"AN ANCIENT YOUTH'S PERPLEXITY"

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There is a perversity in human nature which makes the forbidden alluring to man. Perhaps that is why a certain Biblical book was something of a temptation to me while I was yet in high school. I had heard that the rabbis had forbidden people under forty years of age to read it. So I had to. Now that I am safely past the barrier imposed by the Rabbis of old, I can consider this book without wondering whether my interest is merely prurient. I hope that my warning to Kit Kat members and guests under forty years of age will not impose upon them any compulsion to turn to their Bibles immediately in order that they might peruse these perilous pages.

The Great Debates at Jabneh

This summer my wife and I stopped on our way to Tiberias to visit the grave of Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai. In a very real sense, he vanquished Titus, the celebrated conqueror of Jerusalem in the seventieth year of the Common Era. Rabbi Johanan had a concept of the mission and destiny of the people of Israel which made their national history less important than their religious and spiritual development. Consequently, he was not excessively disturbed by the Roman rule of ancient Palestine as long as the spirit of the Jewish people could remain unfettered. He was unsympathetic with the Zealots who wanted to resist the power of Rome. "Why do you desire to destroy the town, and to give up the Temple to the flames?" he asked the revolutionary leaders. (Graetz, H., History of the Jews, Vol. II, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1893, Vol. II, pg. 323) Undoubtedly, the Roman spies in Jerusalem reported his attitude which was probably interpreted as being pro-Roman or collaborationist. Actually, Rabbi Johanan was thinking at an entirely different level.

When the city of Jerusalem was literally in flames and it was only a question of days as to when it would fall to the besieging Romans, Rabbi Johanan embraced the idea of leaving the city and establishing a school at Jabneh (Jamnia) where he could continue his teaching of the religion of Judaism. It was very difficult to leave the besieged city, as one can readily understand. Johanan

had himself placed in a coffin; his pupils Eleazer and Joshua carried him out of the city gates. Roman sentries escorted the funeral party to the camp of Titus who was rather amused by his teacher's failure to understand the desperate political situation in which his nation found itself. Half jokingly, Titus gave Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai permission to establish his school, "For he could not foresee by this unimportant concession he was enabling Judaism, feeble as it then appeared, to outlive Rome, which was in all its vigor, by thousands of years." (ibid. p. 324)

Rabbi Johanan settled with his disciples in Jabneh, not far from the Mediterranean, between the port of Joppa, and the old Philistine city, Ashdod. When the teacher and his students heard that Jerusalem had fallen and that the Temple was in flames, they mourned as if they had lost close relatives. Unlike his contemporaries and even his own students, Rabbi Johanan did not despair for he did not consider Judaism indissolubly bound up with the Temple and its altar. Although he offered consolations to his disciples for the loss they believed the people of Israel had suffered, he kept reminding them of the prophetic teachings. He emphasized the need for the development of institutions that would preserve Judaism in its prophetic rather than its priestly forms. As a matter of fact the school of Rabbi Johanan became a sort of synod which made the important decisions establishing the future direction of Judaism as a religion. When my wife and I visited the old Roman Forum, and, stood before the Arch of Titus, we recalled his proud boast and realized that a temporal victory scored at the military level had been overshadowed by the spiritual victory of Rabbi Johanan at the religious level.

Among the important activities of the members of the school of Jabneh was the establishment of the Biblical Canon. The Talmud contains references to these discussions. (Yedayim III: 5; and Megillah 7a) They debated the canonicity of books now in the Bible, and of some excluded by their decision.

There were two parties at Jabneh: the liberals, who called themselves "Bet Hillel," or "The House of Hillel," and the conservatives, who called themselves "Bet Shammai," or "The House of Shammai." The latter opposed the canonization of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The House of Hillel favored the inclusion of both in the Bible. According to Rabbi Akiba, the dispute over the Song of Songs was easily resolved. The argument over Ecclesiastes was more bitter. The late Rabbi Leon Harrison wrote in his

"Religion of the Modern Liberal," (1931, p. 1) "that it was unfortunate that 'Ecclesiastes' is in the Bible. Otherwise it would certainly be an extremely popular book. It is so modern, it is so skeptical, it is so blasé, it is so fashionably free from enthusiasm, from all fervor or deep conviction." After some debate, the Book of Ecclesiastes was admitted to the Bible. Apparently, the rabbis agreed that the Book was not appropriate for young people whose faith might be undermined by it. They did not feel that it could do much damage to those of us who are already in the fifth decade of life or beyond.

The Author

This evening, I would like to discuss the book which was the subject of this great debate, the Book of Ecclesiastes, which probably contains more quotations than any other book of the Bible and which is probably less understood. The author of the Book referred to himself by a pseudonym, Koheleth. For him we have no other name. The lack of a name does not make it impossible for us to learn about this author. Indeed, there is considerable autobiographical material in and between the lines of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

What does the Hebrew word, "Koheleth," mean? The Hebrew occurs nowhere else. Obviously it was coined by the author to describe his purpose in writing the book. The word itself is the present active participle of the verb "kahal," which means "to assemble." Writing in Palestine in the year 388 of the Common Era, Jerome considered that the author was describing himself as "an assembler of people," or, "the convener or an assembly." In many Biblical versions, including the Revised Standard Version, the word is translated simply, "Preacher." To be accurate, however, this translation would require a Hiphil form of the verb instead of the simple Kal which we have here. Even more confusing to those who are unfamiliar with Semitic languages is the use of a feminine ending on this coined word. Nowhere in the book does the author represent himself as a woman; whenever he uses the first person singular, he always employs masculine inflections. Why, then, did he give himself a name based on the present active participle with a feminine ending?

The study of Semitic languages reveals that the inflections that we call "masculine" and "feminine" on the analogy of the Latin grammar do not carry the same implications in such languages as Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and

Syriac. The two genders called "masculine" and "feminine" on the Latin analogy might better have been called "primary" and "secondary." Generally, nouns that we would regard as "masculine" are inflected in the primary gender and those which we would regard as "feminine," in the secondary gender. But, the feminine ending is sometimes added to nouns to give them a particular, singular, or peculiar meaning. (Socin, Arabic Grammar, Revised by Worrell, G. E. Stechert & Co., New York, 1922, pgs. 52-53) Undoubtedly, the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes called himself Koheleth to suggest that he was an assembler in a particular, peculiar, unique sense. Obviously, he considered himself an assembler or collector of ideas rather than of persons. Indeed, he described himself and his purpose at the conclusion of the Book in these words: "Besides being wise, Koheleth also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging proverbs with great care. Koheleth sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings which are given by one Shepherd." (Eccleasiastes 12: 9-11) In this presentation, we shall speak of the author by his pen-name Koheleth, distinguishing him from his book which we shall simply call "Ecclesiastes," even though this title perpetuates Jerome's mistranslation. Unless otherwise indicated, we will use the Revised Standard Version of the Bible except for the substitution of the author's pseudonym for the erroneous designation, "Preacher," employed in this translation.

In the first Chapter, Koheleth declared: "I, Koheleth, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." (ibid. 1: 12) From this, a Biblical editor inferred that Koheleth was Solomon, son of David. (ibid. 1) Those who follow this traditional view generally hold that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes when he "was old," and "his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father." (I Kings 11: 4) However, all modern authorities on the Bible, with only occasional exceptions, are agreed that Solomon could not have been the author of Ecclesiastes. Even the late Professor Solomon Schechter said, "That tradition cannot be maintained in all its statements need not be denied.....Solomon cannot be held responsible for the scepticism of the Book of Ecclesiastes." (Schechter, S., Studies in Judaism, Vol. II, pg. 39.) The evidence contrary to the tradition is overwhelming. In the first place, the evidence of the influence of Greek philosophy in Ecclesiastes is so extensive that Koheleth cannot

possibly be identified with King Solomon. Moreover, the use of the past tense in the verse: "I, Koheleth, have been King over Israel in Jerusalem," indicates that Koheleth could not have meant that he actually was King Solomon, because there is no evidence in the Bible that Solomon ever abdicated his throne before his death. It would be difficult for Solomon to write his book after his death. Some of the Rabbis quoted in the Talmud thought that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes on his death-bed.

But those familiar with classical Greek literature recall the Greek custom of using the name of an historic personality to classify new writing. Many of us are familiar with pseudepigraphic writing ascribed to Plato and Hippocrates, among others, for purposes of classification. Koheleth was simply using a Greek way of showing that he was writing wisdom literature, philosophic speculation, after the manner of Solomon.

Date and Place of Composition

Since Jesus the son of Siraḥ wrote Ecclesiasticus in the manner of Ecclesiastes approximately 190 years before the Common Era, we can use that date as our *terminus ad quem*. Because of the obvious influence of Zeno and his stoicism on the thought of Koheleth, we can use the dates of his life, 336-264, particularly the date of his death, as our *terminus a quo*. Since we must allow some time for the ideas of the philosopher to be spread as far as a rural community in Palestine, we can fix the date of Koheleth and the Book of Ecclesiastes as approximately 230 before the Common Era.

The use of a fluent and literary Hebrew, the references to Jerusalem, the Temple, its worship forms, and even the flora of Palestine, all suggest that the Book was written there by a Jewish person who had been under Greek influence, probably in Alexandria.

If we assume that Koheleth was a young man, the son of a well-to-do Jewish farmer, in prosperous Judah, in the third century before the Common Era, he begins to emerge from the lines before us. After a boyhood spent on his parents' estates under the tutelage of local teachers, his parents undoubtedly decided to send him away for higher education, probably to Alexandria. There he listened to lecture by the representatives of the leading schools of Greek though

At first, he found them difficult to follow, but, as he began to understand, he became a little arrogant. He wrote: "I said to myself, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.'" (Ecclesiastes 1: 16) This sounds like a typical sophomore. Perhaps he was home for a brief vacation between semesters when he tried to put his thoughts on paper.

His head was in a whirl. It was full of the ideas of his teachers. He was not sure which of his thoughts were theirs and which were really his own. He sat down to ponder He had his writing tools and parchment before him. The Book of Ecclesiastes was the result.

The Book Itself

The Book itself opens with a statement of the Stoic philosophy, in the style and manner of Zeno.

> "The words of Koheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
> Vanity of vanities, says Koheleth, vanity of vanitie All is vanity.
> What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
> A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever.
> The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.
> The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
> All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again.
> All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
> What has been is what will be, and what has been don is what will be done; and there is nothing new und the sun.
> Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already, in the ages before us."
> (ibid. 1:1-10)

Compelled to reject the Stoic philosophy, Koheleth spec lated upon Epicureanism, hedonism, the philosophy of sensual pleasure. In his imagination, he tried the life based upon this foundation:

> "I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.' But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, 'It is mad,' and of pleasure, 'What use is it?' I searched my mind how to cheer my body with wine--my mind still guiding me with wisdon--and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also grea possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight.
>
> "So I became great and surpassed all who were befo me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. A whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behol all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun." (ibid. 2:1-

Koheleth did not mean to say that he actually did all o the things described in these verses; he meant to say that h tested the things described intellectually, in his mind, and found them wanting.

Then he compared the two philosophies:

> "So, I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly; for what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what he has already done. Then I saw tha wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walk in darkness; and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them. Then I said to myself, 'What befall the fool will befall me also; why then have I been s very wise?' And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool! So I hated life,

> because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind." (ibid. 2: 12-17)

Although he found Stoicism more acceptable than Epicureanism, he was finally constrained to reject them both in favor of a formulation of his own:

> "For everything there is a season, and a time for
> every matter under heaven:
> A time to be born, and a time to die;
> A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is
> planted
> A time to kill, and a time to heal;
> A time to break down, and a time to build up;
> A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
> A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
> A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather
> stones together;
> A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
> A time to seek, and a time to lose;
> A time to keep, and a time to cast away;
> A time to rend, and a time to sew;
> A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
> A time to love, and a time to hate;
> A time for war, and a time for peace.
> What gain has the worker from his toil?" (ibid.3:1-

This is the author's solution of his personal problem. Things are not good or bad in themselves; morality depends upon the circumstances and the appropriateness of behavior. For Koheleth, the problem of morality is the discovery of behavior suited to the time and place.

Social Problems

When Koheleth solved his personal problems he was also able to look about himself in a more mature manner with concern for others. He discovered serious social problems, particularly the violence and tyranny of the Greek dictatorship. He saw a society upside down.

> "Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness." (ibid. 3: 16)

But, he said:

> "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work." (ibid. 3:17)

Moreover, after his resolution of his personal philosophy, Koheleth began to feel compassion for the oppressed.

> "Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and the was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive; but better than both is he who has not yet been, and had not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun." (ibid. 4:1-3)

The best advice Koheleth could give to people living under adverse conditions is that they should learn to cooperate and work together.

> "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up." (ibid. 4: 9-10)

Recommended Values

Recognizing that social conditions are largely the expression of personal values, Koheleth explored this area. He pointed out the temporal character of material values:

> "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with gain; this also is vanity.
>
> "When goods increase, they increase who eats them; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?
>
> "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep." (ibid. 5: 10-12)

Indeed, Koheleth was aware that there was a danger in the unreality of material possessions:

> "There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture; and he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil, which he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil; just as he came, so shall he go; and what gain has he that toiled for the wind?" (ibid 5: 13-16)

His own value orientation is more elaborately expressed in a series of comparisons:

> "A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death, than the day of birth.
> It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting;
> For this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart.
> Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.
> The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.
> It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools.
> For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools; this also is vanity.
> Surely oppression makes the wise man foolish, and a bribe corrupts the mind.
> Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.
> Be not quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
> Say not, 'Why were the former days better than these?'
> For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.
> Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.
> For protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.
> Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?
>
> "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

> "In my vain life I have seen everything; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself? Be not wicked over much, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand; for he who fears God shall come forth from them all." (ibid 7:1
> 18)

In all of these passages, Koheleth was adding very little to the content of Judaism as it was known and practiced in the third century. His belief in God was a fundamental assumption. He thought of God as the Creator still concerned for the world He had created and giving it His continuing providential care. Koheleth viewed man as the recipient of God's gifts and thereby obligated not to waste them or abuse them. But Koheleth was aware of the inadequacy of the prevailing doctrines of retribution as incentives to man for his moral behavior. Like the author of the Book of Job, Koheleth saw that goodness was not always rewarded and that wickedness was sometimes unpunished.

The After Life

For the first time in the Hebrew Scriptures, reference is made to an after life by Koheleth in the Book of Ecclesiastes. In his last Chapter, Koheleth described old age and death as they appeared to him:

> "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and the light, and the moon, and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the duaghters of song are brought low; they are afraid also of what is high, and terro are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because

> man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (ibid. 12: 1-7)

His attitude toward old age betrays the fact that he had not yet experienced it, indeed, that it was far removed from him The years we describe as "golden" were "evil Days" to him. Koheleth thought that maturity was without gratification. He described physical ailments in very anatomical language: the dimming vision, the diminishing and weakened physical prowess, the apprehension occasioned by limited vision and hearing; and the enfeeblement of arthritis are all referred in this Chapter. The hoary head, the failing sexual desires and the loneliness of the aged are a preface to life's final chapter. The ruptured silver cord could refer to a broken neck; the broken golden bowl obviously refers to a fractured skull. The pitcher suggests an ancient scientist's view of the lung drawing in air from the very fountain of life, and the wheel broken at the cistern suggests the failure of the heart pumping blood to the rest of the body. So Koheleth summarized the more common causes of death in his days. Ther for the first time in the Hebrew Scripture, he spoke of the immortality of the soul: "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (ibid 12: 7)

The Book of Ecclesiastes is not as orderly or as systematic as a Greek philosopher would have had it. Many Biblica scholars feel that it consisted of the writings of several different authors. But a young man, especially a sophomore, can easily be several different persons at the same time, or almost the same time. As he tries to digest his new learnin to make it part of himself, he is capable of reaching both heights and depths! Yes, he is even capable of thinking of death and dreaming a dream that none of his forebears ever shared. Like a bullsession in a dormitory or fraternity house, the Book of Ecclesiastes arrives at man's ultimate destiny and produces a magnificent expression of faith in his immortality.