ECCLESIASTES
PART II: THEMES

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THEMATICS

The themes in the Book of Kohelet are essentially those of interest to mature individuals of means and achievement. Using sociological analysis, Brueggemann concluded that the Book of Kohelet articulates a conservative ideology that reflects social control and a concern for stability.[1] This would be the attitude of the establishment – the older people afraid of losing their attained comfort. Even when Kohelet seems to be addressing the young, he may actually be addressing the concerns of his peers with respect to their heirs. A review of the content in the Kohelet corpus clearly impresses one with its somberness and maturity. It is retrospective and restraining. Some key concepts in the book illustrate these observations.

Vanity (*hevel*) – Kohelet begins and ends his book by stating that all is *hevel* (1:2 and 12:8). The ephemerality that hovers over the book reflects the voice of experience, recognizing the elusiveness of aspirations, the insubstantiality of achievements, the inability to control, the passage of time, and the inevitable end. The theme suggests a reference to maturity typical of the old.

Toil – This concept imparts a continuous struggle, or a prolonged effort, to attain some significant understanding, the achievement of a permanent advantage, everlasting fame, or the perpetuation of an enterprise. Fox observes that in Kohelet's view "the toiler may – indeed must – lose the fruit of his toil, and someone may get it who did not work for it. It is worse if the recipient is a fool, and it is better if he is one's son, but nothing really soothes the sting of loss and frustration . . . This, for Kohelet, proves the meaninglessness of human effort."[2] Obviously, the search for meaning in toil makes sense only with respect to someone who experienced frustration with the randomness of the connection between effort and reward.

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Joy – Kohelet recommends the pursuit of enjoyment in 2:24a, 3:12, 3:22a, 5:17, 8:15a, 9:7-9a, and 11:7-12:1a. However, enjoyment of the good that life offers is presented from a perspective of the experienced. Kohelet stresses that the opportunity to enjoy life is God-given: joy is viewed as a gift from God. Man should enjoy the good that life offers because he has to accept his lot (2:26, 3:14, 3:22b, 5:18, 9:9), life is short (5:17b, 9:9b, 11:9, 12:1b), and the future is uncertain (3:11, 3:22b, 8:14). Kohelet suggests that joy is good during the moment it is experienced and this slight advantage makes life, with all its miseries, preferable to death (6:6). These depressing rationales for enjoyment reflect a somber approach. Joy, to Kohelet, is not an urge to be happy, enjoy, live fully the moment, to "have fun." Kohelet describes a mature, controlled merriment.

Wisdom – The Book of Kohelet certainly impresses one with the notion that wisdom is valuable. It seems to be suggesting that wisdom is superior to inexperience as light is to darkness (2:13); can help gain wealth (2:9, 19, 21); gives man a cheerful demeanor (8:1b); develops a feel for timeliness (8:5); and makes man's speech pleasant and careful (10:12). Though wisdom could give man some advantage, it fails to provide a rationale for life's events (7:23). Fox points to four aspects of wisdom that undermine its utility: it does not provide enough knowledge; it is vulnerable to folly and fortune; it causes pain, because it "reveals the bitterness and absurdities of life"; and, it is wiped away by death.[3] Only from the perspective of the experienced is wisdom less than a panacea (2:12-17, 10:1). They are aware of the power and limitations of knowledge.

Death – Kohelet's discussion of death is dark and gloomy. Crenshaw notes that Kohelet speaks about death with both neutrality and bitterness, and to him "death possesses a full measure of existential angst."[4] Fox thinks that Kohelet exhibits "an obsession with death."[5] It has been noted that Kohelet can be understood as suggesting that thinking of death whets the appetite for life.[6] Young adults do not need such prompts.

Kohelet does not fear death; it is part of the natural order (9:5, 12:1-7). However, Kohelet is concerned that death cancels everything (2:14-16). Burkes writes that for Kohelet death is "the event that neutralizes memory, offspring, and choice."[7] Kohelet is baffled by the random occurrence of death. His sense of a right order would have required that one who follows

commandments will live longer. His fear that our lives may prove meaningless in the end haunts him.[8] These, too, are mainly concerns of the old.

Fear of God – Kohelet's discussion of the fear of God (3:14, 5:7, 7:18, 8:12-13) is traditional. It suggests viewing God in awe and wonder, not in belittling slavishness. God *made everything beautiful in its time* (3:11), and He also imbued it with mystery, *has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end* (3:11). Kohelet always uses the name *Elohim* for the deity, which traditionally conveys His attribute of judgment. It is not a warm and supporting image of God that is concerned with the human condition. Old as young, in Kohelet's time, accepted God's role in life (3:10), were incapable of understanding the acts of God (7:14, 11:5), and were puzzled by the unpredictable.

Justice – Kohelet's discussion of justice and the justice system reflects the personal experience of someone who has been involved in litigation. In his view, there is no justice where justice should have been practiced (3:16), and the poor are oppressed without mercy (4:1-3).

Kohelet harbors dissatisfaction with the working of God's justice. God sometimes allows the righteous to suffer and the wicked to prosper (8:14). Fox says, "It is not only the anomalies that contradict divine justice. There is a systemic and invariable violation: death. It's not that death is so bad in itself that distresses Kohelet, but that it is unfair; it fails to recognize distinctions" (9:3, 11-12).[9] Such views could have been aired only among Kohelet's close friends.

Timeliness – The concepts of timeliness (3:1-8), proper manners, and routines represent the norm, the societal expectations chiseled out by years of human interaction. These concepts of the accepted and expected are entirely in the domain of the mature and established. Kohelet is unwilling to experiment with alternatives and to defy the established order. He rather reiterates the transmitted wisdom.

Youth – Barton sums up Kohelet's advice to the young: "Enter into life heartily, be kindly, venture to sow and reap and fill the whole round of life's duties while you can. Let the young man, therefore, make the most of his youth, for the inevitable decay of bodily powers will come with advancing age, and the cheerlessness of Sheol will terminate all."[10]

It is clear from this review that Kohelet deals with issues weighing on the mind of the established and experienced members of society. The aristocracy in Jerusalem was content with what it had. Its fundamental tendency was to promote conservatism and oppose change.

THE BOOK

How was the book formed? At first glance, it would appear to be the creation of a single author because of its personal tenor, expressed, for instance in such phrases as *I turned to see* (2:12), *I said in my heart* (2:15), *I saw* (4:4), and *I tested this in wisdom* (7:23).[11] However, it is possible that Kohelet's observations were only a trigger to a more complicated process in which the observation led to discussion by a small group of Kohelet's intellectual peers, the *kohelet*, or in later parlance the *havurah*.[12] It would be natural to expect that these debaters were not unanimous in their opinions. Kohelet recorded their views, although he did not always accept them. This might explain the contradictions and repetitions in the Book of Kohelet, as well as the absence of any discernible thematic organization or connected orderly argument in the book. Indeed, a number of commentators felt that several hands were involved in its shaping.[13]

These commentators reflect a strong sentiment that the book cannot reflect the mindset of a single person. My suggestion, that Kohelet recorded the positions expressed and discussed in his *kohelet*, would aptly accommodate the views of this approach. Such an approach would allow for a range of views to exist in the discussions of the *kohelet*.

With its pessimistic tone and unorthodox views, how did this book come to be included in the Tanakh? It would seem that the themes of the book were so unusual and pertinent, and the stature of the members in Kohelet's circle was so high, that it made the book a worthy candidate for inclusion in the canon.[14] The members of the *kohelet* were apparently individuals with a solid belief in a God that rules the world who found it difficult to understand divine wisdom on earth. The striving to understand God's ways could not be denied or suppressed.

It is also possible that the superscription (1:1) and the statement in 1:12 were later interpreted as alluding to Solomon, and thereby facilitated the acceptance of the book into the canon. It may be that the later rabbinic percep-

tion of *all is hevel* as referring only to this world as opposed to the afterlife (cf. Targum on 1:2), also helped to smooth the way into the canon. A similar intent can perhaps be found in the later addition of verse 12:11, suggesting that the words of sages are divinely inspired. However, it is doubtful whether these factors played a critical role, although they may have contributed to the book's inclusion.[15] Concern about its suitability for the general public was of greater importance.[16] However, the canon was, as Ehrlich observed, "a national literature upon a religious foundation." The uniqueness of the Book of Kohelet aptly qualified it for inclusion into the canon.[17]

Hengstenberg rightly noted that "The Author has studiously maintained a certain tone of reserve in respect of the circumstances of his time; and of design rather glanced at them, than entered into details."[18] Indeed, in a number of instances, the careful reader can sense fear of the Ptolemaic reporting system and Kohelet's use of ambiguity for self-protection (4:17-5:2, 8:5-7, 10:20-11:1, 12:12-13).[19] The *kohelet*, which consisted of the elderly rich, feared change and naturally resented the opportunities offered by the Ptolemaic regime (1:12-16, 4:1-3, 5:7, 12-16, 7:10, 8:9, 10:6-7). It is possible that Kohelet confined himself to using only the name *Elohim* because its secular and sacred meanings were so convenient for his intended ambiguities.[20] Circumspection apparently dictated the style of the notes taken. These notes are suggestive but never fully developed. They highlight an issue, but do not illuminate it from all aspects.

Finally, the book is intensely human. It soberly addresses the vagaries of life at a difficult time for Jews in Judea. Its contributors valiantly search for the solid and durable in circumstances containing much that is ephemeral and transient. The findings of the elders in the *kohelet* are typically prudent and hesitant. The men of gray saw much grayness. Their focus on the fundamental problems of human existence makes the book ever pertinent. Jastrow writes: "Koheleth is modern because with great literary skill he deals with those aspects of human life which are always the same. He is almost brutal in holding the mirror up to life. For all that, he is neither a scoffer nor a pessimist."[21]

CONCLUSION

The author of the Book of Kohelet was a rich and wise Jewish patrician in Jerusalem. He was not a teacher or a preacher. More likely, he was a leader of a circle of social and intellectual peers, the *kohelet*. At the meetings of the *kohelet* practical and philosophical questions were discussed, and the author recorded the various positions that were taken. This would explain the structure of the book and its apparent contradictions. At some point, the author adopted the noun *Kohelet* as his pseudonym. This would explain the confusion between the noun and pseudonym in 7:27 and 12:3.[22]

The *kohelet* relied on experience and keen observation when formulating topics for consideration. Reason and experience are the key elements of its epistemology (1:13, 2:3, 7:23). It would be too speculative, however, to assume that it had a set of postulates and rules of logic according to which the discussions were conducted, although they must have had some intuitive logic. Thus, it cannot be said that the book is a philosophical treatise.

The many issues that the *kohelet* discussed and textual indeterminacy make it difficult to define the book's message. Graetz thought that the book is a cynical satire on the career of Herod the Great.[23] Delitzsch named it "the Song of the Fear of God."[24] Some commentators thought that the gist of Kohelet's thesis is that "life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery."[25] Other commentators felt that the message has been expressed in "Utter futility! All is futile!" occurring at the beginning of the book (1:2) and its end (12:8). There is no doubt that gloom pervades the book and its tenor is pregnant with pessimism. For instance, Crenshaw writes: "Qoheleth taught by means of various literary types that earlier optimistic claims about wisdom's power to secure one's existence have no validity. No discernible principle of order governs the universe, rewarding virtue and punishing evil. The creator, distant and uninvolved, acts as judge only (if at all) in extreme cases of flagrant affront . . . Death cancels all imagined gains, rendering life under the sun absurd."[26]

The crucial question for the reader is to understand how the *kohelet* related the *hevel* passages to the joy passages within a divinely guided world.[27] Ellul's encapsulation of Kohelet's message may perhaps give the proper answer: "In reality, all is vanity. In truth, everything is a gift of God."[28]

NOTES

1. W. Brueggemann, "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) p. 129.

2. Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qohelet's Thought," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. Anton Schoors (Leuven: University Press, 1998) p. 228.

3. Fox, "Inner Structure," pp. 229-230.

4. James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions. Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995) pp. 573-585; (first published in 1978), p. 574. Kohelet refers to death in 3:2-4, 4:2-3, 6:3-6, 7:1-2, 4, 9:4-6, 10, 12:1-7.

5. Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament*, 42 (1988) p. 61.

6. Kathryn Ymray, *Qohelet's Philosophies of Death* (Ph.D. dissertation; Murdoch University, 2009) p. 1; Choon-Leong Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," *JBL* 118:2 (1999) p. 209.

7. Shannon L. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) p. 76.

8. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 34-35. In Longman's view it is the inescapability of death which for Kohelet renders wisdom meaningless. Indeed, death renders "every status and achievement of this present life 'meaningless'."

9. Fox, "Inner Structure," p. 232.

10. George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908) p. 47.

11. First person language is used in 1:12-14, 16-17; 2:1, 13-15, 18, 24; 3:10, 12, 14, 16-17; 4:1, 4, 7, 15; 5:12, 17; 6:1, 4; 7:15, 23, 25-26; 8:2, 9-10, 12, 14-17; 9:1, 11, 13; 10:5, 7.

12. It is notable that in TB *Gittin* 62a and *Berakhot* 64a the head of a school is called "king." Kohelet might have used this term to describe his leadership role in his *kohelet*.

13. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 21, 23. T. A. Perry, *Dialogues With Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes. Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University, 1993) p. 36. In Perry's view, such a dialogue framework enables us to understand the apparent "contradictions" in the book. Thus, the Book of Kohelet is a debate and the reader's task is to discern the alternating voices. Marvin V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Kohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 48 (1977) pp. 48, 90, 91.

14. When the Book of Kohelet was accepted into the canon is disputed. Wright (C. H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888] p. 79) argued that "the men of the Great Synagogue," who flourished between 444 and 196 BCE, admitted the book into the canon. In the opinion of Gordis (Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, the man and his world: A Study of Ecclesiastes* [third ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968] p. 71), it was accepted at the Council of Jamnia in 90 CE. However, Kohelet's admission to the canon continued to be disputed (Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5, Mishnah *Eduyyot* 5:3).

15. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Westminster, John Knox Press, 1987) p. 52. Crenshaw writes: "A better answer to the question of acceptance points to the second epilogue, which re-

moved the sting from Kohelet's skepticism and advocated traditional views concerning observation of Torah."

16. Menahem. Haran, *Ha-Asuppah ha-mikra'it: tahalikhei ha-gibbush ad sof yemei Bayit Sheni ve-shinnuyei ha-tzurah ad motza'ei yemei ha-beinayim* (Jerusalem: Bialik and Magnes Press, 1996) p. 301 and ch. 5.

17. Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Die Psalmen, neu übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1905), VI. In the view of Gordis (*Koheleth*, p. 131), "Undoubtedly, the tradition of Solomonic authorship and Koheleth's unique style, particularly his unquestionable use of a religious vocabulary and his citation of proverbs for his own special purposes, proved decisive factors." This position is questionable.

18. Ernst W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1869) p. 1.

19. Aron Pinker, "Intrusion of Ptolemaic Reality on Cultic Practices in Kohelet 4:17 and the Unit to which it belongs," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 9 (2009), art. 21; "On the meaning of Kohelet 11:1," *Old Testament Essays*, 22/3 (2009) pp. 618-645; "On Cattle and Cowboys in Kohelet 5:9b," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche* Wissenschaft, 123 (2011), pp. 263–273; "The Structure and Meaning of Qohelet 8:5-7," *BN* 153 (2012).

20. Marcus A. Jastrow, Jr., *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919) p. 134. In Jastrow's opinion, Kohelet uses *Elohim* rather than Y-H-V-H, because "he has passed beyond the stage of any narrow nationalistic conception in his religious attitude."

21. Jastrow (*A Gentle Cynic,* pp. 8-9) writes: "The human interest of the book is all the more intense because of its main conclusion, that life itself is a paradox. Life is made to be enjoyed, and yet enjoyment is 'vanity'."

22. The voice of the *kohelet* comes through in 1:2, 7:27 and 12:8. This third person voice is not that of Kohelet, particularly in 7:27. It is unlikely that Kohelet would speak of himself in the third person in the midst of a first person sentence.

23. Heinrich Graetz, *Kohelet* (Leipzig: C.F. Winter'sche Verlagshandlung, 1871) p. 13.

24. Franz Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth* (BKAT4; Leipzig: Dorffling & Franke, 1875) p. 190. Deltzsch says: "The Book of Kohelet can therefore be better named the *Song of the Fear of God* rather than, as H. Heine suggested, the *Song of Skepticism*."

25. Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) p. 14; Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968) p. 318.

26. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 7.

27. Craig Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Themelios*, 24.3 (1999) p. 15. Bartholomew suggests that "what we have in Ecclesiastes are the *hebel* conclusions – arrived at via Qoheleth's empiricism applied to the area he examines – juxtaposed next to the joy passages which express the shalomic perspective on life that Qoheleth would have derived from his Jewish upbringing and being part of Israel. These perspectives are set in contradictory juxtaposition and the effect of this is to open up gaps in the reading which have to be filled as the reader moves forward."

28. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) p. 31.