

THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES.

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The important questions in relation to the book of Ecclesiastes are three; its unity (or integrity), its date, and its purpose, and these three are interdependent. There is a reasonable measure of agreement concerning the date, so that the discussion needed here will be very brief. The question of unity (or integrity) demands a somewhat fuller consideration. But it is only the matter of purpose that will be given a detailed treatment, although with recognition of the fact that the question of unity is intimately associated with this.

By general agreement the date of the book is either in the latter part of the Persian period, or in the Greek period. The language of the book has many indications of lateness, and favors the latter assignment, although the question of direct influence from the Greek language is an open one. Whether the book shows the influence of Greek philosophy is much disputed, and this will be considered later. In any case, however, the evidence points to the Greek period. A date somewhat after 200 B. C. seems to the writer to be probable, see the more definite statement later.*

The unity (or integrity) of the book has frequently been questioned. Some have seen in the book the work of several authors. There are more who consider it the work of one principal author, with the additions of several editors or glossators. It is the inconsistency, apparent or real, in the views expressed in the book which is the principal reason for thinking that the book is not entirely by one author. It is unnecessary to consider the various views concerning authorship in detail, the conclusion of the writer on this point will be indicated later.

*On the date and all the other matters here discussed, see especially the recent discussion by Barton in his Commentary (International Critical Commentary).

There has been much difference of opinion concerning the influence of Greek philosophy upon the writer. Some have held that specific doctrines, of the Epicureans or the Stoics, are expressed in the book. But more generally this has been denied, and it has been maintained that there are but slight indications of such influence. Of course a general acquaintance with this philosophy, which affects the tone of the book, would be presumed from the date above given. The question of this influence will not be discussed by the present writer until after the principal ideas of the book have been considered.

The author indicates his aim, or at least a prominent part of his aim, to be to engage in a comprehensive study of human endeavors to determine what is good. This is stated most clearly in two passages: 1:13a, "And I applied my mind to seek and to search out by means of wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven"; and 2:3, "I searched in my mind how to cheer my flesh with wine, my mind yet guiding me by means of wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what it was good for the sons of men that they should do under heaven all the days of their life." This investigation, it is said in both statements, is by means of wisdom, *חוכמה*, the instrumental use of *ג*. The same phrase is found in 7:23a, a statement of the result of his investigation, "All this have I tested by means of wisdom." Wisdom is the agent in this investigation. It is evident that wisdom has not the same meaning here as, *e. g.*, in the book of Proverbs, where the religious element is fundamental, see such statements as Prov. 9:10. Here no religious element is indicated, it is secular wisdom, observation of the affairs of life. But it is here broader than secular wisdom in the ordinary Old Testament use, it is observation and speculation in a broad way upon the problems of existence, in an endeavor to find what is good.

What is the result of this investigation by the author? It is described by various phrases, but the most frequent

description used for human endeavors is the word "vanity." The various things which are indicated by this term are mentioned in the following statements, those verses being omitted which are considered later additions. Vanity is predicated of all things, 1:2*, 14; 2:11, 17; 12:8; of mirth, 2:1; of wisdom, 2:15; of the uncertainty of posterity, 2:19, 21; of the fruitlessness of labor and sorrow, 2:23; the fact that man is like beasts, 3:19; the lack of satisfaction in silver and abundance, 5:10; many things, 6:11; lack of justice in requiting the righteous and wicked, 8:10, 14; all that cometh, 11:8; youth and the dawn of life, 11:10. Besides, the phrase "life of vanity" is used, 6:12. The word translated "vanity" has the original meaning *breath*, and thus indicates something unsubstantial. The descriptive phrase "and a striving after wind" is added to this in 1:14; 2:11, 17. This describes that which fails to satisfy, it lacks the essential qualities of true worth.

Other elements of description are associated with these. Particularly to be noted is the term *evil* as descriptive of human endeavor, both as an adjective, the Hebrew being $\gamma\tau$, and as a noun, the Hebrew being the closely related word $\eta\gamma\tau$. The adjective is found in 2:17 and 9:3, both general descriptions of human life, which are to be rendered: "So I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun was evil unto me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind," and "This is evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event to all." The noun is found in 2:21; 5:13, 16; 6:1; 10:5, where specific phases of human endeavor are classed as evil. In 2:21 this is associated with "vanity" as a description of the uncertainty of posterity; in 5:13, 16; 6:1 is predicated of the uncertainty of riches; in 10:5 it is of the inequitable reversal of social conditions.

The first result of the investigation of the author, then, is this, no human activity is good. The next result

*The references are to the English translation, not to the Hebrew.

is that the effort itself is a failure, and a failure because the problem is too great for his solution, at least by the method followed, because that is God's plan, God has intentionally hidden His ways from discovery by human investigation. This further result is stated in the following verses: 6:12, "Who knoweth what is good for man in his life, all the days of his vain life which he spends as a shadow?" 7:14, "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; yea, God hath made the one side by side with the other, to the end that man should not find out anything that shall be after him." 3:11, "He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set eternity in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end." 7:23, 24, "All this I tested by means of wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off and exceeding deep; and who can find it out?" 8:16-9:1, "When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth, (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes), then I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because however much a man labor to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea, moreover, though a wise man says that he knows it, yet shall he not be able to find it. For all this I laid to my mind, even to explore all this: that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God; whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not; all is before them." 11:5b, "thou knowest not the work of God who doeth all."

A group of passages needing special attention in connection with what has been said consists of 2:24-26; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9. These passages have a marked similarity with each other, and all speak of enjoyment through the senses as a good, being thus in apparently clear contradiction to the thought already men-

tioned that nothing is good. 8:15 explicitly contradicts 2:1, the former speaking of mirth as good while the latter calls it vanity, the Hebrew word for mirth being the same. The possibility that either thought could be a provisional conclusion which was later contradicted seems very remote, and is not suggested by anything in the context.

Further, 3:12, 13; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9 interrupt the context, the thought being continuous before and after these passages. In the other two cases, 2:24-26; 3:22, these verses contribute no necessary element in the connection of thought. Hence this whole group of passages which speak of enjoyment through the senses as a good, are to be regarded as a later addition, doubtless the work of a single author.

Barton thinks that there are later additions of two kinds, those of a Chasid writer, whose work is more devout and orthodox than that of the original writer, and of a Hokma writer, whose work is proverbial in its nature. The reasons for considering these to be additions are that they are thought to teach doctrines inconsistent with the original work, and also because the various additions are regarded as interrupting the connection. The former argument has not much force, but the latter has a considerable amount. The following Chasid additions given by Barton are to be regarded as really additions, principally because interrupting the context: 2:26, which is included in an addition already referred to; 3:17; 8:2b, 3a, 5, 6a. The other Chasid additions of Barton are not to be so regarded, viz., 7:18b, 26b, 29; 8:11-13; 11:9b; 12:1a, 13b, 14. Of the Hokma additions of Barton, all but 7:3 are to be so regarded because interpreting the context, these being: 4:5; 5:3, 7a; 7:1a, 5, 6-9, 11, 12, 19; 8:1; 9:17, 18; 10:1-3, 8-14a, 15, 18, 19. Minor editorial additions are "saith the Preacher" in 1:2; 12:8, and also 12:9, 10, all these speaking of the Preacher in the third person, while the book as a whole gives his language in the first person. There seems to be no sufficient reason for regarding any further portions as later additions.

The results thus far reached may now be brought into comparison with the philosophy of the Greeks. In the post-Aristotelian systems of Greek philosophy there were three divisions, nature, logic and ethics. The book of Ecclesiastes has no marked resemblance to the first two divisions, the inquiries of the author are comprised under what the Greeks call ethics. The chief question of the Greek philosophers in the realm of ethics was concerning the highest good for human attainment. Connected with this were the detailed questions in reference to the things that were to be regarded as good, in their relation to the highest good, and in reference to the things that were to be regarded as evil. The aim of the author of Ecclesiastes is the same as of these philosophers, the investigation of that which is good, as has been noted. The opposite of the idea of good is that of evil, applied to human endeavor by the author, as has been noted, and by the Greek philosophers. The author also describes the evil things by the phrases *vanity* and *striving after wind*, meaning that the evil is such because it fails to satisfy the desires of man. This failure of the evil things to satisfy is also stated in explicit language, sometimes in close connection with their description as *vanity*, in the following passages: 4:8, "Neither are his eyes satisfied with riches—this also is vanity"; 5:10, "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this also is vanity"; 1:8, "All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing"; 6:7, "All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled"; 6:3, a part of the description of one whose lot is vanity is "his soul be not filled with good," according to the usual English rendering, which might better be translated "his soul be not satisfied with good," the Hebrew root being שבע. This idea that a prominent cause of evil is unsatisfied desire is found among the Greek philosophers, especially in the teaching of the Epicureans. "The

only unconditional good, according to Epicurus, is pleasure; pain is an unconditional evil. . . . He concludes that the real aim and object of all pleasure consists in obtaining freedom from pain, and that the good is nothing else but emancipation from evil. . . . The essential and direct cause of happiness is repose of mind—*ἀραπαξία*. Positive pleasure is only an indirect cause of *ἀραπαξία* in that it removes the pain of unsatisfied craving.”* This “pain of unsatisfied craving” is closely akin to the ideas of Ecclesiastes.

It is evident then from the comparison thus far that the fundamental aim of the writer of Ecclesiastes is the same as that of the Greek philosophers, and that several of his principal ideas and his phraseology closely resemble those of some of the philosophers. None of these features have close resemblances in any other book of the Old Testament; they are not a natural development of Hebrew ideas without other influences. It seems inevitable that the author, living in the Greek period, was influenced by the teachings of the Greek philosophers.

But the author is not simply presenting the ideas of any one school. There are resemblances to some teachings of each post-Aristotelian school, of the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Sceptics. But there are also marked differences from each school. For example, the Epicureans and the Stoics agreed in teaching that the wise man was always happy.** To the author of Ecclesiastes it is a grievous evil that wisdom brings sorrow, and thus is itself vanity, as in 1:17f; 2:12-17, 21-23; 7:16; 9:13-16. Again, the conception of the relation of God to the world is far different from the view of any of these schools. The Stoic conception of God was predominantly pantheistic, while the Epicurean teaching was that the gods were personal beings, but with no relation to the world nor care for it, and the view of the Sceptics, certainly in the

*Zeller, *The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics*, 1870; pp. 446-8.

**Zeller, *op. cit.*, pp. 253, 456.

teaching of Carneades and doubtless earlier, was that it was impossible to know anything about God. The author of Ecclesiastes is conducting his investigations without any explicit recognition at first of the relation of God to the world; yet from time to time he directly affirms God's care and control in reference to all worldly things, yet in no pantheistic sense, as in 3:10f; 5:18-20; 7:13f; 8:17—9:1, etc.

What the author is attempting is, rather, to establish a philosophical system of his own, parallel to the Greek systems and influenced by his knowledge of them. The author's use of wisdom is in the sense of philosophy, as has been, substantially, indicated earlier. It is worthy of note that the Greeks used *σοφία* as well as *φιλοσοφία* to convey that meaning. The author is making his investigations by means of wisdom, *i. e.*, by means of philosophy.

The failure of the author's endeavor is because of the impossibility of knowledge. This is similar to the Sceptic position, that it is impossible really to have knowledge about anything. But the author's conclusion is less sweeping than that of the Sceptics, it does indicate the impossibility of knowing human affairs because they are in the hands of God and He has intentionally hidden His plans, but it does not include scepticism concerning God Himself.

It is evident, therefore, that the failure of the author is considered by him to be the failure of all philosophy. Philosophy is a human endeavor, and it fails because of the limits of human knowledge. It is only divine knowledge which could solve the problems, and that God has kept from men.

Two things appear thus far concerning the main purpose of the book: the attempt of the author to solve the problems of existence by philosophy, and the failure of the attempt. The result thus far is negative. But there is a third main element in the purpose, and it is a positive element. To the author the great certainty in all the un-

certainties that he sets forth is God. It has already appeared that the reason for the failure of philosophy is because the knowledge of God is too great for it. The knowledge of God and His plans does not appear through philosophy. Nevertheless, in some way, God can be known. The book presents this as the supreme duty, fear God. This appears in 3:14, where it is said of God's activity, especially that which is too deep for human apprehension, "And God hath done it, that men should fear before him." In 5:7 is given the command, "but fear thou God." In 7:18 the conclusion in reference to the dangers that surround men is "He that feareth God shall come forth from them all." In 8:12, 13 the matter is summed up in its two phases in the statement, "Though a sinner do evil a hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, that fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God." Similar is the thought of 12:1, "Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth." 12:13, which many have considered a later addition, is in harmony with the verses already mentioned and their culmination, "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."

This third point is not a conclusion of philosophy, it is apart from philosophy. Yet it is really the answer to the question with which the author starts, what is good, what is worth while; the answer is, the life that is worth while is the one characterized by acquaintance with God. Philosophy by its failure prepares the way for this, but this is in the realm of religion, not philosophy. How one gains a knowledge of God is not stated, but that is assumed as familiar, from the Hebrew faith.

These three principal thoughts of the book are not presented consecutively, but that is a part of the general lack of orderly arrangement in the book, for which no ade-

quate explanation has been given. The third point, more especially, appears here and there throughout the book.

On this view of the book, the author has in mind the conflict between Hellenism and Judaism. To him Hellenism appears as Greek philosophy. To him the failure of philosophy is the failure of Hellenism, while Judaism appears triumphant in his assertion of the supreme duty to fear God.

The time of the book, then, is probably as close as may be to the Maccabean period. There is no allusion to the Maccabean period itself. Hence the time is before the beginning of the persecution in 168 B. C. But it was probably soon before that time, because then Hellenism had great power in Palestine.