

# DETERMINISM AND ANTI-DETERMINISM IN THE BOOK OF KOHELETH

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Determinism is the belief that human thought, action and feeling is, to a greater or lesser extent, controlled by a greater power and that human beings have little or no free will of their own. This power may be called God, or Fate, or the two may be seen as identical. As a general concept, it is often linked with Greek or Hellenistic philosophy, particularly the teachings of the Stoics. The Babylonians had their own belief in determinism, based on a preoccupation with the movements of the heavenly bodies and how those movements were manifested in earthly events – an early form of astrology.

Deterministic ideas can also be detected in the Hebrew Bible. In the Exodus narrative, God ultimately controls the innermost thoughts of Pharaoh and his officials in order to prevent them – at least initially – from letting Israel leave Egypt (Ex. 7:2; 10:1). The author of Isaiah 40-55 saw the God of Israel operating a kind of global determinism through his control of King Cyrus of Persia (45:4-5; 46:10). The embryonic determinism that may be discerned in some biblical writings reach full maturity in the Book of Daniel, particularly the latter part (Ch. 7-12) in which the rise and fall of world empires is predicted by that sage.

The question of the extent to which determinism features in the thinking of Koheleth continues to exercise scholars and commentators. Some believe that Koheleth's writing expresses a fully deterministic worldview, in which all human action and thought is under the control of the deity.<sup>1</sup> Others maintain that determinism is either not present at all or that it influences Koheleth's worldview only to a limited degree.<sup>2</sup> Looking at modern commentaries, one might be forgiven for thinking that this debate is a relatively recent development, arising from 19th-Century secularism.

Few scholars of the Book of Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) are aware that this particular debate is far from new. The Targumist and Ibn Ezra both advance deterministic readings which later Jewish commentators attempt to counter or mitigate. The history of the exegesis of the book reveals a struggle

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not only to harmonize those statements which the sages considered heretical or offensive (cf. Eccl. Rab. 1:3), but also to come to terms with a canonical book whose seeming determinism is at odds with ideas of human free will and ethical responsibility.

MODERN COMMENTATORS – CHAPTER 3:1-11

1. *A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:*
2. *A time for being born, and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted;*
3. *A time for slaying and a time for healing, a time for tearing down and a time for building up;*
4. *A time for weeping and a time for laughing, a time for wailing and a time for dancing;*
5. *A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, a time for embracing, and a time for shunning embraces;*
6. *A time for seeking and a time for losing, a time for keeping and a time for discarding;*
7. *A time for ripping and a time for sewing, a time for silence and a time for speaking;*
8. *A time for loving and a time for hating; a time for war and a time for peace.*
9. *What value, then, can the man of affairs get from what he earns?*
10. *I have observed the business which God gave man to be concerned with;*
11. *He brings everything to pass precisely at its time. He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass [literal translation: He has made everything beautiful in its time, and he has also set eternity in their minds, so that no-one may find out the work of God from the beginning to the end] (3:1-11).*

The apparent presence of determinism in a work canonical to Jews and Christians has presented problems for both. If human action and thought is controlled by a force external to the individual, then no law, whether it be

man-made or Divine, can ever be just. Taken to its logical conclusion, a deterministic philosophy would imply that God Himself is ultimately responsible for the performance not only of the good actions of human beings but also the bad. It should come as little surprise that many attempts have been made over the years to read Koheleth's work in a way that moderates or excises any deterministic tendency.

Within modern scholarship, the catalogue of times and seasons in 3:1-8, and the commentary that Koheleth provides on this passage in 3:9ff., is seen as a key text for understanding the book as a whole. There are two main ways in which this passage could be interpreted. On the one hand, Koheleth may be saying that all human activities have an ideal or opportune time at which they should be carried out (3:1), but that human beings are prevented from doing so by a God anxious to protect His sovereignty over existence (3:11).<sup>3</sup> The problem with this view is that birth, death (3:2) and losing (3:6) do not have opportune or ideal times.<sup>4</sup> One does not choose the time to be born or to die or when to lose something. Accordingly, most scholars see the "times" of this passage as being imposed on human activity by God.<sup>5</sup> That is, they read the text as expressing a deterministic world view.

However, despite scholars' apparent acceptance of determinism applied to human activity in Koheleth, all but a few balk at the idea of God determining the thoughts and emotions of people – even if this does then become the most logical way to understand such phrases as *a time for loving and a time for hating, a time for weeping and a time for laughing*. Faced with the prospect of ascribing to Koheleth this "hard" deterministic outlook, scholars have attempted to harmonize the determinism evident in this passage with human freedom in the spheres of thought and feeling.

Seow provides a good example of this tendency. He notes that:

. . . the occasions [of 3:2-8] are not those that human beings plan, nor are they contingent on human decisions . . . [they] simply present themselves, and people simply have to respond appropriately in each situation. The mortal is not in control.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Seow's determinism is a "determinism of circumstances." The situations that arise in our lives are God's work: the (emotional) responses to those situations are ours to make. Yet the passage 3:1-8 contains a mixture of action and feeling, activities and responses to events, that implies God's total

control over all human experience. Human happiness is certainly dependent on the gift of the Deity (cf. 2:26; 3:13; 5:17-18). So, too, I would argue, are other feelings such as love.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, it may be observed that although there is a consensus within modern scholarship that 3:1-11 comments on the predetermined nature of human existence, a significant number of scholars fall short of extending God's control of humanity into the realm of thought and feeling. Nor do they attempt to find some form of compromise between the deterministic and non-deterministic readings of this passage, even where this creates new difficulties.

#### JEWISH DETERMINISTIC READINGS -- MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN

The modern debate is reflected in earlier Jewish exegesis of the text. In the rabbinic literature, there are conflicting views about the extent to which human life is determined. In the Babylonian Talmud, Rava states that even the most basic aspects of human life are under the influence of the constellations: "Life, children and sustenance depend not on merit but on the stars [*mzl*]" (B. Mo'ed Katan 28a). This influence is also seen in the smallest workings of Nature: "R. Simon said, 'There is not a single herb, but it has a star [*mzl*] in heaven that strikes it and says, Grow!'" (Gen. Rab. 10:6).

Often, an attempt is made to argue that while the actions of the nations are predetermined, Israel and its people are granted free will: "R. Hanina b. Hama said: 'The stars [*mzl*] make one wise, the stars make one rich, and there are stars for Israel.' . . . R. Johanan said: 'There is no star [*mzl*] for Israel.'" (B. Shabbat 156a-b, cf. B. Yevamot 21b). This idea is also reflected in Genesis Rabbah 44:12, in which Abraham and his descendants are considered beyond subjection to the dictates of the constellations (although J. Kiddushin 5.17; B. Bava Batra 16b also interpret the blessing on him in Genesis 24:1 as being the gift of astrology).

The Targum of Koheleth is heavily influenced by this type of astrological thinking, and reads the book throughout in a deterministic way. As Levine observes:<sup>8</sup>

On fifteen occasions, the Targum utilises the term *MAZAL* which I, with serious reservations, have translated as 'Providence'. . . In the Targum, God determines *mazal* (Cf. V,18;VI,2;X,6) and good *mazal* is

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a reward given to deserving people (V,17). On the other hand, *mazal* is used to describe inescapable fate: a person can do nothing to change his *mazal* (IX,11). Due to its mechanistic and deterministic features, the Targum uses it to account for such inequities as the suffering of the righteous and the well being of the wicked (VIII,15). The *mazal* elements in the Targum testify that Pharisaic-Rabbinic tradition did not eradicate the grip of astrology on the popular mind, even in cases where *mazal* triumphed over *zekut*, i.e. accrued merit, "Everything is determined by *mazal*!" (IX,2). Yet here too on occasion the Targum tempers this fatalism by explaining that God determines even what *mazal* will bring (IX,12). Finally, the Targum includes a stern warning against the study and practice of astrology (XI,4), although it is itself contaminated by it.

The fatalistic understanding of existence also underlies the Targumist's interpretation of 3:11 which he reads as a Solomonic prophecy concerning Jeroboam and the division of Solomon's kingdom:

The Lord made everything beautiful in its time: for the quarrel which happened in the time of Jeroboam son of Nebat was fitting to happen in the days of Sheba son of Bichri but it was delayed and happened in the days of Jeroboam son of Nebat (for otherwise) . . . the Temple would not have been built.

The actions that human beings perform occur at the time set by God and are thus "beautiful" from God's perspective, playing a part in His wider plan for the world. Deterministic elements are also clearly evident in the work of later commentators. This is particularly true in the case of Ibn Ezra, who, like the Targumist, believed that the destiny of human beings was subject to astrological influence. In his comment on 3:1, he remarks that the passage concerns "the times which are strong upon humankind, for a human being is bound to do everything in its appointed time, and the beginning of the appointed times and their end restrain him."

## IN SEARCH OF A COMPROMISE: SEMI-DETERMINISTIC READINGS

The point at which a "deterministic" reading of Koheleth becomes non-deterministic is difficult to define. Rashi explains *a time for being born and a time for dying* (3:2) straightforwardly as the Divinely ordained limits placed

on the time of gestation and on the span of human life respectively. For his reading of much of the Catalogue of Seasons he is dependent on Koheleth Rabbah. Hence, *a time for building up* (3:3) is referred to Amos 9:11 (*and build it up as in days past*); *a time for weeping* (3:4) is referred to the Ninth of Ab; *a time for laughing* (3:4) is referred to an eschatological interpretation of Psalm 126:2 (*then our mouths will be filled with laughter*), and so on. Ultimately, the passage is taken as emphasizing Divine judgment rather than determinism. This is expressed in Rashi's comment on 3:11: "At the time of good, it is beautiful that the reward be given for good deeds, and at the time of evil, it is fitting for the recompense for evil deeds." Nevertheless, it is still God who is in control, and in this respect Rashi demonstrates the debt that he owes to earlier deterministic readings.

Rashbam to some extent follows in the footsteps of his grandfather Rashi, in that he too sees the "times" of 3:1-8 as indicating Divine judgment on human deeds. He comments:

For everything there is a season: all works have their time, and every matter under the heaven has its appointed time – evil times and good times – to pay people their reward according to their deeds: payment of evil and payment of good, times appointed for evil and times appointed for good.<sup>9</sup>

In some respects, both exegetes might be considered as part of a tendency to find a compromise between the deterministic sense of the passage and the desire to uphold a more traditional worldview emphasizing obedience to the law.

The search for a compromise which simultaneously affirms a perceived determinism in Koheleth's work and reconciles this with notions of God's justice is most clearly expressed in the 16th-Century commentary of Moses Alshich, which betrays an awareness of the dispute in its exegesis of 3:1-11:<sup>10</sup>

Solomon considers whether the things which befall a man are the result of the constellation (*mzl*) under which they were born or whether they are the result of individual guidance from the Holy One, blessed be He. He accounts both to be true; **they are not in conflict with one another. When God, blessed be He, created the heavens and their constellations, it was revealed to Him everything that Humanity was going to do, be it good or evil, and what was proper to befall them, be it**

**good or evil, according to their deeds.** With His great wisdom, He stood and measured and fixed the heavens so that they would judge a man only according to what is proper to befall him according to his deeds. He does not bring a man into the world except at the time when his constellation (*mzl*) will judge him according to his deserts. This is what Solomon says in his wisdom: "Everything has an appointed season . . . and there is a time for every desire and choice that man makes under the heavens," for the time of the constellation (*mzl*) and the desire are one, for the time was designated according to the desire . . . .

While the commentary by Alshich may indeed follow that of the Targum in seeing *mzl* as the supreme guiding force in life, it also attempts to leaven the determinism inherent in this view by asserting God's justice: the *mzl* is itself fixed by God according to His foreknowledge of human action and the events which happen in human lives are in effect God's judgment through the *mzl*. Superficially, human free will is preserved since the deterministic effect of the *mzl* reacts to, rather than controls, the choices that human beings make. Alshich's paradoxical reading expresses the idea that humanity has free will, but that their actions are nevertheless foreseen by God at the moment of Creation.

#### ANTI-DETERMINISTIC READINGS

At the other extreme from the outright determinism of the Targum and Ibn Ezra is the 18th-Century *Metzudath David* by Yehiel Hillel Altschuler. His interpretations of the statements of Koheleth emphasize human free will as being the crucial factor in the way that existence works. Interestingly, Altschuler also understands the term *hefets* in 3:1 to mean "desire" rather than "business" or "matter" (its more usual meanings, though the NJPS translation is correct in the present context to use "experience"). He sees the "times" of 3:1-8 as being the particular moments at which human beings may wish to perform a stated action. This is evident in his comment on 3:1, where he states: "For everything that a person desires there is also a time, for a person does not desire the same thing at all times, but at one time he desires one thing, and at another time he desires its opposite, as is delineated in the following verses . . . ." Similarly, it is human free will which is emphasized as the decisive factor in the causation of all events in his exegesis of 3:11: "Eve-

rything that the Holy One, blessed be He, created and made in His world, is all beautiful, but it should be used by them in its designated time, not in any other time." This reading is broadly similar to the modern interpretation that 3:1-11 deals with the subject of opportuneness. Although there may not be in the *Metzudath David* the express idea that one can act more effectively "at the appropriate time" (rather, a moral basis for such action seems to be enjoined), humanity are left free to make their own decisions.

Altschuler remains eager to maintain human free will, even where this leads him into contextual difficulties, as in 3:11 where he comments: "Also all the ways of the world and its benefits He has placed in the hearts of human beings, in order that they might understand them thoroughly if they delve into them profoundly." While such a comment may be consistent with his desire to emphasize the importance of humanity in shaping the events which happen in the world, it is directly opposed to the plain sense of Koheleth's words in 3:11, which seem to assert that the Deity actively prevents humanity from gaining control over existence: [literally] *also eternity He [God] has put in their hearts so that no one may find out the work of God from beginning to end . . . .*

The reasons for the insistence of Altschuler on preserving the concept of free will are clarified considerably by his expansion of 1:13, in which Koheleth apparently bemoans the ceaseless round of daily activity with which God has afflicted His human subjects:

It is an evil business that God left over all deeds to human beings and gave them free choice to do as they wish. [He has done this] in order to afflict them with punishment for their deeds because of their freedom of choice, for without free choice, there would be no punishment.

The concern of this text, it would seem, is with the ethical ramifications of determinism. If all is predetermined, then why has God instituted laws to be followed? Why is the transgression of these laws backed up by punishment? Altschuler has (correctly) recognized that determinism and a traditional view of the law are irreconcilable and rather than compromise, as did Rashi and Rashbam, has attempted to counter the deterministic readings of earlier commentators.



## CONCLUSION

As far as modern readings of Koheleth are concerned, it is interesting to note that the thoroughgoing determinism of the Targum of Koheleth demonstrates that by the Seventh Century C.E. at least, there was a strong tradition of reading the Book of Koheleth deterministically.<sup>11</sup> Hard determinist readings of Koheleth did have their advocates (notably Ibn Ezra), while even those later commentators who are reluctant to depict Koheleth/Solomon as a prototypical astrologer continue at least to pay lip service to the apparent deterministic thread running through Ecclesiastes (Rashi, Rashbam), or attempt to find some form of compromise between this determinism and free will (Alshich). It is in many ways remarkable that we have to wait until the 18th Century for the first truly anti-deterministic reading of Koheleth in the *Met-zudath David*.

Although Koheleth himself shows no interest in astrology and denies any possibility of human beings knowing what the future holds (3:22; 6:12; 7:14), the ease with which his work seems to have lent itself to such readings suggests that he himself is expressing some form of determinism. Whether this determinism is a product of Stoic influence, or a development of certain latent ideas within the Hebrew Bible (cf. e.g. Ex. 7:2; Isa. 46:10) is open to question. What does seem certain, however, is that later Jewish exegetes have expressed Koheleth's determinism in the astrological language of their own time. The insights of the Targumist and Ibn Ezra may have more to offer modern Koheleth scholarship than has hitherto been thought.

## NOTES

1. F. Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) pp. 254-5; 365-7; M.V. Fox, *Koheleth and his Contradictions* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1989) p. 192.
2. E. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1912) p. 192.
3. E.H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1881) pp. 98, 127; R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) pp. 66.
4. Fox, *op. cit.* p. 192.
5. One of the few contemporary scholars who does appear to advance the idea of a "hard" determinism in 3:1-8 is R.E. Murphy in: *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word, 1992) pp. 33, 39, although the consequences are not dwelt on in detail.
6. C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) pp. 171-72.
7. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 23 (1982) p. 88; D. Rudman, "Woman as Divine Agent in Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 116 (1997) pp. 411-427.

8. E. Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Hermon, 1978) pp. 75-76.
9. S. Japhet & R.B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam) on Koheleth* (Jerusalem-Leiden: Magnes, 1985) p. 114-15.
10. cf. A. J. Rosenberg, *The Five Megilloth (Vol. 2)*, (New York: Judaica Press, 1992), pp. 28-29.
11. P.S. Knobel, *The Targums of Job, Proverbs, Qohelet* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1991) p. 13.



## RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. Some sages and commentators point out that the positive fulfilment of this *mitzvah*, if pursued literally, is virtually impossible. Hillel's interpretation brings it into the realm of reality. Also, the golden rule appears to be a summation of all the laws beginning with verse nine and they are all stated in the negative form.
2. In verses 33-34 the love of the alien (גַּל -- stranger) is enjoined in the same strong terms and a rationale is added: "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt."
3. In 9:1-14, the laws of *Pesah Sheni*.