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WAS KOHELETH A SCEPTIC?

As in a former paper we considered the question whether Job was an agnostic, so here we propose to inquire whether in the book of Ecclesiastes we have, as some think, the work of a Jewish sceptic, whose scepticism is individual rather than national, though, like the book of Job, having for its background those national misfortunes which called forth serious doubts in many minds as to the Divine direction of national concerns. Koheleth does not speak here, it is assumed, as a patriot, but as an independent observer of men and things in his own day, drawing his ironical conclusions from, and passing his satirical remarks upon the state of society in which he lives, delivering himself, in fact, as a private philosopher in trying to solve the problem of existence. Acquainted, indeed, with Job, but not imbued with the latent faith and fervour of its author, Koheleth is said to approach much more closely the spirit of modern scepticism. Sometimes he is represented as a counterpart of the modern rationalistic Jew in his easy morality and frivolous self-indulgence, with occasional relapses into gloomy Pessimism, himself, like his modern prototype, under the influence of pagan culture. There are those, however, who speak of the book as "a sacred philosophy," which, beginning with reflections on the vanity of things, ends in a return to the fear of God. But by far the greater number among modern scholars of repute, taking the closing sentences of the book as an addition by a later hand to save its orthodox character, see in it only the utterances of a *blasé* mind, sad and dejected by what he sees and feels, expressing here, in a kind of soliloquy, his personal broodings on the nothingness of life, living, as he did, in a social environment of oriental misrule and despotic absolutism.

The idea that Solomon could be the author of such a book is now rarely entertained,¹ whilst in the recent work by Professor Siegfried² no less than four, probably more, authors are mentioned as joint contributors to the work with the original author, whom he describes as an out-and-out pessimist. But whether we have here a "Solomon in a state of mental eclipse," or some one of a much later age assuming his name, which he drops as he proceeds in the discourse, whether we insist on the unity of the book, or admit the existence of collaborators with their glosses, corrections, and amplifications, looking at the work as a whole, and as such the final outcome of Hebrew thought, we may ask simply, without any desire or design to establish or to follow any critical hypothesis on this head, what resemblance with modern scepticism may be found in it, how far may it be said to throw light on some of the difficulties of modern thought, and does it suggest any solution of present-day problems?

In putting the question thus, we must recollect that Hebrew is a language which does not lend itself easily to express philosophical thought, and that the Arian tendency to fathom the reason of things, or curious speculation on the laws of our being, is foreign to the Semitic mind, and that we have to face, therefore, another question, *i.e.*, how far the book is influenced by Greek thought.

We ask, then, Is Koheleth Epicurean or pessimist in its tendencies, or is it neither of these, but only the unsystematic expression of a Hebrew believer in God, with a mind perturbed by doubt and debating—Koheleth is interpreted by some as "the debater"—with himself, like Pascal in the *Pensées*, the general truth of his inherited belief, shaken

¹ See, however, Dr. M. Friedländer's arguments in favour of this view in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. i., p. 359 seq.

² *Handcommentar z. alten Testament: Prediger und Hohelied, übersetzt und erklärt* von D. C. Siegfried; Göttingen, 1898.

as it has been by individual trials, domestic troubles, and national misfortunes?

If we regard him in the light of a Jewish Montaigne, we miss in him the equable temper and cheerful acquiescence in the facts of life professed by the French humanist; for, in spite of repeated exhortations to enjoy life and to take things as they come with a light heart, the Semitic seriousness of Koheleth reasserts itself constantly; the author lacks the mental tranquility and imperturbable indifference of ancient Epicureanism or modern Hedonism. Nor is it necessary to call in Prof. Siegfried's theory of an Epicurean glossator, Q³, a second Koheleth, who is the mouthpiece of all the Epicurean or Sadducean sentiments contained in the book. It is much more natural to see here the "two voices" within the mind of the same debater discussing the respective claims of sensuous pleasure and sad resignation. Nor is it clear that our author is a pronounced pessimist, though the minor key predominates in those passages where he dwells on the sad and seamy side of life. For even in these he is far from being such a hater of life as Schopenhauer professed to be; and if we compare him with Hartmann in his treatment of the three illusions of life, he is far from being as thorough as the modern pessimist in despairing of life. He does not, indeed, reach the cheerful resignation of the later Jewish Stoic Spinoza, who defines happiness as "Tranquility of the soul arising from a clear knowledge of God." But in following the meditations of this Hebrew philosopher of a remote age we seem to listen at times to the voice "of calm despair," and then again, to a cry of resigned cheerfulness trying to make the best of life under difficult circumstances. In all this we cannot help noting something akin to the spirit of our own time and among our leading thinkers, in giving way to the dejection which comes of lost faith, and then, again, descanting in a higher

key on the duty and charm of self-cultivation, and the sublime joy of self-renunciation.

In this Hebrew criticism of life we seem, then, to have the pleadings of faith with scepticism, the arguments of the sceptic traversed by the deeper reflections of the believer, not the utterances of a man hopelessly puzzled by the enigmas of life, vainly trying to recover equanimity amid its bewildering scenes; but, as Delitzsch puts it, we have here a writer who, admitting "the illusory character of earthly things, does not indulge in any kind of extreme asceticism which despises the world as such, and, in so doing, the gifts of God, but one whose ultimatum consists in claiming his share in a bright enjoyment of life, but only so far as this is possible within the limits of the fear of God and made possible by Divine co-operation."

It is not necessary to see with Dr. Dillon in the apparent irrelevancy of general observations and judgments of Koheleth the proof of a disordered mind, or a dislocation of leaves in the original manuscript; but we have here rather the divagations of a mind troubled by the double aspect of things when viewed from different standpoints.

It is worth while to pursue the subject into detail and inquire:

1. *What traces are there in the book of Epicurean modes of thought?* Since all is vanity, does our author simply recommend, as some think, the moderate enjoyment of life, having due regard to the conventionalities of religion, but with a reservation almost leading to fatalism and religious indifferentism? The ground tone of the book is entirely opposed to this view. There are passages, indeed, which sound Epicurean, but these are comparatively small in number. We rather feel inclined to view these Epicurean touches as one of the elements in the soliloquy, admitted for argument's sake, and finally rejected as a philosophy of life; just as a modern sceptical writer on the value of

life may weigh for a moment Hedonism or Eudaimonism as counter theories to Pessimism or Malism. In *Hamlet* and the *In Memoriam*, Shakespeare and Tennyson do the same. Some have suggested that Koheleth suggests a dialogue between two interlocutors maintaining contradictory views. Others that in its etymological meaning it suggests a conference between various thinkers of the academy founded by Solomon, whose different views are stated in the form of a discussion. But there is no need for all this. Every thinker dwelling on such a problem, as the book does, conducts, so to speak, a dialogue in his own inner consciousness, or holds a symposium in his own mind, where two or several voices make themselves heard, each suggesting a different solution or a new doubt, until at last, either in despair the problem is pronounced insoluble, or a conclusion is arrived at—"the conclusion of the matter"—which does not logically follow from the preceding premisses. The abrupt changes in the argument would thus be explained as fresh starts in speculation, or "temporary alleviations" of the mind in its sad musings, as so many attempts to catch a glimpse of the brighter side of life. The pendulum moves backwards and forwards from sad to gay, from cheerfulness to gloom, as one or other mood prevails; though even when the mind has reached what appears to be a sunny height, weariness again overtakes the writer. (see chap. ii. 26). There is no occasion to regard such abrupt changes as independent interpolations of a foreign hand; it is in accordance with the mutability of the human mind in its deeper moods. Even when the influence of Epicureanism is most pronounced, *e.g.* in chap. v. 17 seq., the Hebrew belief in God is no less earnestly affirmed, and throughout the Semitic seriousness of the author returns; a pessimistic gloom absorbs in its shadow the faint gleams of Hellenistic joyousness which for an instant glint across the page. "The genial, philosophical Koheleth," as

some one has called him, even when he exhorts his readers and himself to bright cheerfulness in life, attributes the gift of cheerfulness to God; he never approaches the lower Epicurean standpoint—"let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

2. *Was Koheleth, then, a Pessimist pure and simple?* "Pessimism," it has been said, "is the proper emotional reflex of intellectual scepticism. In this sense, it may be admitted, the book of Koheleth is pessimistic in tone, though the work, as a whole, is far from being what a German Pessimist has called it, "a Catechism of Scepticism." Yet the author's mind seems haunted throughout by a sense of the utter worthlessness of existence. He is brooding all along on the dreary aspects of life, which would leave him utterly disconsolate were it not for the one redeeming possibility of its being a school of adversity, and so affording a discipline for training oneself so as to enjoy the passing moments without fretting.

Those passages in the book which recommend tranquility and regulated enjoyment, and from which it has been too readily inferred that he is an Epicurean are, in fact, a relief from a protest against the unmitigated gloom of his own ingrained Pessimism. The work does contain detached thoughts, which are profoundly pessimistic, but it also includes others where the good and evil of life are judiciously balanced against each other, and which exclude the idea of philosophical despair. There may be cases where a misshaped existence and undeserved misfortunes produce a sour misanthropy, as in Swift. There may be others where the sadder experiences of life predominate and produce a kind of moral scepticism, or practical disbelief in virtue, and so generate misogyny. Koheleth is subject to both these, as passing intellectual moods, but he recovers himself, so that his irony or satire never reaches the bitterness of, say, such pessimists as

Leopardi or Heine. The reluctance of orthodox Judaism, which is optimistic, to accept the book for a time as canonical, and the absence of quotations from it in the New Testament and most of the Fathers, no doubt arose from the fact that its Eudaimonism is too Epicurean and its Pessimism not sufficiently redeemed by Christian resignation. But the final verdict in favour of its canonicity and use since in the Christian Church arose from the further consideration that our author, though he seems to go a long way in the direction both of Epicureanism and Pessimism, ultimately returns to a better and higher view of life than that which either of these presents; that he, unlike them, avoids the fallacy of extremes.¹ The book of Ecclesiastes, then, is, after all, and in spite of M. Renan's assertion to the contrary, "a book of sacred philosophy." Its author sees some kind of law and order in the rigid sequence of events which follow from their antecedents. But he stops short of fatalism. He counsels cheerfulness in labour and sorrow, but escapes the charge of Epicureanism; he is deeply affected by the sorrows and sufferings of humanity without losing himself in the abyss of hopeless Pessimism; the outcome of his philosophy seems to be—"Work, and despair not"; or, in the words of a modern Jewish philosopher, he seems to say, "The only true happiness in the world's gift is that which springs up, free and unsought, by the wayside of duty."²

3. *We have here, then, a believer in doubt, baffled by the contradictions of life, "thinking aloud" to himself, letting us know how his mind turns now to this, now to that theory of life in search after a solution, and how, after a circular tour through the mazes of human thought,*

¹ On the theory that Koheleth is a protest against Pessimism of the school of Shammai, see *Jewish Chronicle*, vol. i. p. 36f.

² *Path and Goal*, by M. M. Kalisch, Ph.D., M.A.; London, 1880, pp. 490-1. This important work is a discussion founded on an original translation of Ecclesiastes into English.

he finally returns to a firmer faith in God and the Divine law of duty. The book in its recoil from the world thus prepares the way for Christian conceptions of life and duty. For this reason there are thrilling passages without number in recent dramas like those of Ibsen, and recent works of fiction like that entitled *The Open Question*, as typical of a considerable number of the same class dealing with life's problem in a pessimistic vein, which simply re-echo the perplexing doubts and reflections of Ecclesiastes on the vanity of all things.

Again, the modern melancholy which is ascribed by some to the growth of democracy in its futile quest after earthly happiness, and the severe condemnation passed by modern poets and philosophers on the false promises held out by the prophets of evolution and the professors of "dynamic Optimism" seem to have been anticipated by Koheleth, though different in form, corresponding with the difference of the conditions, social, political, and intellectual, of the age to which they belong. He, too, attacks the false Optimists among Jewish theorists; he, too, dwells on the final outcome of life, on death and immortality in a vague, undecided manner, not unlike some of the finer minds of our own day, who try to escape the meshes of doubt, and to find their way out of the confusing maze of life in threading their labyrinthine way guided by the Ariadne cord of faith and a better hope. A distinguished sceptical agnostic speaks contemptuously concerning such a state of mind. "Faith in the beyond," says Mr. Leslie Stephen, "really implies scepticism as to the present, and those who most fervently assert their belief in an omnipotent and perfect governor of the world are, therefore, those who can speak most bitterly, and with the least hopefulness, of the world which he governs." But is not such a secular and mundane scepticism, which despairs of attaining the ideals which haunt the lives of

mortals, a legitimate form of scepticism? and in giving expression to it, does not Koheleth pave the way to the next stage in the evolution of human thought, which looks on life as a state of probation and preparation for another and higher state of existence in the individual and the race here, or hereafter, when these ideals—which are inseparable elements of ideal human nature—may be more fully realized?

And what is the conclusion arrived at, what is the general outcome of the book as the latest product of Jewish philosophy? Does it contain more than the expression of mental weariness produced by a wide survey of life? Since neither wealth nor wisdom avails, and since the well-being of man cannot be secured by any of the ordinary means adopted by man for this purpose, is there nothing left but resigned labour to make life worth living? Is there no escape from moral scepticism amid the prevailing injustice in the universe? and is there nothing left but the practical duty of adjusting the course of life to existing facts without being able to account for them? Is there nothing for it but indolent acquiescence in the unavoidable, in view of man's impotence to alter the destinies of fate? Is there no reality behind the veil across which we see the vain shadows flitting? Is all a deceptive picture, and shall we never be able to forecast the goal of the seeming progress of our race? Is there no prospect of an ultimate realization of our ideals? Are we to be satisfied as best we may with an enforced contentment or a self-imposed renunciation according to "the golden rule" which is "to keep our wishes within the bounds of moderation, and to adjust them to unfavourable circumstances?—and, if so, *cui bono*?

In other words, have we, as some think, here in this book of Ecclesiastes something corresponding to the latest forms of doubt among ourselves, as *e.g.* in J. S. Mill's pathetic desire to snatch some remnant of truth in the old

formulas about God and the soul in his profoundly sceptical *Essays on Religion*; or something like Goldwin Smith's "tremulous aspirations" towards God and immortality in his *Guesses on the Riddle of Existence*, as necessary to the heart, but unprovable by the head of man? or something like the speculations of Sir John Lubbock on "the pleasures of life," when he simply bids us to try to make the best of it, so that "if we cannot hope that life will be all happiness we may at least secure a heavy balance on the right side"? Or have we not rather here something akin to all these, yet something at the same time differing essentially from them, something more worthy of the genius of religion possessed in an eminent degree by the compatriots of Koheleth? Have we not the confession of faith of a true Israelite mingled with thoughts which border on infidelity, representing as it were a class of thinkers, in all ages and countries, searching after truth, who cannot rest till they have tried at least to discover a true philosophy of life on rational grounds; who, when baffled in the attempt, have recourse to faith where reason fails; who, groping in the darkness which envelops us, give utterance in varying accents to the cry of the blind man in the Gospel, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief"? "Was Pascal a sceptic, or a sincere believer?" inquires Leslie Stephen in an article on the subject in the *Fortnightly Review*; and thus replies: "The answer is surely obvious. He was a sincere, a humble, and even an abject believer precisely because he was a thorough-going sceptic." The same might be affirmed of Ecclesiastes. It reminds us of Tennyson's line, "Who never doubted, never half believed." The belief in God and duty was not a "vague surmise" like that ascribed by L. Stephen to Hume's Deism. To Koheleth it was a matter of spiritual apprehension. Faith in God was to him the anchor of the soul tossed about upon the sea of doubt in his voyage of discovery after truth. As

a reformer of the current theology he falls back on Old Testament *fiducia*, fearful trust in some sustaining Power amid the evanescent phenomena of existence; it is to him the resting point in the whirl of moral chaos.

The book before us, therefore, in its general drift contains much that is calculated to correct and modify some modern exaggerations of the "blessings of unbelief" and the rash averment of those who speak of Scepticism as "the great sweetener of life." It reminds us that "without sorrow the divine seriousness of life would be unknown." It presents us with the most pathetic picture of the melancholy side of religion. It corrects, at the same time, the too hasty conclusions of Pessimism, "All is dreary"; it seems to say with Dr. Newman, "Till we believe what our hearts tell us, that we are subjects of His governance, nothing is dreary, all inspires hope and trust, directly we understand that we are under His hand, and whatever comes to us is from Him, as a method of discipline and guidance."

If, on the other hand, it indicates a brighter view of life, it does so, as we tried to show, not in the ordinary Epicurean strain, but rather in the spirit of Tennyson's "Ancient Sage," who sees the two sides of the shield:

Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt
And cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith!
She reels not in the storm of warring words,
She brightens at the clash of "Yes" and "No,"
She sees the Best that glimmers through the Worst,
She feels the Sun is hid but for a night,
She spies the Summer through the Winter bud,
She tastes the fruit before the blossom falls,
She hears the lark within the songster's egg,
She finds the fountain where they waited "Mirage."

If the author of Koheleth, like some modern writers of the same type, exhorts us to seek refuge in routine work, or solace in labouring incessantly for the species, as when he exclaims, "In the morning sow thy seed," etc., or "Cast

thy bread upon the waters," etc., he does so not in the sad tone of the modern poet :

Unduped of fancy, henceforth man
Must labour!—must resign
His all too human creeds, and scan
Simply the way divine!

The ancient Hebrew writer goes beyond this, though not far enough for us, because not with the full assurance of those who have reached a further stage in the "way divine," taught by the messenger of truth who brought life and immortality to light by the gospel for which it was the mission of Koheleth to prepare the way.

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