

The Book of Koheleth, or Ecclesiastes, read in the synagogue during the Sukkot festival, has long intrigued students of the Bible. Traditionally ascribed to Solomon, the book, despite its apparent pessimism, leads into what seems to be a "surprise ending." It is on the basis of this concluding passage that many of the modernist students of the Bible have challenged the integrity of the book and the unity of its authorship. Dr. Vogel here discusses the validity of this inference from the thematic or literary point of view, comparing the development of Koheleth's thought, up to and including the affirmative conclusion, with that of four famous English writers. Dr. Vogel is associate professor of English and Acting Dean of Stern College for Women and a member of the Editorial Committee of TRADITION. He is active in the Young Israel movement, and has contributed articles on American literature to a number of scholarly journals.

KOHELETH AND THE MODERN TEMPER

To this day, homiletic interpretations of the Book of Ecclesiastes have stressed the pessimism of the author's outlook, a feature which scholarly studies also tend to emphasize. Yet after twelve chapters of negating life in all its aspects, the book of Koheleth concludes with the famous exhortation to fear God and to keep His commandments. This seeming turn of mind has troubled some recent commentators on this book to such an extent that one of them, Robert Gordis, concludes that there is a "contradiction between the sentiments expressed in vv. 13 f. and the rest of the book. . ."¹ and "The Epilogue (Chapter 12, verses 9-14) is generally recognized as emanating from another hand, not only because its viewpoint diverges from that of Koheleth, but because it speaks of him in the third

1. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth — The Man and His World* (New York, 1951) p. 339.

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person.”² Experience, he says, “robbed [Koheleth] of traditional Jewish faith in the triumph of justice in the world,” deprived him of his old belief in redress in the hereafter, and led him to lose “assurance that man could fathom the meaning of life.”³ Gordis then conjectures, “The modern reader might expect that Koheleth would be led by his views to deny the existence of God, but that was impossible to an ancient mind, especially to a Jew.”⁴

In this essay I shall not try to dispute his contentions on the basis of linguistics; rather, my discussion will attempt to show that there is no divergence of view in the Epilogue, that this passage is the climax of a development of thought in the book. The fact that this last and crucial passage is written in the third person is not by any means decisive proof that its contents is foreign to the thought of Koheleth. Possibly the shift to the third person is a matter of style, consistent with the opening verse which is also in the third person. Possibly Koheleth himself did not personally write this epilogue or the opening verse, but, like Jeremiah, had his Baruch ben Neriah. But there can be no doubt that Koheleth may very well have uttered them for, as we shall show, there is a straight line of conceptual development in the book which leads naturally and without discontinuity to the Epilogue. To argue solely from the text and from the writings of commentators would be to reiterate what has been said in homiletical, historical, rabbinic, and philological approaches in the past. These, important as they are, would take us far beyond the limited scope of this article. I shall attempt to present my case only from the viewpoint of analogy with works of modern writers, with a view toward demonstrating that Koheleth’s thought, like that of modern writers, developed in a (to us) familiar pattern from realism and disillusionment to a form of faith. It is not merely a habit of the ancient Jewish mind not to deny God, as Gordis implies, but an inexorable development of both an ancient and modern view of man and the universe.

Koheleth, indeed, set forth the temper of the modern mind. He

2. Robert Gordis, *The Wisdom of Koheleth* (London, 1950) p. xxi. This point is not quite so generally accepted, however; see Victor Reichert and A. Cohen eds., *Five Megilloth* (London): Soncino Press, 1952, p. 189. Quotations from Ecclesiastes are from the Soncino edition.

3. *Ibid.* 112.

4. *Ibid.*

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is the searcher after truth, traversing the three worlds of man's experience: the worlds of Nature, of the Society man fashioned for himself, and of the Spirit. To those who see in Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, and Ernest Hemingway, among others, and above all in T. S. Eliot, modern Koheleths, the Epilogue is neither unexpected, nor divergent, nor contradictory. By reviewing Ecclesiastes, we will be able to discern the major lines of parallel thought.

I

Nature, to Koheleth, is a bitter experience. The nature images with which he begins his work are unconventionally used. Once, in his father's poetry, the sun was a symbol of joy and power: in Psalm 19, for example, the sun is pictured as "a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,/ And rejoiceth as a strong man to run his course." His course, in that *tehillah*, marked a cycle in which "Day unto day uttereth speech,/ And night unto night revealeth knowledge." Not so in Ecclesiastes. Here, "The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down,/ And hasteth to his place where he ariseth." The wind and the rivers, too, exist in a monotonous cycle.⁵ They parallel the dismal observation, "One generation passeth, and another generation cometh." In Ecclesiastes, Nature has no explicit productivity. Instead of symbolizing the glory of the Almighty, as for the Psalmist, Nature mimics the sterile life of man, as Koheleth observed it in Jerusalem. He now begins his career as a seeker of truth.

"I applied my heart [he cries] to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. It is a sore task that God hath given the sons of men to be exercised therewith" (1:12). Koheleth, then, views his search with tragic vision. It is not a task of his own choosing, but emanating from God. His search for truth is not a rebellious act, but a holy commission. Yet it leads not to a romantic rosy-colored view of man's life, but tragically back to the realistic perspective of the Torah, whose laws are designed to curb the physicality of man and to sublimate his innate spirituality, and to the recognition of the Prophets that human nature must be curbed and channeled. Even in the days of his father, at a time of

5. Winds and rivers are also treated differently in the Psalms: e. g., 36 and 135, where these natural phenomena are part of God's "pleasures" and "treasures."

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such joy that the King could produce his Psalms, there were prophets to criticize the appetites of men. Koheleth sorrowfully but realistically writes of the degradation of wisdom, and of the vanity of labor and wealth. This is the second world of man's experience — Society. Civilization seems to have deteriorated into a waste land, but, as we shall see, Koheleth will not be satisfied with mere complaining.

The only pattern Koheleth finds in Jerusalem and in his observation is the lack of pattern. True, man's fate is the cycle of birth, life, and death. But birth and death are God's affair; life is man's business. And this life, to finite sight, is variable and devious. Life is inconsistent and contradictory. It is dualistic, ambiguous, and paradoxical. At the bottom, the mind of Koheleth is plagued by the same universal paradox that has troubled most thinkers in all times: the same God who is All-good is the Overseer, if not the Creator, of evident Evil. In Ecclesiastes, the paradox of life is seen in the contradictions of thoughts which mirror the contradictions of existence: wisdom and labor are simultaneously symbols of vanity and of laudable endeavor which gives some meaning to life.

At the beginning of his search, he hates life and labor because of the inevitability and finality of death (2: 17 and 18). But he soon realizes that the problem of death is not man's problem: "[God] hath made everything beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their hearts, yet so that man cannot find out the work God hath done from the beginning even to the end" (3: 11). To try to seek out the unsearchable is the true vanity: "I beheld all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun; because though a man labour to seek it out yet shall he not find it; yea further, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it" (8: 17).

Koheleth, then, does not seek to placate his sensibilities by trying to find the purpose that God formulated for man's life in this world. He attempts to find a *modus vivendi*, a way of living within the narrow and harsh framework with which God has endowed mankind: short-sightedness, imperfection, and finity. Man has not been given the vision to see in his own existence, admittedly chaotic, a pattern of complete, inexorable, daily consistency. If this is the case, then man must look elsewhere for his "portion" of knowledge and reward. Therefore Koheleth declares, "I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his

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portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him" (3: 20). Again, death is inevitable, and man's concern is with this life. In Alexander Pope's words, "Presume not God to scan;/ The proper study of mankind is man."

Koheleth's study of mankind, however, shook his faith in man, not in God. We must pause at this point to consider the question of free will and determinism in Ecclesiastes, for through such a discussion the essential moralism of the book may be discovered. In chapter III is the famous passage of juxtaposed "times" which has been interpreted as indicative of Koheleth's belief that "all events are part of a fixed scheme; they happen to the human being whether he wills them or not; therefore individual effort is abortive."⁶ The difficulty of this position becomes apparent in the interpretation of a verse later on: "According to [a previously mentioned] interpretation, God exacts a reckoning from man for his actions, although circumstances have been ordained by Him, because the human being possesses freedom of will."⁷ If "all the events of life" and "circumstances" are ordained and fixed, wherein can the freedom of the will operate? The statement not only admits an inscrutability of God's plan, but it also attributes to Him injustice, if not malice. It makes Him a spiteful puppeteer, pulling the strings and destroying the doll because it responds to the string-pulling. Such a seeming dilemma is Calvinistic, certainly not Jewish, and is unacceptable to Koheleth.

On this point, Gordis perhaps approaches what I think is a rational answer, though he preliminarily falls into the same trap. At one point he states, "Man remains incapable of changing the predetermined character [of events]," yet a few pages later goes on to say, "[Koheleth] would have been too honest to deny the conclusion that a system of society which denies inalienable rights to men is not God-ordained, and that men have the duty as well as the right to change it."⁸ It is necessary to distinguish in Koheleth's thinking between "events" and "society," cosmic occurrences and man-made incidents and institutions, to interpret the passages in chapter III as seeing in the universe a division of responsibility concerning man's life in earth, in nature, and in society. This is the Jewish view. Determined by God are birth and death and the cycle of Nature: "A time

6. *Five Megilloth*, 123.

7. *Ibid.*, 127.

8. *Koheleth-Man and World*, 116 and 120.

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to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted. . . ." Within the world of man's own doing, however, he has the free will to choose "a time to seek and a time to lose. . . a time to love and a time to hate."

The civilization of Jerusalem which Koheleth observes is not a predetermined civilization. It is a life which has consciously deviated from the values of the Torah of their ancestors. It has forgotten the wise and aggrandized the rich and permitted labor to fall into debauchery. But Koheleth's point is that man can consciously reclaim the proper ways of living. Wisdom, labor, and riches are transitory, yet they are better than foolishness, idleness, and poverty.

Ecclesiastes does not merely decry life and society; it is a moral work exhorting man to look to better values. Utilizing his free will, man can use his "portion" wisely or foolishly; he can shrug off the commandments of God, or use his capacity to accept them. Which alternative he chooses will dictate the balance of judgement by the Almighty. This is the only basis of universal justice. To the finite eyes of man, the "sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily" and seemingly "a sinner doeth evil a hundred times and prolongeth his days"; but, Koheleth insists, "it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he [in the long run] prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he feareth not before God" (8: 11-13). Man has to fight against fantastic odds of cosmological blindness, personal imperfection, chance, and fear of death. Confronted with these facts of life, man can only hope to find a "golden mean" in God's commandments — not being overmuch wise or wicked or foolish (7: 16-17).

Koheleth's experience of life has shown him that the waste land is paradoxically the crucible through which man must pass for possible ennoblement. Nature to him is but a symbolic mirror of Man's spiritual and social aridity; and Society is but the cumulation of vain actions. The source of goodness and justice, then, is not in these worlds. Only the world of the Spirit remains. "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole man." The climax of the book of Ecclesiastes is not mere resignation to the order of the cosmos. It is an affirmation of God's power and goodness, for it is His commandments that are the foundation of the ethics and morality by which society may cleanse itself. The whole man accepts not only the existence of God, but

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the responsibility of proper conduct. This is the only path left to man. The so-called Epilogue is an inexorable conclusion of a tough and realistic philosopher.

Viewed in this way, Ecclesiastes becomes a poem with a single plan from first verse to last. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end – Nature, Society, Spirit. It is an integral entity of an ethic and a logic impossible to disrupt or to doubt.

II

The basic development of Koheleth is from disillusionment to positive and active acceptance, not resignation.

Resignation is the passive condition which is engendered by a withdrawal from the demands of responsibility. Active acceptance is the conscious choice of man, to act morally and manfully, to the best of his limited ability, and to accept the responsibility for his actions.

This is the basic development of the works of such modern novelists as Melville, Dreiser, and Hemingway. These writers are representatives of three different epochs of American literature: the romantic, naturalistic, and realistic. That all reveal the same process of thought as the ancient thinker of Israel is not necessarily strange; it but shows that the problems Koheleth faced and his solution transcend time and geography.

Ecclesiastes exerted a powerful influence upon Herman Melville. From it he received the motifs of vanity of human wishes and of the sterile cycle of nature, which figure importantly in his little known allegory of mankind, *Mardi* (1849). Koheleth was in his mind as well when he wrote his epic of disillusionment and heroism, *Moby Dick* (1851). He wrote to Hawthorne at the time, "I read Solomon more and more, and every time see deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings in him. . . . It seems to me now that Solomon was the truest man whoever spoke, and yet that he a little *managed* the truth with a view to popular conservatism. . . ."⁹ Like so many Biblical scholars, Melville could accept the disillusionment of Ecclesiastes, but not the affirmation of faith. Melville could create a truth-seeker like Captain Ahab, who, like Koheleth, applied his heart to search out the truth and also felt the weight of the sore task. But

9. *Moby Dick*, ed. Mansfield and Vincent, 1951, p. 801.

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in 1851 his tragic vision could not see any other solution than the death and defeat of the truth-seeker at the hands of a cyclical, inscrutable nature. This is the legacy of Calvinistic puritanism.

Forty years later, however, Melville wrote a story about a youth named Billy Budd, a god-like figure who experiences the inexplicable evils of this world and dies for it. But Melville's vision had undergone a metamorphosis. Evil and Inscrutability are a fact of life and what is left to man is acceptance. Though Billy Budd is convicted, by dubious justice, of murder and mutiny, at the moment of execution he delivers a benediction upon the captain who sentenced him: "God bless Captain Verel" To Melville, he had become "spiritualized now through late experiences so poignantly profound." And the sailors remember him not as one defeated, but as a symbol of triumph.

The career of Theodore Dreiser is a parallel one. The objectivity of the scientific method led this naturalist to view the worlds of nature and of society through quite the same glasses as that of Koheleth. His early novels like *Sister Carrie* (1900-1911) and *An American Tragedy* (1915) are rancorous in their condemnation of society's lack of values and of purified man caught in the inescapable net of universal coldness, biology, and economics. Yet almost on his deathbed, Dreiser, too, wrote his Epilogue of faith and affirmation, *The Bulwark* (posthumously published, 1946). It is a novel about a Quaker family which was seduced by society's materialistic values, but through tragedy returns to the faith of an eternal "Inner Light" and love of nature and man. As one critic states, Dreiser came to "admit the further necessity of religion." The pattern of Ecclesiastes is repeated.

In our own day, Ernest Hemingway has retraced the road from disillusionment to acceptance. Hemingway's early vision of nature and society is epitomized by a novel so close to Koheleth's perception that its title is derived from a verse in Ecclesiastes, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). The society of post-World War I Paris that Hemingway depicts here is almost a reproduction of Koheleth's Jerusalem: the degradation of values, of wealth, and of morality, portrayed in acts and scenes which are bitter not only in themselves but in the repetition of the cycle of such existence. The book ends without a resolution, only with a renewal of the cycle of futility.

Over the years, however, a resolution began taking shape in Hemingway's mind. Like the experience of Koheleth, Hemingway's think-

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ing was purified in the very crucible of realistic objectivity. It was purified by living through and observing two world wars and a civil war in Spain. The fruit of this evolvment is *Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Here finally the hero separates the responsibility of God from the responsibility of man. Old Santiago, the fisherman, goes out to do his best against the forces of nature, but though these forces are antagonistic, they are accepted simply because they are real and presumably, therefore, necessary. Thus the sharks which rob him of his prize catch are his "brothers": they do what God expects them to do. He does "what a man must do." Though Santiago disclaims "thinking," yet he, like his author, is a thinker and his conclusion is that this is the way God wants his universe to be: "I was born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish." His affirmation lies in the acceptance of God's will and the moral values that are to be learned from this commandment. Death comes to all men; but how he lives is the measure of his manhood.

III

The closest parallel between Koheleth and the modern mind exists in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a work which has been hailed as the most significant and influential poem of the 20th century. In tone, imagery, idea, and structure, *The Waste Land* seems to me to be strikingly similar to Ecclesiastes. Both poems present a Protagonist who sets out on a search for a *modus vivendi* in a seemingly purposeless world; both poems depict the search through the three worlds of man's experience; both works present passages of disillusionment interspersed with moments of alleviation; and, most significantly, both poems end with a plea for faith in God and concern for His commandments. If *The Waste Land* is a unified work, then we may conclude that Ecclesiastes, too, is a unified work.

To both Eliot and Koheleth, Nature is a bitter experience. The nature images with which each begins his work are unconventionally used. "April," Eliot says in his opening line, "is the cruellest month." In all uses of springtime allusions in poetry in English back to the days of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, rarely, if ever, is the month which signals the end of winter-sterility and the beginning of spring-fertility considered cruel. Yet in Eliot's special sense it is cruel through its very connection with fertility: it is an ironic re-

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minder to man that Nature's cycle reaches betimes a season of productivity, yet man's cycle of life remains sterilely covered "in forgetful snow." April mixes "memory and desire." Nature in this poem, as in the Biblical poem, reminds man of his own inanition.

Eliot's Protagonist wanders through the streets of London as Koheleth wandered through the streets of Jerusalem. And he sees the same degradation and debauchery. Eliot, writing in the idiom of the 20th century, communicates his sorrow by contrasting ancient noble love with modern brutish sexuality, and ancient heroes with dull city businessmen. Similarly, Koheleth had despairingly described the debauches of the rich man's feast and contrasted the wise man and the fool.

Yet for Eliot, too, this world cannot be judged by one view of life. For him as well as for the ancient preacher, it is a strange, unpredictable, and contradictory existence. Twice in his poem, Eliot epitomizes for us the variability of this life. In the midst of presenting nature as an ironic chorus of man's sterility, Eliot furnishes us with a moment of mystical beauty and insight in a hyacinth garden (lines 35-41); and in the midst of deriding a modern superstitious mode of faith, Eliot permits a line of true prophecy concerning the death of the Materialist (line 47).¹⁰ The very death of the Materialist becomes a lesson for future conduct. Drowning, Phlebas the Phoenician merchant, "forgot. . . profit and loss," and Eliot pauses to exhort us:

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you

(lines 319-321)

Death is inevitable, but not the kind of life Phlebas had led.

Like the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes, the last part of *The Waste Land* points toward the better life through the recognition of God. Having viewed the world of nature, having traversed the waste land of his civilization, there is for Eliot but one world left — that of the Spirit. Toward the end of his journey, the Seeker gropes for a spiritual rededication. For him, the end of the matter is the rediscovery of God. Not only of God, but of His commandments, too. Eliot in his

10. See A. F. Beringause, "Journey Through the *Waste Land*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* LVI, 85 (January, 1957). I would like to acknowledge the interest of Rabbis David Mirsky and Sol Roth of Yeshiva University who read this paper and made valuable suggestions.

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erudite way borrows from the Hindus the expression of the three principles of ethics which are guides for living: *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* — “Give,” “Sympathize,” and “Control Oneself.” Koheleth more simply sends his reader back to the source of the ethical principles which for him make life worth living, the Torah.

The basic development of the theme of both works is from disillusionment to rededication. Far from showing a divergence of views in its conclusion, Ecclesiastes reveals a modern tendency of similar development of thought and feeling. Eliot has shown the same evolution within the confines of a single, unified piece of work, as we have seen it develop over the canon of other writers.

There is then no thematic or philosophical reason to question the authenticity of the last verses of Ecclesiastes. On the basis of analogy with modern minds, Koheleth did nothing strange. His work from first word to last is the expression of the recognition of human limitations, a recognition that is a characteristic of mankind and his literary utterances. It transcends the eons that separate individual thinkers and will, I trust, find expression as long as man walks the earth that God gave him, in the cities he built for himself, burdened with the soul and mind that is his link at once with an omnipresent Lord and all men.