⁵ Finally, Sierd Woudstra, who criticizes Leupold for his nature-grace dichotomy in interpreting Qoheleth's thought, falls into speaking of two concurrent lines of thought prevalent in Qoheleth: "Kohleth is on the one hand dealing with life as he observed it, while on the other hand he knew and was convinced by faith that things were different."¹⁶

However, Woudstra here raises an important issue in the interpretation of the ethical perspective of Qoheleth. If there does exist a distinction here, that distinction is not between faith and reason but between faith and sight, i.e. between "faith~" (that comes from special revelation) and that revelation presently available to any natural man as he perceives the creation about him. Of course, such a distinction can be seen in the New Testament record (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; Acts 14: 15-17; Acts 17:22-31). But, in what sense and to what degree is such a "distinction" relevant to Qoheleth?

To begin with, Qoheleth was not merely a theologian working from the construct of "natural theology" who then attempted to understand God's creation without the interpretative key of special revelation. As we shall demonstrate later, he looked upon life and the world from the perspective of an Old Testament believer who had understood the reality of the curse of God placed upon life "under the sun" in Gen. 3. Hence, Qoheleth's

¹⁵ Hengstenberg, p. 26.

¹⁶ Sierd Woudstra, "Kohleth's Reflection Upon Life," (unpublished Th. M. Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959), p. 38. Notice Woudstra's evaluation of Leupold on p. 106.

wisdom and knowledge of this world was not merely that of a propositional and sense-experience sort. He approached the world and the life-situation by presupposing a Creator God who had indeed revealed Himself in creation, in the fall and in the subsequent history of redemption. He stood in a culture which knew Yahweh and the world about them in terms of direct revelation given through the Law and the Prophets. Consequently, his knowledge of anything must presuppose his knowledge of God, which sprang from a proper attitude of the fear of God. Thus, Qoheleth's "faith" and "sight" were not something wholly distinct from and independent of each other (cf. below, Phrase 4).

But also, they do not *oppose* one another in the book of Ecclesiastes. The historical-redemptive *antecedents* of Qoheleth's sight-perspective find their point of reference in the fall and curse of Gen. 3. Intimations to such a reference-point are found in an exposition of some of his recurring phrases and their contexts (cf. below, Phrase 1, Phrase 4). Moreover, the twin-idea of all men being "of dust" (3:20; 12:7) and "turning or returning to dust again" (3:20j)"to the earth as it was" (12:7) when they die, no doubt has its primary reference in Gen. 3: 19: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return."¹⁷ Further, the *consequences* of Qoheleth's sight-perspective merely drive him to acknowledge that wisdom resides in fearing God and keeping His commandments (12:13). Consequently, any claim that Qoheleth's ethic falls into the imperfect ethical thought of the Old Testament and that we must therefore expect some sort of faith-reason, or rather faith-sight, dichotomy cannot be maintained.

Yet, in another sense, since Qoheleth does refer back to the

¹⁷ Comparing the Hebrew of Gen. 3:19 with Ecc. 3:20 and 12:7 we notice some interesting syntactic parallels:

שֵׁב אֶל-הָעֵפֶר	(Ecc. 3:20)
אֶל-עֵפֶר תָּשׁוּב	(Gen. 3:19)
וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעֵפֶר אֶל-הָאָרֶץ	(Ecc.12:7)
אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה	(Gen. 3:19)

Hengstenberg maintains that the foundation of Ecc. 3:20 is found in Gen. 3:19 (op. cit., p. 118) while allusion is made to Gen. 3:19 in Ecc. 12:7 (cf. p. 253.).

fall and the resultant curse, he like Paul in Acts 14 (cf. Acts 17 and also Rom. 1) makes a case that is largely restricted to that revelation made available by the Creator God to all natural men who live in the light of the fall. Qoheleth gives the natural man an astoundingly lucid description of what he can behold in this world and his life which should drive him to seek God and His self-revelation in Jesus Christ. To demonstrate this we notice two points.

First of all, to the Lycaonian Gentiles Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14: 15ff. restrict their case to that revelation available to these people in the Creator God (vs. 15) providentially giving them "rains and fruitful seasons filling your hearts with food and gladness." (vs. 17) F. F. Bruce suggests that the imagery here is drawn from several Old Testament texts, one of which Ecc. 9: 7 (cf. below, Phrase 5).¹⁸ This "gladness" was a gift God to these Gentiles by which they should have discerned His rule over them.¹⁹ It was therefore foolish and vain them to attempt to perform that worship before Paul and Barnabas which, by the light of even natural revelation alone, belonged only to the Creator.

Then, also, the theme of foolishness for unregenerate men not recognizing the "power and divinity" of the God of the creation in which they live and move is brought out clearly in Rom. 1: 18ff.²⁰

¹⁸ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: 1954). The term for gladness (εὐφροσύνη) is used in the of Ecc. 9: 7 and translates פִּנְיָ. Other possible references to Old Testament imagery for vs. 17 are Ps. 4:7 and Is. 25:6. At the very least, the Apostles may be alluding to the passage in Ecc. 9:7.

¹⁹ "This εὐφροσύνη can also be gratefully understood as the gift of God by which even the heathen may discern his providential rule, Acts 14:17." (R. Bultmann, article on εὐφροσύνη / εὐφροσύνη, Vol. II, TWNT, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 774.

²⁰ M. D. Hooker maintains that Paul in Rom. 1: 18-32 had the figure of Adam in mind: "In these verses he deliberately described man's predicament in terms of the biblical narrative of Adam's fall. Not only does the language of this section echo that of Gen. 1 :20-6 but the sequence of events is reminiscent of the story of Adam in Gen. 1-3." (M. D. Hooker, "A Further Note on Romans 1," *NT Studies* 13 (Jan., 1967), p. 181; cf. also his "Adam in Romans 1," *NT Studies* 6 (1959-1960), pp 297-306). C. K. Barrett develops this thesis in *From First Adam to Last* (London, 1962, pp. 17-19) and claims that the moral wickedness described in Rom. 1 is the direct result of the Fall.

These unrighteous acts of the Gentiles in the light of God's natural revelation proceeded not from a mere deficiency in mental capacity but from moral obtuseness, or foolishness (vs. 22).²¹ Again, F. F. Bruce points out that the term used by Paul for "fool" probably refers back to the "fool" of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.²² Here we have a tie-in with Qoheleth's exposition in Ecclesiastes. As natural men observe the creation about them there are only two possible options for a philosophy of life. One is to claim the "wisdom" of this world and thus become fools in the sight of God. The other is to recognize the stark reality of the picture Qoheleth paints for him and to heed the command, "Fear God and keep His commandments" (cf. below, Phrase 6). True wisdom resides in this alone.

Before we consider the recurring phrases, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks on the method of interpretation of Qoheleth's ethic in these phrases. To begin with, we should attempt to understand the book in the apparent way Qoheleth has composed it. He has done so by using certain phrases which occur over and over again throughout the twelve chapters. I think that J. Stafford Wright has a valid hermeneutical principle in mind when he suggests that examination of these recurring phrases reveals, at the very least, Qoheleth's thought in the immediate context of the book.²³

Secondly, Qoheleth's directive in 12:13 and the remark in vs. 14 skilfully summarizes and concludes his whole ethical

Finally, Robert Haldane in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Banner, 1960) notes that the wrath of God "was revealed when the sentence of death was first pronounced, the earth cursed and man driven out of the earthly paradise. . ." (P. 55).

We might therefore be able to draw a redemptive-historical link between the Fall/Curse, Qoheleth and Paul in Rom. 1 and hence in Acts 14 and 17.

²¹ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Romans*, Tyndale Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). Calvin says that impiety here should be joined to unrighteousness (Commentary on th'e Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, p. 68).

²² Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans*. He also notes that parallels exist between later Israelite Wisdom Literature (cf.. Wisdom 12-14). Hooker (op. cit.) make a similar point in his exposition of this section.

²³ Wright, op. cit., p. 22 has a rather uncritical way of suggesting this hermeneutical principle. Nevertheless, I feel he has a valid principle in mind.

stance. Qoheleth's ethical integrity is grounded in the practice of the fear of God along with the keeping of His commandments, and however we analyze the rest of the book we must not contravene Qoheleth's own ethical conclusion.

Third, we must remember that Ecclesiastes appears in the broader context of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. That literature, though similar in some formal characteristics with other Ancient Near East Wisdom Literature, cannot be identified with it in its ethical perspective. Qoheleth's wisdom has its foundation clearly laid in the fear of the Lord.

Finally, we must understand Qoheleth's ethical perspective in the general context of the rest of the Old Testament and in the light of the One who embodied this wisdom in the New Testament, even Jesus Christ. We affirm that Qoheleth does not disagree with other Old Testament thought. Rather, he writes in the context of the doctrines of the fall and man's sin. He does not dispute their revelatory character and relevance to his situation; he assumes their validity for his life and world view. Also, he looks forward in hope to the New Testament in his doctrine of the fear of the Lord and the coming judgment of the secret thoughts of man.

C. QOHELETH'S ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE IN LIGHT OF THE RECURRING PHRASES

1. Phrase 1: "All is vanity" or "This is vanity"
(1:2, 14; 2:1,11, 17, 26, 15, 19,21,23; 3:19;
4:4, 8, 7, 16; 5:7(6), 10(9); 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15;
8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8 repetition of 1:2)

This phrase is the most dominant and pervasive of all the recurring phrases in Ecclesiastes. Hengstenberg disagrees with those who would attempt to make this phrase the one theme of the book since it does not sufficiently explicate some of the other material in the book. Yet its dominance in Qoheleth's thought renders it a key to the interpretation of life "under the sun".

Woudstra states the main exegetical question concerning this class of phrases well:

Is Koheleth only saying that man's accomplishments under the sun are transitory in character, are devoid of any perma-

nence, or is he saying that human existence and everything that goes with it is futile and meaningless?²⁴

The latter, Leupold holds, gives the term *hebel* (הבל) a pessimistic connotation not warranted by the facts.²⁵ He claims that the term refers to "that which is fleeting and transitory and also suggests the partial futility of human effort."²⁶ Woudstra, on the other hand, opts for the latter description of *hebel* and denies that this implies a pessimism that the critics would like to see here.

A thorough study of the word in the contexts mentioned above reveals that the term takes on different connotations in different contexts. Theophile Meek says that "in this short book, *hebel* would seem to be used in at least five different senses: 'futile' (most frequent, e.g., 1:2), 'empty' (e.g., 6:12), 'sorry' (e.g., 6:4), 'senseless' (e.g., 8:14), and 'transient' (e.g., 11:10)."²⁷ He therefore proposes that the term takes on different meanings in different contexts. With respect to other Old Testament literature, *hebel* can refer to that which is "unsubstantial, evanescent" as far as a basis for religious trust is concerned (cl. Jer. 1:15; 51:18; 16:19). In Ps. 39:4ff, man is in a "turmoil over vanity" (vs. 6), over the labor to attain breaths of wind. His "precious things" cannot endure because they partake of the nature of "vanity".

The power of Meek's suggestion in the immediate context of Ecclesiastes lies in the fact that it seems to give the term the flexibility of connotation that Qoheleth evidently employs in these recurring phrases.²⁸ Different "aspects" of the idea of vanity are employed by Qoheleth to vividly illustrate the reality of the curse of God placed upon the work of man after the Fall (cl. Gen. 3: 17-19). Therefore, an attempt to find a "static" meaning to *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, as Woudstra and others do, fails to take note of the richness of the concept as used by Qoheleth. Those aspects which are available to every man, and from

²⁴ Woudstra, p. 38.

²⁵ Leupold, p. 41.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Theophile J. Meek, "Transplanting the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 79 (1960), p. 331.

²⁸ Note also the variability of connotations in the use of the term **עלם** in Ecclesiastes: 1:4; 3:11, 14; 9:6; 12:5.

which none can entirely escape, are a life and labor that are wearisome (cf. Job. 7:3), filled often with sorrow and pain (cf. Job. 3: 10; Ps. 25: 18; 73:16)²⁹ and will only end up in physical at the very least. Also, Qoheleth tells us that this created partakes of the character of "vanity" (cf. 7: 15 ; 9:9). Yet, man's effort in this context is given to him as a gift of God (3:13,14; 6:2). Therefore, natural man cannot claim that his efforts are "meaningless" or that the situation in which he finds himself forces him to sin, since God made labor a good gift. It is the fear of God alone and the keeping of His commandments which can give men the ability to enjoy this gift of labor. Yet, Qoheleth's faith does not change the character of a created order which now partakes of the character of vanity (cf. Rom. 8 and below). Consequently, excruciating moral problems do exist for Qoheleth because the ground after the curse brought on by the becomes an occasion for temptation.

2. Phrase 2: "under the sun" (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 8:9, 15, 17: 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5)

This second phrase forms the immediate context of a world which has the constitution and course of "vanity". It has reference to the place where the toil of man occurs and is tantamount to **עַל־הָאָרֶץ** (cf. 8:14, 16; 11:2). Notice that this phrase is unique to Qoheleth.

3. Phrase 3: "striving after wind" (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9)

With the exception of 4:6 this expression is always joined to the phrase containing the word "vanity". A man may determine or make up his mind to accomplish something eternally significant in a creation subjected to vanity, yet no matter how hard he tries Qoheleth tells him it will be a fruitless endeavor (cf. 1: 14 and use of n'~'). A man in his toil "under the sun" grasps after the wind and attains precious little for all his labor.

²⁹ Even as early as Gen. 4:2 in the history of redemption Eve was overcome by the discovery of the vanity of this earthly life. This is expressed in the naming of "Abel": **הַבֵּל וַיְהִי־הֵבֶל רֶחֶק**.

4. Phrase 4:

- (a) "I perceived" (1:17; 2:14; 3:22)
- (b) "I said in my heart" (2:1, 15; 3:17, 18; 9:1)
- (c) "I gave my heart to consider" & variations (1:13, 17; 2:3; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1)

Most interpreters have more or less considered this class of phrases as indicative of a thoroughgoing research activity, primarily involving mental conception of various empirical facts. Leupold maintains that these phrases merely indicate an experiment of Qoheleth in rational thinking, thinking that, for the time-being, is unaided by enlightened reason and revelation from God.³⁰ As noted above, Hengstenberg would disagree with Leupold's conjecture and claim that this class of phrases demonstrates Qoheleth's enlightened reason operating in the sphere of natural theology. But again, revelation has very little to do with Qoheleth's perception of this world of vanity.

However, we must maintain, contrary to the majority of critical and conservative commentators, that Qoheleth's perception as indicated in this class of phrases refers to a knowledge which is a "reflex-action" of his fear of God and which penetrates to the essence of the meaning of what this world of vanity is all about. Surely, Qoheleth does perceive the vanity "under the sun" which does not exclude the intellectual element of knowledge of these things. Yet that perception also includes a deep, spiritual insight into the effects of the curse of God upon life and labor "under the sun".

Two very common Hebrew words (יָדַע and רָאָה) are used to denote the sight-action involved here. Commenting on 1:17, Delitzsch notes that ". . . *daath* is knowledge penetrating into the depth of the essence of things, by which wisdom is acquired and in which wisdom establishes itself."³¹ However, he distinguishes between this "type" of knowing and the "intellectual" experience recorded in verse 16 - "my heart hath seen (MN1) wisdom and knowledge in fullness." "The seeing here

³⁰ Leupold, p. 55.

³¹ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970 reprint), p. 230.

ascribed to the heart is meant of intellectual observation and apprehension. . ."³² As to **עֵד**, Qoheleth uses it to refer to a spiritual perception (cf., for example, 3: 12, 14; 8:5; 9:12:10: 14; 11:2,5). In 7:25f. notice that spiritual conception arising from *revelation*, not from experimental data, intellectually found and studied, accounts for the acknowledgment of the truth in vs. 29: "God made man upright." Indeed, a man's own reasoning ability functions in the context of vanity too (cf. 8: 16, 17) !

But, furthermore, the distinction which Delitzsch (and others) makes between the **רָאָה**-seeing and the **עֵד**-seeing cannot be sustained either on general Christian-theistic anthropological grounds or on specific exegetical grounds in Ecclesiastes.

As to the latter consideration, we recognize the close tie between **רָאָה** and **עֵד** in 6:3-6. In verses 3 and 4 Qoheleth states that even an "untimely birth" comes and goes in the context of vanity just as a man who lives many years (vs. 3) lives in the context of vanity. On that consideration there is no difference. However, what is better about this "untimely birth" than the long-lived man without a burial and without "his soul being filled with good" is that at least this child "hath not seen the sun nor known it" (**שָׁמַשׁ לֹא רָאָה וְלֹא יָדָע**). A purely "intellectual perception" of life under the sun and a deeper, spiritual perception are brought so close together grammatically that they are interdependent.

Secondly, in this class of phrases we have Qoheleth using the term **בְּלִבִּי** (**καρδία** in LXX), "I said in my heart, etc.". While Leupold relates all of these sayings to the realm of empirical experiences, Qoheleth does not do so. Rather, Qoheleth employs the bond that exists between religion and ethics which is found in the Wisdom Literature's concept of "heart". Yes, it is true that the will, aims, principles, thoughts, and intellect of man are found in the heart (cf. Provo 18:15; Job 8:10; Jer. 23:20; 11:20). Yet, also, the "heart" describes the whole person (Ps.

³² Delitzsch reasons thus: ". . .for all perception, whether it be mediated by the organs of sense or not (as prophetic observing and contemplating), comprehends all, from mental discernment down to suffering, which veils itself in unconsciousness, and the Scripture designates it as seeing" (Ibid.) Much of this comment seems to proceed from his particular view of psychology, which tends to break up the psycho-physical unity of man into artificial compartments.

22:26; Prov. 23:15f, etc.) and in it dwells the "fear of God" (cf. Jer. 32: 40). How can Qoheleth, out of an ethic dominated by the fear of God, look on the world solely from an intellectual, empirical sense that is somehow to be distinctly differentiated from "heart" consideration of the world? Surely, Qoheleth perceives this world of vanity from the "unity and totality of the inner life represented and expressed in the variety of intellectual and spiritual gifts."³³

5. Phrase 5: "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (2:24; 3:12, 13; 3:22; 8:15; 5:18, 19; 9:7, 9)

It has been claimed by the critics that Qoheleth here expressed his "questionable ethic" by approving of some form of Epicureanism. However, the six occurrences of this phrase support nothing of the sort. In His gracious wisdom God has given Qoheleth the insight to a proper understanding of how man is to labor in light of the curse. True, it is hard work, and the ground does not easily give its riches to man. Yet man's attitude in all his labor should be to rejoice in it (8: 15) and work with all his might. This is what belongs to man in the context of vanity (3:22).³⁴ In the midst of life's confusion mankind receives a call from God to rejoice. In this redemptive-historical "time of ignorance" when God patiently "suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways" (cf. Acts 14, 17) Qoheleth counsels all men as to their labor before their Creator.

Therefore the readers are not led into some Epicurean work-ethic or "to the desperate attempt. ..to snatch what they can while there is still time."³⁵ This toil cannot endure for eternity since it takes place "under the sun". Hence, the ozm"se reader will see that that which abides is the eternal work of God (3:11, 14, 15) and that all men must place their fear in Him alone (3: 14 ; cf. 2:22-26) and not in their vanishing works done under the

³³ Notice the article on ~«Q~(1 by Baumgarten and Behm in *TWNT*, Vol. III, ed. G. Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 609-610.

³⁴ מַלְאָכָה man's due or his portion.

³⁵ F. N. Jasper, "Ecclesiastes: A Note for Our Time," *Interpreter*, 21 (1967), p. 265.

sun. In this very practical situation there is truly "nothing better" for a man to do than to rejoice in what God has providentially given him (cf. I Sam. 27: 1) .

6. Phrase 6: Instances employing some variation of "fear God" (5:7; 12:13; 3:14; 7:18; 8:12, 13)

If we ask ourselves why it is that Qoheleth possessed an unusually keen perception (cf. Phrase 4) of the actual condition of man and his world (cf. Phrases 1-3) and yet understood his role in that context of vanity (Phrase 5), we must reply that Qoheleth practiced the fear of God. In that fear he found wisdom and knowledge and hence could understand the fall and its effects "under the sun" (Prov. 1:29; 2:5; 1:7; 9:10).

With respect to ethics, Qoheleth found the fear of the Lord the foundation of his faith and practice in a world in which human wisdom is limited. His keenness of insight and exceeding fruitfulness of thought was ensured by his fear of God. That fear also ensured the integration of the theoretical and the practical in Qoheleth's perception of this world subjected to vanity. Indeed, we have noted this in the examination of the fourth class of recurring phrases. Therefore Qoheleth's God was not some "hidden" Great Unknown who did not have very much to do with his ethical point of view. Rather, Qoheleth found that all of our knowing and applying of personal ethics must be related to humble faith in the Creator God.

Since he knew that worship takes place in the presence of the living God Qoheleth could stress the fear of Him against the foolish multitude of form-ritualism that was then prevalent within the Temple (5: 1-7). Further, since he knew that all our labor partook of the character of "vanity" he had to affirm that, instead of attempting either to frustrate God's purposes or to add to them, we should rather submit ourselves to them, in reverence to our God (3:13ff.).

Finally, Qoheleth joined the "keeping of God's commandments" to the general imperative "Fear God" (12: 13) to indicate to men that their ethical standard must be the revealed Word of God. Of course, Qoheleth knew that men will attempt to hide their works from the searching eye of God, yet he nails his hearers to this truth of "fearing God" by pointing to the truth of the coming judgment of God (12:14). Certainly, many evil

things are done in this context of vanity which are hid to men's eyes, yet God will reveal them all at a future judgment day to take place in the coming Messianic Age (cf. Mal. 3:5).

How do we relate the ethical situation and conclusions of Qoheleth to that of the believer today? New Testament evidence in Rom. 8:18-22 tells us plainly that a state of "vanity"³⁶ now exists and that it had a beginning and will have an end. Before its beginning recorded in the curse of Gen. 3 stands a God and a κτίσις without vanity, and at its end stands the hope of a "new heavens and a new earth" no longer under that curse. The coming of the Messiah and the subsequent Age of the Spirit have brought freedom from that curse and from the effects of vanity only in principle; the full realization of that liberation awaits the Second Advent. Indeed, the Messiah came into this world of vanity and took upon Himself the labor ('amal) of a cursed world. We read in Isaiah 53:11 that the Suffering Servant "shall see the fruits of the travail ('amal) of his soul and be satisfied." Therefore, in contradiction to Qoheleth who stood in an age of the history of redemption among wise and foolish men, both of whom could never overcome the inevitable fact of death, Christ came and conquered death for the believer. The New Testament believer lives in the present light of Christ who has come and who has delivered us from the bondage of sin and death.

However, until he comes again, we live in the stark reality of the suffering which characterizes a world under the curse (Rom. 8:18). How then shall we view life and labor today? We may regard Qoheleth's thoughts on life and labor as developed from his recurring phrases as a normative pattern of experience to be applied by way of *analogy*³⁷ to our situation today. Qoheleth's analysis functions as a vivid reminder for the natural man of the reality of the curse. For the believer Qoheleth's ethic remains meaningful since it finds the present situation rooted

³⁶ Notice Paul's use of the term ματαιότης for "vanity", which is same term used in the LXX rendering of Ecclesiastes for this word.

³⁷ The principle of analogy is a hermeneutical principle used in the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New. It refers to the embodiment of a certain principle of redemptive truth which can *constantly recur* in the history of redemption. Although it may probably more fully developed in the New Testament, there is no inherent demand in analogy for fulfillment in an anti-type.

in the past declaration of the curse of God upon the creation "under the sun" and moving toward the future renewal of the cosmic order in the hopeful certainty of God's just Judgment of the innermost thoughts of men at the Second Advent (12:14).³⁸

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³⁸ Since the judgment spoken of in 12: 14 cannot take place now before men since the hidden things are not able to be seen by men, Qoheleth refers to a future judgment. Further, the primary objective reference of **מִשְׁפָּט** (**κρίσει**) is to the Day of Judgment recorded in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 2:16; I Cor. 4:5; I Tim. 5:24, 25).

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