

# THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES AND THE AFTER-LIFE

by ARTHUR MALTBY

**M**R. MALTBY, who is Deputy Librarian in the Commercial and Social Science Department of Liverpool Public Libraries, has found the book of Ecclesiastes an excellent "praeparatio evangelica." It is interesting and refreshing to read his study of one aspect of this enigmatic book, especially as he comes to independent conclusions markedly divergent from those reached by most of its modern students.

**T**HE work which we know as Ecclesiastes is not, and probably never will be, among the most popular books in the Bible. Yet, after studying this book, it is difficult to regard it with indifference. We shall either tend to distrust Ecclesiastes and minimize its worth, or fall under the spell of its peculiar literary charm and make it one of our personal favourites. That the present writer is strongly attached to this book is evident from this article. At the same time, it is as well to recognize that it is not everybody's meat and, in fact, was accepted into the Hebrew Canon with some reluctance. The great appeal of this work will usually be to those who, from contemplation or bitter experience, have found life wanting in some way. Koheleth, for we shall call the author of the book by his Hebrew name, certainly found life unsatisfactory. But did he believe in a life beyond the grave? Did he consider that the injustices and injuries of this life were recompensed in a life to come? Now most modern scholars insist that he did not and quote some verses to suggest that, in Koheleth's speculation, the grave was the end. This article is an attempt to refute such a view. There are certainly verses in the book of Ecclesiastes which can be cited if endeavouring to prove that the after-life did not exist for its author, but there are certain others which suggest that it played a prominent part in his philosophy. The conflict can only be resolved by studying these verses in their context and making a careful study of the book as a whole. One is reluctant to row against the stream of modern scholarship, but the evangelical Christian will certainly feel happier about the book if he feels it has suggestions of a life to come. The book as a whole has been well considered in this journal by Principal Stafford Wright<sup>1</sup>

and the aim of the present article is solely to deal with the problem of whether or not Koheleth believed in a life after death. The authorship of the book is not considered, except that Ecclesiastes is regarded as being "given from one shepherd" who "set in order many proverbs."

In suggesting that Koheleth believed in a life after death, we are at variance with the work of scholars such as Wardle<sup>2</sup> and Oesterley and Robinson.<sup>3</sup> Likewise Seton Pollock<sup>4</sup> says that while Koheleth presented life as worthless and vain, he "gave no answer to the dilemma he propounded." Pollock goes on to say that remarks in the book concerning a life to come must be the work of a pious editor. He tells us that "some other hand has added the epilogue. . . . Ecclesiastes had regarded the grave as the end of the story and had conducted his experiments without regard to any wider horizon." Why, one must ask, is the conclusion necessarily an addition? There is no evidence at all to say that it is such. The most facile explanation of texts which seem contradictory is achieved by the multiplication of authorship. If we say that verses in this work which appear to involve a clash of opinions could not possibly come from the one mind, then we end in a hopeless tangle. How can one divide up, for example, a passage such as Ecclesiastes 7: 16-17, "Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?" We therefore conclude that the work is all to be attributed to Koheleth and therefore such apparent contradictions must be explained in one of the following ways:

(a) That the author was including objections to his own ideas and endeavouring to answer them.

(b) That the book reflects the struggle between his higher and lower nature.

(c) That the work reveals the development of his outlook and philosophy, beginning at the start of his quest and leading us through to the end.

This article accepts the last view, although there may be some truth in the others also. Koheleth collects sayings, considers them,

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, January, 1946.

<sup>2</sup> W. L. Wardle, *The history and religion of Israel*.

<sup>3</sup> Oesterley and Robinson, *Hebrew religion: its origin and development*.

<sup>4</sup> S. Pollock, *Stubborn soil: the Hebrew interpretation of human life as reflected in the "Wisdom" books*.

and works his way through a train of thought and speculation before reaching his own conclusions. This would account for the phrase "set in order," the order being that of his own deliberations following his fundamental assertion that life under the sun was vanity. His conclusion would seem to support the belief in the after-life. True, he offers no clear picture of this after-life, yet his merciless analysis of the present one inevitably paves the way for belief in a life to come where justice shall be done for the evils that go unpunished on earth. Now it has been said that the judgments spoken of in Ecclesiastes relate merely to temporal things, but the references to the certainty of judgment would be obvious lies if they did not refer to a future state, as Holden<sup>5</sup> wisely shows: "Why did he paint, in such glowing colours, the emptiness of all terrestrial things if no better prospect awaited us beyond the grave? . . . The declaration 'God shall bring every work into judgment,' if it merely refers to his dealings with mankind on earth, neither agrees with the scope of the whole discourse, nor forms a reason for the precept delivered immediately before. Take it, however, in its true light, and all the expressions will be found correct and the argument cogent." With this commentary the present writer is in complete agreement.

If we go through the book of Ecclesiastes to note the development of the author's ideas, we find that he begins with the declaration that all under the sun is but vanity and a striving after wind. "Under the sun," as Barton<sup>6</sup> says, is a synonym for "in this world." Barton does not think that Koheleth believed in an after-life, and yet the very phrase "in this world" seems superfluous unless the writer had at least a vague idea that there might be another one. However, Koheleth is, at first, solely concerned with seeking happiness under the sun and he can find no lasting satisfaction in worldly knowledge, wealth or acquisition. He goes on to say that he hated life because it could not provide enduring contentment. He tells us that there is a season for all things, and laments the wickedness that corrupts judgment in this world. He therefore reasons that God will judge men in due season (3: 17) and continues his analysis. He includes many proverbs which interest him, but he is also developing his own views. His strong moral sense is grieved at the idea of the wicked flourishing while the righteous are afflicted and he has by now found that men are not judged in this world as he had previously hoped. In a moment

<sup>5</sup> G. Holden, *Attempt to illustrate the book of Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>6</sup> G. A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes* (International Critical Commentary).

of bitterness he discourages righteousness, but his sense of eventual justice prevails and the next verse of his record counterbalances the pessimistic one (7: 16-17). He continues his musings and in Chapter 9 he reaches a point of despair, where his hope of a compensating life to come seems to have been temporarily extinguished. It revives, however, and the closing chapters of the book urge good works and a sober and religious life, reminding us of the brevity of our existence in this world and the coming judgment. In making this cursory survey of Ecclesiastes, it is hard to see why so many scholars maintain that Koheleth believed that death ended all. It is true that, towards the end of his quest, he becomes disgusted with the blatant injustices of this world and, having no material proof of another, he passes through a period of despair. In his final position, however, he is a believer in an after-life where judgment will take place. The strong desire in his nature for moral justice really makes it impossible for him to be otherwise. Here we are supported by Desvoeux,<sup>7</sup> who says that the object of the book is "to prove the immortality of the soul, or rather the necessity for another state after this life, from such arguments as may be afforded by reason and experience." The book shows changing moods of its author and his developing opinions, the only constant notion being that life on earth is vain. However, Koheleth ends by asserting his faith in a future life although his conception of it is vague.

Let us now examine the texts quoted by those scholars who maintain that Koheleth definitely believed that the grave was the end of human existence. The first is 3: 21 which reads: "Who knoweth the spirit of man whether it goeth upward and the spirit of the beast whether it goeth downward to the earth?" At most, this verse only suggests that there is no readily demonstrable proof of human superiority over lower animals. Man's body, like that of the beast, turns to dust. What of his soul? Koheleth leaves the question unanswered at this early stage, but he returns to this theme in Chapter 9. It is here that we find the other two texts used by critics of Ecclesiastes who would deny the view of the book that is taken in this article. The first of these texts reads: "the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything." The second text, which we shall consider together with this one, says: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave (*Sheol*), whither thou goest." Now at first

<sup>7</sup> A. V. Desvoeux, *Dissertation on Ecclesiastes*.

sight these texts seem a conclusive denial of the after-life, but they certainly do not blend with the notion of a coming judgment that Koheleth refers to also. To obtain the true explanation, we must examine the above verses in their context, remembering that Koheleth is a writer with a very keen sense of justice. He has been considering evils "under the sun" and is indignant that "there be righteous men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked." Justice is not done and good and bad die without righteousness being openly vindicated. Koheleth is bitter about this and, in a moment of despair, he proclaims that man must accept this life and make the best of it, for its many activities are all curtailed at the grave. If the current doctrine of Sheol was right, he argues, then our existence is both shallow and unjust. Vanity of vanities is life, for death quickly terminates it. Men and women know no more of this world and are soon forgotten by those who remain. But this is not the last word of Koheleth. He returns to the fray at once, for he is dissatisfied with the opinion he has just offered. Returning to his theme of injustice, he re-examines it and justifies wisdom and good works. He eventually decides that there is a judgment for the deeds that we do on earth and his majestic conclusion is supported by other texts such as 8: 11-13 and 11: 9. He has weighed two ways of life against each other for us and chosen the better. Some writers would deny the "judgment texts" to Koheleth, but this virtually means hacking the book to pieces and attributing to another pen, not merely verses, but half-verses and single phrases.

We have reached the end of our investigation and now, like Koheleth, we must round it off with a conclusion. Can we state that this work, the product of a mind that was deeply concerned with justice and with finding a rational and logical approach to life, decided that man had best do what he liked before omnivorous death swallowed him up? Our survey of the book has endeavoured to illuminate the ponderings of one who was desirous of finding the best way to live and who perpetually returns to the idea of justice and judgment. This is always in the background of Koheleth's thought and it triumphs in the end, for although he lacks the material evidence that he could wish for, he affirms that God will have a reckoning day with man in a life to come. As Holden says, "his conceptions of a future state were surrounded with shade and obscurity. But he was too well convinced of a future life to regard aught as the chief good which is restricted to the present." The other viewpoint, that Koheleth did not finally believe in a future state, leads us to some strange con-

clusions. "Though a sceptic," says Barton, "he has not abandoned his belief in God." After making due allowance for the opinions of the age in which Koheleth lived, it is a poor tribute to his intelligence to say that he would pay homage to a deity as impotent as this idea would suggest. The main object of Ecclesiastes is not to speak of the after-life, but to show the necessity for it by showing up our earthly vanities for what they are. In this Koheleth is wonderfully successful. The "golden bowl" of this life that is the only concern of so many people may be shattered at any time. Why give such a warning if not as an incentive to use the time wisely and prepare to meet the Creator? Barton suggests that the teaching of Koheleth is, to a Christian, "chilling and disappointing," but this will not be so if our view of the book is the one that is defended in this article. Koheleth has a hard-won faith in a life beyond the grave born of moral necessity rather than intellectual conviction, but then it was left to Jesus to spotlight the doctrine and bring "life and incorruption to light through the gospel." To the potential Christian, Ecclesiastes can act as a wonderful corrective to the snares of the world, for it underlines the emptiness of mortality and is a tremendous advocate for the moral necessity of a future state.

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