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## THE INTERPRETATION OF ECCLESIASTES<sup>1</sup>

THE Book of Ecclesiastes might be called the black sheep of the Bible. In olden days the Rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai disputed whether or not this Book "defiled the hands", that is whether it was a canonical Book that conveyed holiness when it was handled. To-day the examiner asks, "On what grounds would you defend the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the Canon?" In fact the history of the interpretation of the Book shows the profound suspicion with which it has always been regarded. It did, however, find its place in the Canon of Scripture, chiefly because of its Solomonic authorship and the orthodoxy of the final chapter. Yet to-day few of us would care to maintain that Solomon was the author, while many scholars reject the final chapter.

Ought the Book then to remain in the Bible? Would it not be better to admit straight away that the contradictions and unorthodox statements, that have delighted sceptics and puzzled devout minds down the ages, have no reasonable explanation? The author would have been far better employed in writing for the Rationalist Press Association than for the Library of the Holy Spirit. It is a question that must be faced. If there is no satisfactory interpretation of the Book—satisfactory, that is, from the Christian standpoint—there is no logical reason for retaining it in the Bible.

I need not at this point enumerate the particular passages that have shocked the devout; we are familiar with the general tone of them. But it will be worth while to refer briefly to the methods of exegesis that Jews and Christians have employed to justify the retention of the Book as part of the Word of God.

Jewish expositors made use of three methods. (1) Some of them read the so-called Epicurean passages with a question mark after them, thus; "Is there nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, etc?" (2) Others adopted a legend that Solomon was driven from his throne in consequence of his disobedience to God, and held that this Book was the product of his period of estrangement from God. The

<sup>1</sup> A Paper read at the Cambridge Conference of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research in January, 1945.

origin of this legend appears to be i. 12 which says, "I the preacher *was* King over Israel", implying that now he is no longer king. (3) The unorthodox statements were paraphrased and explained away, as they are in the Targum on this book. Thus such a verse as ix. 7, "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God hath already accepted thy works", becomes in the Targum, "Solomon said by the spirit of prophecy before Jehovah, 'The Lord of the world shall say to all the righteous one by one, Go taste with joy thy bread which has been given to thee on account of the bread which thou hast given to the poor and the unfortunate who were hungry, and drink with good heart thy wine, which is hidden for thee in the Garden of Eden, for the wine which thou hast mingled for the poor and needy who were thirsty, for already thy good work has been pleasing before Jehovah'." Paraphrase along these lines could make even Wellhausen a fundamentalist!

Early Christian commentaries used similar methods of allegorising, paraphrasing, and explaining away. Jerome wrote a commentary on the Book to induce a Roman lady to adopt the monastic life. According to him, the purpose of the Book is to show the utter vanity of every sublunary enjoyment, and hence the necessity of betaking oneself to an ascetic life, devoted entirely to the service of God.

Martin Luther was probably the first to deny the Solomonic authorship. He regarded the Book as "a sort of Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt". Grotius in 1644 followed Luther in the idea that the Book was a collection, and once the idea of the unity of the Book was broken, it became possible to follow a fresh line of interpretation. Thus Herder and Eichhorn (*c.* 1780) regarded the book as a dialogue between a refined sensualist and a sensual worldling, or between a teacher and a pupil. The successor to this theory to-day is the commonly adopted one of three hands in the Book. First, there is Koheleth himself. Koheleth is the title assumed by the main author. Our English versions translate it as "The Preacher". Probably this is near enough to the correct meaning, but the commentaries commonly transliterate the Hebrew, so we shall do the same. Koheleth states doubts and problems that arise in his mind as he examines life. Then there is the Pious Man

who interjects orthodoxy when he finds a saying of Koheleth that shocks him. Finally a Wise Man sprinkles in a few maxims and proverbs. It is, of course, possible to have many more writers than these three if you wish. Siegfried has a pessimist, a Sadducee, a wise man, a pious man, a proverbial anthologist, a Redactor, an Epilogist, a second Epilogist, and a Pharisee.

On the other hand some commentators hold strongly to the unity of the book. Canon Lukyn Williams in the Cambridge Bible accepts it almost entirely, as previously did such commentators as Delitzsch, C. H. H. Wright and Cornill. What interpretation on this view will justify the retention of the Book in the Bible? Without concerning ourselves with details, the interpretation generally adopted is that here we have the struggles of a thinking man to square his faith with the facts of life. In spite of all the difficulties, he fights his way through to a reverent submission to God. The Book then is valuable, since it shows that even with the lesser light of the Old Testament it was possible for a thinking man to trust God; how much more is it possible for us with the fuller light of the New Testament! Cornill thus regards the Book as marking one of the greatest triumphs of Old Testament piety.

Another type of interpretation is worth mentioning. This stresses the phrase "under the sun", and holds that the author deliberately concerns himself only with the things of this world. Revelation and the world to come are laid aside for the purpose of the argument. Experience of the world leads only to pessimism. Where then is satisfaction to be found? The author does no more than hint that there is something more to be found in God. His purpose in writing is primarily negative—to cause dissatisfaction, so that men will turn in search of something that will satisfy.

Amongst those commentators who hold to the full inspiration of the Bible there is a certain hesitancy in dealing with Ecclesiastes. The introductory note in the Scofield Bible may be taken as fairly representative. "This is the Book of man 'under the sun', reasoning about life; it is the best man can do, with the knowledge that there is a Holy God, and that He will bring everything into judgment. The key phrases are 'under the sun'; 'I perceived'; 'I said in my heart'.

Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man's."

Without being concerned with minor details, we have now reviewed the main lines of interpretation of this fascinating Book. I do not know how far any one of them has satisfied you, but none of them completely satisfies me. This is not to say that there is no truth in them: obviously most of them contain some truth. But I do not feel that any of them has given a key that will unlock the Book as a whole, though all assume that there must be a key somewhere. That is to say, Ecclesiastes cannot be treated as a string of texts, each of which may be interpreted in isolation. Even though we may conclude that the author jotted down different passages at different times, in the manner of a diary of his spiritual experiences, yet most of us will feel that there must be some underlying unity, some theme by which the whole is to be interpreted. At any rate I am proceeding on that assumption. So it is useless to take a text and ask "What does that mean?" unless we have in our minds some scheme for the whole Book into which that text must fit. Most commentators have, of course, realised this. The point is, what is the scheme?

First of all there is one interpretation that I believe we must unhesitatingly reject. This is the conclusion that we have here the uninspired reasonings of the natural man or even of the sceptic. The theory of Scofield, and the theory of those who hold to several hands in the Book, do not strike me as in the least likely. Koheleth is spoken of in the last chapter as a wise man. He evidently had a high reputation for wisdom. There is a proverbial saying that a fool can raise problems which a wise man cannot answer. If Koheleth was the sceptic whose doubts needed to be dealt with by the other two writers, I do not see that his wisdom is much greater than that of the modern tub-thumping objector to Christianity. Anyone who wants to fling doubts at religion has plenty of ammunition in the world around.

Moreover it does not seem to be worthy of God to occupy valuable space in the Bible with the arguments of the sceptic and of the natural man. We can buy those anywhere or have them for nothing. That is the difficulty with Scofield's theory. This objection, of course, does not hold good against those who, like Cornill, see in the Book the triumph of piety over

the arguments of scepticism. There is something very attractive in this view, but none the less I do not feel that it gives us the master key to the whole Book.

Let us then turn to the Book afresh, and try to examine it without prejudice. And let us see whether we can interpret it as a unity before cutting the Gordian Knot and dividing the Book amongst three or more hands.

If you pick up a book and want to find the author's viewpoint, where do you turn? The preface is usually helpful—sometimes it saves you reading the book! The conclusion also in a well-written book generally sums up the point that the author has been trying to put over. When you look through the book, you may also be struck by something in the nature of a refrain, that by its continual recurrence tends to drive some point home. Suppose we apply these methods to Ecclesiastes.

The preface is a gaunt and stark announcement, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity". That may be the grumbings of a pessimist. To me it is the trumpets sounding the opening theme of some colossal overture. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

My opinion may be purely subjective; I do not ask you to accept it yet. But I do ask you not to dismiss the text as a sub-Christian verdict on life. It is sometimes said that Ecclesiastes is never quoted in the New Testament. But surely Paul has this verse in mind when he says in Romans viii. 20, "The creation was subjected to vanity", and in the context he includes us Christians in the whole creation. In other words whatever may be the precise meaning of Koheleth's sentiment, there is a general agreement between him and Paul that everything is subject to vanity. Incidentally I wonder whether this text is a genuine utterance of Solomon's, handed down as his comment on life. Koheleth at a much later date is so struck by it that he proceeds to put himself in the position of Solomon, and examines life through Solomon's eyes, so as to see how far his verdict was justified. That, of course, is only an idea, and has no direct bearing upon the theme of the Book.

From the preface we turn to the conclusion. Here again, not far from the end, we find the words of the preface recurring,

“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity” (xii. 8). But the final conclusion is definitely presented as the final conclusion: “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. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil” (xii. 13, 14). This conclusion is so orthodox that we hardly need any parallel quotations to support it, but we may notice the statement of Christ in Matt. xix. 17, “If thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments”, and that of Paul in 1 Cor. iii. 13, “The fire shall prove each man’s work of what sort it is”.

Now if this is the deliberate conclusion of Ecclesiastes, and if the Book is a unity, it stands to reason that no statement elsewhere in the Book can be interpreted as a final conclusion if it contradicts the statement at the end of the Book. Or, to put it from another angle, if any statement in the course of the Book is given as a final conclusion, it must be interpreted in the light of the ultimate conclusion at the end. This is not a matter of inspiration or non-inspiration; it is the treatment that we should give to any book written by a reasonable man.

The third way of finding an author’s point of view is to see whether there is any statement that recurs as a kind of refrain. There are several of these in Ecclesiastes. The “Vanity” theme recurs a number of times: Koheleth keeps reminding us of his text. “Under the sun” is another theme. One might add also, as Scofield does, “I perceived”, and “I said in my heart”, and similar phrases that describe a personal experience. We can see how these refrains fit into the general argument.

But there is yet another refrain, and this is the one that causes most of the difficulty in the interpretation of the Book. Six times over it comes, repeated in slightly different phraseology but reiterating the same sentiment. Its first occurrence in ii. 24 is representative of all the six; “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour”. The other occurrences are in iii. 12, 13; iii. 22; v. 18, 19; viii. 15; ix. 7-9. In each case the statements appear to be made as final conclusions. So the solution to life is that of the Epicurean sensualist, “Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die”!

Now something must have gone wrong with our deductions somewhere. For this is completely different from the ultimate conclusion of the Book. We must face the contradiction and look at the alternatives which might resolve it. Koheleth may be a slipshod writer who does not worry about contradictions. But this is not a minor contradiction; the whole basis and argument of the Book is at stake. Perhaps then the Epicurean sentiments represent a temporary mood, which is described, only to be rejected. If this is so, it is strange that the mood keeps recurring, each time in a dogmatic form that suggests a reasoned conclusion. At this point we may grow faint-hearted and adopt the counsel of despair, and dismember poor Koheleth, sending him to join the noble army of martyrs, amongst which will be found most of the Books of the Old Testament. This dismembering is an easy way out of many Bible difficulties, so easy that no one seems to have wondered why the Hebrews were so much more careless with their literature than any other people have been.

But let us have one more look and see whether we can save the unity of the Book. Why do we read Epicureanism into this refrain? Because we are familiar with the Epicurean slogan. But suppose that Koheleth was not familiar with the slogan. Would he then necessarily mean by his statement precisely the same as the Epicureans meant by theirs? Could he possibly mean something that would be consistent with his ultimate conclusion? This line of thought is worth following up.

There may be something in it. For at the beginning of chapter ii Koheleth describes Solomon's adventures in what we may call Epicureanism—mirth, pleasure, laughter, wine, servants, silver, gold, music and love. What more could a good Epicurean want? But Koheleth's conclusion is that it is all vanity. He can hardly then be advocating a similar course of pleasure for all men, even on a lesser scale. What then does he mean? Let us return to the preface and to the conclusion.

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” “Fear God, and keep his commandments . . . God shall bring every work into judgment.” The first is a verdict on all life. The second is counsel in view of the verdict. But is the verdict true? That is what Koheleth examines for us, turning life over and over



in his hands so that we see it from every angle. And he forces us to admit that it is vanity, emptiness, futility; yet not in the sense that it is not worth living. Koheleth's use of the term "vanity" describes something vastly greater than that. All life is vanity in this sense, that it is unable to give us the key to itself. The Book is the record of a search for the key to life. It is an endeavour to give a meaning to life; to see it as a whole. And there is no key under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." If you want the key you must go to the locksmith who made the lock. "God holds the key of all unknown." *And He will not give it to you.* Since then you cannot get the key, you must trust the locksmith to open the doors.

Before we come back to the Epicurean refrain, I want us to be convinced that this really is the theme of the Book and not just a fancy of my own. The statement in iii. 10, 11 is instructive: "I have seen the travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. He hath made everything beautiful in its time: also he hath set the world in their heart, yet so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end." A number of commentators adopt the R.V. marginal rendering here, and translate the Hebrew *ha-'olam* as "eternity" instead of "the world", and, as this makes better sense, we may adopt it. The previous context deals with the occurrence of events at their right times. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted." And a long list follows. Then come the two verses that I quoted just now. God has given us a sore travail. Events happen to us from time to time, but God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme; but, try as we will, we cannot see it, though we can declare by faith that each event plays its part in the beauty of the plan.

This is not an isolated thought. It occurs again in vii. 14: "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God hath even made the one side by side with the other, to the end, that man should not find out anything that shall be after him." Again it comes in viii. 17: "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

labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it: yea moreover, though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it."

This is not pessimism. It is the solemn truth—just as true to-day in Christian times as it was in the days of Koheleth. That eternal WHY hangs over our lives. It meets us at every turn. Our fondest hopes are shattered. Why? The Nazi hordes overrun Europe. Why? God allows the War. Why? A brilliant young Christian life is swept away, while a good-for-nothing wastrel is miraculously delivered. Why? Why? Why? Where is the sense in it all? And yet we must go on looking for the sense. It is incredible that life should make no sense. Every man who thinks at all believes that there is sense somewhere, if only he could find it. He may not look very far; he may settle down to an unworthy philosophy of life. Or he may plumb the depths of reason, of science, or of theology in an endeavour to find the plan. But he cannot find it. Joad has not found it. Huxley has not found it. Karl Barth has not found it. No one has. The moment we think we have it, something happens that does not fit into the scheme at all. But we go on looking. We must look. We cannot help it. "It is a sore travail which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith. . . . 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."

See how Koheleth develops his theme. We go through the world with him, looking for the solution to life, and at every turn he forces us to admit that here is only Vanity, frustration, bewilderment. Life does not provide the key to itself.

Come with him in the first chapter, and study Nature, that great revelation of God. But Nature is a closed system, an endless round of sunshine, winds, rain, rivers, speaking of God, it is true, but not disclosing the plan of God. The key is not in Nature.

Then let us try Man. Perhaps the key will be found in the process of history or in the progress of science. But all we see is an endless chain of generation after generation, striving for this and for that, groping for something and finding no satisfaction, producing new inventions, which are but adaptations of what already exists in the closed system of Nature, and which never bring to light that new truth and solution to life that all men long for. The key is not in humanity.

But it may be in Wisdom. Surely the greatest minds have the solution, or what is Wisdom for? Does Wisdom satisfy? Koheleth faces the question in the second part of his first chapter. Even though you have the Wisdom of Solomon, the verdict is: "In much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow." Why should it be so? Verse 15 suggests the answer, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is deficient cannot be made up". If we may paraphrase the last clause, the world is bankrupt and can do nothing about it. It is only the really wise man who realises the bankruptcy of life. Philosophy may easily lead to despair. It has been said that it is better to be a discontented Socrates than a contented pig. Certainly your Socrates will always be discontented, because he knows that he must for ever search for the key that he will never find.

But is there such a thing as a contented human pig? If there is, perhaps he has found the key dropped after all in the mire of his sty. So Koheleth looks there. In chapter ii he becomes the complete human animal. He runs the whole course of sensual pleasure, and his verdict is: "Vanity and a striving after wind." You can no more grasp the solution to life's eternal discontent there than you can grasp the wind in your fist.

Koheleth's mind sways to and fro. The clue is not in wisdom, but may it be perhaps in folly, in an attitude that closes its mind to all ideas? Is a fool the ideal man? No, cries Koheleth, I cannot admit that. "Wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness." "Yet I perceived that one event happeneth to them all. . . . How doth the wise man die even as the fool! So I hated life." Now for the first time Koheleth faces us with that supreme vanity—Death, Death that beats at every man's door, Death that comes when man least expects him, Death that undoes man's finest plans. Death can make a man hate life, not because he wants to die, but because it renders life so futile, just as a child on the seashore may grow weary of the sand castles that he builds so patiently only to have them swallowed up by the inexorable sea. Koheleth gives an illustration in ii. 18-23. A man gains wealth and power and makes an honoured name for himself. If he could live for ever, all would be well. But at his death all his possessions pass to another, and he may be a wastrel and a fool.

Pessimism of pessimisms: all is pessimism! God then has

made us to dance like puppets, in a play that we must always be trying to understand but can never comprehend.

There seems to be no cure, but to cut the strings and end the play by suicide, or to dance to our own tune and call it God's. The last is the conclusion of Omar Khayyám, but neither of the two is the solution of Koheleth. And yet so nicely balanced are the ultimate conclusions of life and religion that there is in places only a hair's breadth between Koheleth and Omar Khayyám. Yet that hair's breadth puts Koheleth's Book in heaven and leaves the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám tied to the earth.

Now at last we are ready to deal with the interpretation of the refrain to which we have already referred. But let us pause one moment more to ask ourselves what are the possible solutions to the problem of life that Koheleth raises, and what is the Christian solution? Suicide is a possible solution; we give life up in despair as a problem too great for us to understand. Few philosophers have accepted this solution, which is no solution at all. Popular Epicureanism is another solution which gives up the problem as insoluble. Some have believed this to be Koheleth's answer. But if it is, the closing verses of the Book, and other passages in the course of the Book, must be ascribed to another hand and Koheleth himself written off as a worldling. Fatalism may solve the problem. God is the arbitrary Judge, or maybe He is no more than impersonal Fate, working according to His whims and fancies. Omar Khayyám combines this Fatalism with Epicureanism. But what is this driving force that compels our minds to turn again and again to the problem of life? Is it no more than idle curiosity? Or is it part of our inheritance as those made in the image of God, so that we see that the universe has a wholeness, and that it must make sense if only we could find what that sense is?

The Christian answer is that the universe does make sense. There is a plan and a purpose that has its centre and its climax in Christ. We as Christians have been predestinated to be an integral part of that plan. We have been "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. ii. 10). But not even to Christians has it been given to comprehend the plan. Not even a Christian can explain how everything that comes into his life takes its place in the plan. But, none the less, all the time he is trying

to catch a glimpse of a certain wholeness that will link together all his individual experiences. But again and again he is driven back to the position of Romans viii. 28: "We know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose"; or, if *ὁ θεός* is read in place of *τὸν θεόν*, "We know that God works all things for good with them that love him". The Christian attitude then is one of faith and confidence. The Christian says, "I know that all these things must play their part in God's total plan. I long to know what the plan is and to see it as a whole, and I shall always go on trying to see it. But in the meantime I will live my life one day at a time, believing that in the common round of life I am doing the will of God. I will be content with what God gives me and take my life from the hand of God".

If, as I believe, this is the Christian solution, it is also the solution of Koheleth. If his refrain is interpreted in the light of the rest of the Book, it can only mean what the Christian means when he says, "I will take the things that make up my life, my food, my drink, my work from the hand of God. All things work together for my good". Thus Koheleth says in ii. 24: "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God." Or again in iii. 11-13: "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. I know that there is nothing better for them, than to rejoice, and to get good so long as they live. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God."

Now this theme is worked out, not only in the refrains, but continually throughout the Book. There is the thought of the certainty of a divine plan, even though individual steps in the plan remain a mystery, and must be accepted by faith. But man must never lose the realisation that there is a plan, and he must never begin to treat the common things of life, his food and drink and work, as though they were not the gift of God. Hence man must learn to serve God from his youth and he must remember that there is to be judgment. Judgment, of course, implies a divine plan. If our sins were not a falling

away from the divine plan, it would be difficult to vindicate God's justice in bringing us to judgment. But if we are brought up to realise that we owe a responsibility to God, it will help us to take our daily lives from the hand of God. This is Koheleth's thought in xi. 9, 10: "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart and put away evil from thy flesh; for youth and the prime of life are vanity." In other words, Koheleth advises young men to enjoy their lives, but not to forget that their pleasures should be regulated by a sense of accountability to God. They should put away all that would harm mind or body, and remember that youth is not the whole of life; it will give place to middle age, old age, and death. Could even a C.S.S.M. leader say more?

But this question of death needs a little more consideration. Once again Koheleth's statements must be interpreted against the background of the whole Book. Death is a salutary and sobering thing to Koheleth. See how he deals with it in *iii*. 18-22. Man commonly tends to live as though he had unlimited time for doing the plan of God. It is an extraordinary fact that most of us live as though this life were to be prolonged indefinitely. Or, looking at it from another point of view, we dwell upon the immortality of the soul, and forget that the vehicle for the service of God now is the body, and, if we fail to serve God in the body now, we shall never be able to make up in the future for what we have failed to do now. But the body is a frail thing. It links man with the animal world. Animals and men both possess that which the mineral and plant world lack—body and spirit. It may sound rather shocking to say that animals possess spirit, but, if you are shocked, I believe that shows that you have misinterpreted Koheleth. Some Biblical psychology has failed to recognise different uses of the term "spirit" in Scripture. Hence Koheleth has been understood to teach in *iii*. 21 that man perishes at death in the same way as the beasts perish; and in *xii*. 7, when he says that the spirit shall return unto God who gave it, that man at death goes straight to heaven, and not to Sheol. But the fact is that Koheleth is not discussing the survival of the personal spirit

in either of these passages. All animal life, which includes human life, has two features in common—a physical body and a life principle which animates the body. The thought is expressed again in Psalm civ. 29, 30: “Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created.” This life principle, or spirit, is the gift of God, and, when the body turns back to dust, the life principle goes back to the Author of all life.

Thus, to return to the interpretation of iii. 18–22, this body that we share with the animal world is a frail thing, yet it is the instrument with which we serve God. When an animal dies, where does it go? It goes to dust. What about its life principle? Can you assert that its destination is different from that of man? Are you, in other words, on a higher footing than an animal so far as the fact of physical death is concerned? Never mind about future opportunities of service. We are talking about service in the body. This life is the portion that God has given you. Here you must find your satisfaction and must realise yourself. For you will not come back again to this earth any more than an animal will.

I submit that that is a straightforward interpretation of the passage. And I should give a similar interpretation to viii. 16–ix. 10. Here once again we find the longing to know the plan. “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 labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it.” Here too we have the acceptance of the plan by faith. “The righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God.” Here too is the bewilderment at individual events: “All things come alike to all.” Those events that are beyond the individual’s own control so often appear to happen in a haphazard way. The tower at Siloam falls on the good as well as on the bad. And then, looming ahead, is the one event for all mankind, the one event of Death. And Death closes all. “A living cur is better than a dead lion.” “The living know that they shall die”, and can make their plans accordingly. There is a sense in which it is never too late in this life to take up your part in God’s plan. But the dead have run their course. They are waiting in Sheol for the judgment. They do not, like the living, know what is happening on the earth. They have no further opportunities of earning the Master’s reward.

Their bodies, the vehicles of the emotions of love and hatred and envy, have gone to dust, and no more can they share in life under the sun.

Now see how beautifully the refrain follows in verses 7-10. Take up the common things of life, and find your joy in the service of God there. Life is but vanity, but it is a vanity that may be turned to profit if only one grasps the opportunity while it is present. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in Sheol, whither thou goest." And if that last verse sounds sub-Christian, we may remind ourselves that Christ Himself said, "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work" (John ix. 4).

This emphasis upon doing our work with all our might is a necessary counterbalance to the thought of accepting our life as from the hand of God. We are not to live in a spirit of complete resignation to life, tamely submitting to the flow of events, saying about everything, "This is the will of God". This is not Koheleth's idea. The fact that he introduces the idea of moral responsibility, with his warning of the Judgment, shows that we are to live our life as free beings. Moreover the incidental pieces of proverbial wisdom are intended to be a guide for the practical side of life. We have reached the conclusion that the events of life by themselves do not furnish the clue to their own meaning. "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." So Koheleth says in ix. 11 and, if we are honest, we must admit that this is the impression that life makes on us. No one can guarantee success, and no one can quite see how God will deal with him in the events of life. Therefore many things in life must be planned on this basis. As God's people we may sincerely desire to arrange our lives for His glory, but we find it very difficult to say for certain, "If I do such-and-such a thing, I know I shall be conforming with God's plan, and He will bless me in it". That is the point of chapter xi. If you are a merchant or a farmer, it is no use waiting for infallible guidance so that you can invest all your possessions in one venture, or plant all your seed with the prospect of 100 per cent success. You



must use your common sense, and make such provision as you can to meet the unknown quantities in life. If you are a merchant, distribute your ventures over seven or eight schemes. If you are a farmer, sow your seed at different times so as to make sure of one crop, if not of more than one. This all sounds rather banal, but it seems to me to be a true guide for life. Until such time as God gives us infallible guidance, and as long as events in the world continue to happen apparently indiscriminately, I do not see that we can do anything else. Let us remember, however, that belief in the Providence of God does allow us to hold that there are exceptions to the ordinary run of things. God can and does work miracles, which are none the less miracles because they are brought about through natural causes. His people are often miraculously delivered. But it is fair to hold, as Koheleth held, that the vindication of God's ways in individual lives is the miracle, while the apparent chance—which to us, as to Koheleth, is no more than *apparent*—is the normal rule. But let us emphasise it once again, God has a plan, and at the end of it He will be vindicated. But until we have reached the ultimate end, we must not attempt to judge the plan from what we see by the way. Foolish men may try to do this and will be led to a false philosophy of life. Listen to Koheleth in viii. 11-13: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days as a shadow (i.e. in quiet coolness after the fever of life); because he feareth not before God."

Here then is the case for Koheleth. As counsel for the defence let me adopt a sentence of Cicero in his *Pro Archia* and say, I hope I have caused you to say, not only that Ecclesiastes ought not to be struck out of the Canon, since it finds a place there, but that, if it had not been placed in the Canon, it ought to have been placed there. It is a unique Book, and its omission from the Bible would be a definite loss. Quite obviously it is not the last word on the problems of life, for it belongs to the Old Testament and not to the New. But its solution is along the consistent Bible lines that appear in both the Old and the New Testaments. Is it only by chance that Paul in Romans

viii, after speaking of the vanity of the whole creation, goes on to speak of the sufferings that create a problem even for the Christian, and the confidence of the Christian in his daily life that all things work together for good for him? "All things" means those fortuitous events that we share in common with all mankind, where the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. The world is not weighted in our favour. But the same things, which break the man of the world, can make the Christian, if he takes them from the hand of God. Go on looking for the key that will unify the whole of life.

You must look for it: God has made you like that, sore travail though it be. But you will not find it in the world; you will not find it in life; in revelation you will find the outskirts of God's ways; in Christ your finger tips touch the key, but no one has closed his fingers on it yet. No philosophy of life can satisfy if it leaves out Christ. Yet even the finest Christian philosophy must own itself baffled. But do not despair. There is a life to be lived day by day. And in the succession of apparently unrelated events God may be served and God may be glorified. And in this daily service of God, we may find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us.

That was Koheleth's philosophy of life. Was he wrong?

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