

ECCLESIASTES.

CHAPTER I. VERSES I—II.

IT is not my intention to lay down anything at the outset with regard to the object or scope of this Book. I shall not even begin by inquiring who was the author of it, or at what period of Jewish history it was written. These are questions of interest, which have been long and eagerly debated, and it can scarcely be said that any of them have been finally settled. There are elements in the problem that, on the one side or on the other, have hardly had full justice done them; and where the bulk of the evidence on which the answers to these questions rests is of an internal kind, turning upon the subject-matter and language of the Book, it is better to suspend our judgment till we have examined the Book itself. This is what I propose to do. I shall not begin with a theory. I shall not state a proposition as to the end and purpose of the Book, and try to prove it. I shall not argue whether it is the work of Solomon or of some later writer. Let the Book speak for itself. It is a very striking and unique specimen of ancient Jewish literature. It is the one attempt made by a Hebrew writer, whose works have been comprised within the Canon, to face the problems of life in a philosophical spirit. It is true this is not done in the manner of a formal treatise. The Jewish mind was naturally averse from speculation. Jewish

literature in its earlier form is wholly wanting in that keen and subtle analysis which is characteristic of the Greek. Jewish thought delights itself in the dramatic incidents of history, and in the strong and passionate forms of poetry, rather than in metaphysical disquisitions or the keen fence of dialectics. It is not till the Jewish mind is brought into close contact with the Greek that it submits to the discipline of form. The Epistle to the Hebrews is the most orderly and systematic of all the Books of the Canon, just because the Jew who wrote it was most distinctly under the influence of Greek culture and philosophy in Alexandria. St. Paul, with all his Greek education, has the fervid irregularity of the Jew. His logic is broken by passion. It does not follow from this that the view of life and of duty presented to us in the Jewish writings is less true or less sure. On the contrary, the poet always sees more than the philosopher; and perhaps there is nothing further from truth than the rigid logic which takes no account of the infinite play of human emotion. A religion or a philosophy which leaves the emotions out of account must always be barren. The heart has its imperative demands in any discussion of the problems of life, of man's destiny and his position towards his Creator, which must be satisfied no less than the claims of the intellect. And a work like that of Qoheleth (or Ecclesiastes), irregular in its form, and making no pretensions to exact thought or logical order, may be of far more service to us in the battle of life than the most logically-arranged treatise, in which all is as cold as it is fair.

At the opening of this Book we might indeed suppose that we were to have the results of the writer's

experience and reflections presented to us in a systematic shape. The various methods by which he had tried to satisfy the longings of his heart are stated in their proper sequence, and we might have expected that the failure in each case would have been traced to its source, and the true remedy supplied. But we find nothing of the kind. We are soon wandering in a labyrinth without any clue to guide us. The Book, we feel, is not, was never intended to be, a philosophical or ethical treatise, or even a religious treatise in the common acceptation of the term. There is nothing of method about it. It does not propose to give a complete solution of all the difficulties of life, or to advise as to all its duties. It is simply the actual record of the struggles, fears, hopes, perplexities, griefs, sins, of a human heart. A man of ripe wisdom and mature experience gives us what may be called the journal of his inner life. He takes us into his confidence. He unclasps the secret volume, and invites us to read it with him. There is that in it which may be of service to us, most of all of service to those who are setting out on the voyage of life, if they will listen to the pilot who offers to guide them. He draws the chart, and marks the sunken reefs and dangerous iron-bound coasts, and the harbours of refuge. He lays before us what he has been, what he has thought and done, what he has seen and felt and suffered; and then he asks us to listen to the judgment which he has deliberately formed on a review of the whole. We have in these "Confessions" the record of a singularly varied experience. The Preacher has had at his command great power and vast wealth; he has surrounded himself with Oriental magnificence and luxury; there is scarcely any pursuit

in which he has not engaged, any mode of life, any form of human enjoyment, with which he has not had some acquaintance. This lends a charm to his Book ; but we have here also what is of far more value—the autobiography of one of the largest hearts God ever gave to man. It is conceivable that the tale of such a man's occupations and pleasures might have palled upon us and disgusted us. But it is not so. The mighty magician touches the secret chords of the human spirit. Heart speaks to heart; and as we struggle on through the dusty ways of life, footsore and weary of heart, not knowing what shall be the end of the journey, and saying to ourselves, "Who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth upward, and the spirit of a beast goeth downward to the earth? one event happeneth to all alike," it is something to hear a friendly voice beside us, saying: Yes, my brother, I, too, have uttered words like these. I, too, have wandered like you in that dark interminable forest, torn by its prickly undergrowth, poisoned by its exhalations, bitten by its deadly reptiles; but I have come forth into the light of God, a fresh air fans my cheek, the broad ocean of his love stretches in the sunlight before me: and I tell you, as the sum of all my experience, that God and duty abide. "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole of man." Surely that is a right noble creed and a right noble philosophy. But we must not anticipate. The questions which properly belong to the *Introduction* to the Book I wish to reserve for the present. Let us turn to the Book itself.

The First Verse of the First Chapter may be re-

garded as a general title, either prefixed by the author himself, or added subsequently by some scribe.

Chap. i. 1.—*The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king of Ferusalem.*

A complete discussion of this Verse would plunge us at once into the whole controversy concerning the authorship of the Book ; and this is one of the points which, as I have said, will be better considered hereafter. I may, however, say a few words on the signification of the *nom de plume* which the author has thought fit to employ. *Qoheleth* is not a proper name. It is, strictly speaking, a feminine participle from a root meaning “to gather together,” the noun from the same root being constantly employed to denote “the congregation” or Church of the Old Testament, and finding its equivalent in the *ἐκκλησία* of the New Testament. Hence *Qoheleth* would mean, strictly, “she who assembles.” The choice of the feminine participle has been accounted for as having a reference to the Hebrew noun “Wisdom,” which is feminine. And then, further, it has been supposed that Wisdom stands here for Solomon, the abstract for the concrete. Thus it is Wisdom personified in Solomon who assembles men to listen to him, and, consequently, who occupies the place of a teacher or preacher. So the LXX. give ὁ ἐκκλησιαστής, and the Græc. Venet. ἡ ἐκκλησιάστρια, or, as in Chapter xii. 9, ἡ ἐκκλησίαζουσα. And Jerome rightly explains the Greek title by saying that it means one who calls together an assembly, that is a Church ; one whom we may call a preacher (*concionatorem*), because he speaks to the people, and his discourse is addressed, not to an individual in particular, but to the mass in general.

Some of the Rabbis, Rashi for instance, R. Solomon b. Meir, and others, have supposed the name to denote Solomon as a "gatherer of *wisdom*," because he was wiser than all the children of the East. But such an explanation of the participle is not warranted by usage.

Nor, again, can it be said that this is the feminine form which is sometimes employed to denote *office* in Hebrew; for that is always an abstract noun, and it is a feminine participle *active* that we have here, not an abstract noun. The nearest approach to a similar form is in the use of a feminine participle denoting office as the proper name of a man, Sophereth (scribe), in Nehemiah vii. 57; and, with the article, Hassophereth, in Ezra ii. 55. (See, for another instance, Ezra ii. 57.)

For the true analogues to this feminine participle as it is here used we must go to Arabic. There we find feminine forms closely corresponding to this; and the Arabic grammarians tell us that the feminine termination gives to the idea sometimes a collective signification, or serves as "an exhaustive designation of the properties of the genus." For instance, *'allamat* means a very learned man, as uniting in himself all the properties of learned men. The feminine in such a case takes the place of the neuter, as is frequent in Hebrew, and hence we have the notion contained in the word in its most essential form. Qoheleth therefore is, without regard to the gender, a person who preaches, one who concentrates in himself the idea of preaching or teaching.

CHAPTER I. VERSES 2-11.

2. *Vanity of vanities, saith Qoheleth, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.* 3. *What profit hath man of all his travail wherewith he travaileth under the sun?* 4. *One generation goeth, and another cometh, while the earth abideth for ever.* 5. *The sun ariseth, and the*

sun setteth, and panteth (again) to reach his place where he ariseth. 6. The wind goeth to the south, and turneth round to the north; round and round it goeth continually, and the wind returneth to its circuits. 7. All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full: unto the place whence the rivers flow, thither they return in their flow. 8. All things are weary; man cannot utter them. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. 9. That which hath been is the thing that shall be; and that which hath been done is the thing that shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. 10. If there be anything whereof men say, See, this is new, it hath been long ago, in the ages that were before us. 11. There is no remembrance of them that were before; so likewise for them that shall be hereafter they shall have no remembrance among them that come after them.

I have not arranged the clauses here metrically, for Ecclesiastes is not a poem. No doubt there are in it passages of a strongly poetical colouring, especially at the beginning and towards the close, and impassioned or elevated sentiment falls naturally in Hebrew into a rhythmic cadence. But it is quite a mistake to cast such a book as this into a metrical paraphrase. The parallelism which is of the essence of Hebrew poetry appears here only fitfully and at long intervals. The subject of the writer's meditations, and the deep personal feeling everywhere shewing itself, invest the work with a charm such as is found in the highest poetry; but the diction is that of prose, with but few exceptions.

Verse 2.—"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

This is the wail with which the Book opens; and it is repeated, with melancholy iteration, till the close. It is the cry of a bitter disappointment, the cry wrung from a man who, looking back, sees nothing but a wasted and fruitless life. It is scarcely necessary to say a word of this Hebrew idiom of reduplication, by which the intensest expression of feeling is conveyed.

it has passed so completely into our own language, that we do not suspect it to be of foreign growth. But the word rendered "vanity" deserves a moment's notice. It means, strictly, *a breath, a vapour*, the lightest and most fleeting of things. This is what the world is, this is what it appears to any observer who allows himself to be impressed only by the fleeting evanescent nature of the phenomena which surround him. But the feeling which speaks here is deeper. I have said that I will postpone the full discussion of the question of authorship till we have finished our exposition, only noticing it so far as certain verses (*e.g.*, the twelfth and sixteenth of this Chapter) imperatively require me to do so, in order to their proper interpretation; but meanwhile I may at least assume, what all Commentators admit, that the Book, whether written by Solomon or not, is intended to describe an experience like that of Solomon. It is he whose voice we hear in that exceeding bitter cry, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." None ever entered upon the voyage of life with such prosperous gales; no wiser hand ever steered the barque; none ever made a more fatal shipwreck. We shall see, as we go on, how two aspects of life are presented to us in this Book, how two currents of thought and feeling mingle. We shall listen sometimes to the language of despair, sometimes to that of hope. But the first words that escape from this accomplished man of the world when he sits down to write the tale of his life are expressive of weariness, satiety, dissatisfaction: "All is vanity." All is *not* vanity. But there are moods of bitterness and unrest when the pessimist view of life seems the only natural one, when to read the riddle of the world seems hope-

less, and the utter futility of all human effort is the irresistible conclusion from a survey of the vast tangled web by which we are compassed about.

A man like Solomon, looking back upon his past life, could only look back upon it with shame and bitterness. He had had splendid opportunities. God had given him wisdom, a large heart, great power, great riches. What use had he made of all? His wisdom had been clouded and darkened by passion; he had become despicable in his own eyes, and hated by his subjects. That was the end of all his pomp and splendour, his vast acquisitions, his great public works, his lavish outlay, in a word, his boundless self-gratification.

If, then, we bear in mind that a man is speaking to us here who was not only endowed with singular gifts of mind and heart, but who had a profound sense of religious duty, and who yet had flung himself with ardour into every pursuit and every pleasure, lawful or unlawful, which can attract man, we have the key to those strange utterances of pain and discontent which are so affecting in this Book.

Verse 3.—"What profit hath man of all his travail wherewith he travaileth under the sun?"

These words are the dominant note, so to speak, not only of the Prologue, but of a large part of these "Confessions." "What *profit*?" The word means, exactly, what is over, what remains, what is the net result, of so much toil. It is all fruitless; it leads to nothing. What had he gained by all his experience of life? Nothing but disappointment. Neither he nor others were the better for it. The world is full of changes without result. The world of nature and the

world of man are alike in this, so he thinks, seeing his own bitterness and unrest reflected on all sides. The phrase "under the sun" is frequent in this Book, and is characteristic of it. The Chaldee paraphrast always adds the words "in this world" as explanatory of it, and this is all it means. It is foolish to attach to it some hidden or mystic meaning.

Verse 4. — "One generation goeth and another cometh, while the earth abideth for ever."

This fleeting evanescent character of human life, this come-and-go of the actors in the drama, has always produced its profound impression on all who have asked the meaning and the purpose of life. It is this thought which has given birth to some of the finest passages in the poetry of all nations. It is this thought which lends such infinite pathos to that sublimest of human hymns, the Ninetieth Psalm. It is this thought which has subdued conquerors in the hour of their triumph, and melted them into tears. It is this thought which gives such deep solemnity to the Christian view of life. "The world passeth away." "What is your life but a vapour?" To a man meditating like Qoheleth, feeling bitterly that he had failed to achieve anything durable with all his efforts, it was the uppermost thought in his mind; and it added a tragic pathos to the thought that the earth remained ever the same. You might have thought that if the actors came and went, and the scenes shifted, yet the theatre remaining ever the same, there would be some advance, some progress, some onward movement.

Verses 5-7. — But no! All things move in a circle. Nature herself is a parable of human life. The sun rises and sets and rises again, panting, like some tired racer, to mount the steep ascent, that he may start

afresh on his old course. The wind, the very emblem of fickleness and uncertainty, veers round and round to the same points of the compass, with all its restlessness only "returning to its circuits." The rivers ebb and flow, but they keep always in the same channels. They all empty themselves into the sea, but the sea remains as it was before, and is not sensibly affected by receiving their waters. Everywhere there is the same restlessness, and everywhere the same barren monotony. Everywhere there is labour, but everywhere labour without fruit.

Verses 8-10.—"All things are weary."¹ This is the poetry of the heart. The weary spirit sees its own weariness reflected on all sides. Man interprets nature, reads into it his own unrest and dissatisfaction, and weary, profitless, laborious monotony. All things are burdened, and all faint under their burden. "The eye is never satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing." How can the one or the other be satisfied with this stale flat repetition of sameness? Give the eye some new object to rest upon, give the ear some new voice of man or note of bird, or new thought clothed in speech, and you may kindle hope afresh in the weary heart. But "*there is no new thing under the sun.*"² Some youthful dreamer, some not yet dis-

¹ It is surprising that this, the true interpretation of these words, should have been missed. The other rendering, "All *words* are wearisome" (LXX., πάντες οἱ λόγοι ἐγκοπιοί), which has been adopted by many Commentators, as meaning, "It is wearisome to utter the whole tale," gives a wrong sense to the adjective, which never means "wearying," "causing fatigue," but always "made weary" by labour and fatigue.

² The following striking parallels from classical writers have been adduced:—"Nisi forte rebus cunctis inest quidam velut orbis, ut quem ad modum temporum vicēs, ita morum vertantur." Tacit. *Ann.* iii. 55. Still more strikingly, Seneca says: "Nullius rei finis est, sed in orbem nexa sunt omnia. Omnia transeunt, ut revertantur, nil novi video, nil novi facio." *Epist.* 24. And Marcus Aurelius: πᾶν τὸ γινόμενον οὕτως αἰεὶ ἐγένετο, καὶ γειήσεται, καὶ νῦν πανταχοῦ γίνεται.

illusionated spirit, may come to you and say, "See, this is new ;" but it is only the old story: "It hath been of old time which was before us."

Verse 11.—And then, to add to all, and thus to deepen its mournful solemnity, "there is no remembrance of them that have gone before," and future ages will cherish no remembrance of the present. If there is any one thing which could reconcile man to this strange profitless existence, it would be the hope of being remembered hereafter. It would be something to feel that we have not been quite useless, that the world will be the better for us, and will gratefully acknowledge the debt when we are gone. But even this satisfaction is denied us. Oblivion, with cold finger, draws the curtain upon each act of the drama. How is it possible to hope for any progress? Men do not rise upon the stepping-stones of the past to a higher outlook and a wider grasp and an onward movement. The dreary round continues, and man beats himself against his prison walls in vain if he tries to break out into a purer atmosphere and a higher life.

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CHRIST DEMANDING HATRED.

LUKE xiv. 26.

THIS demand has, at first sight, a strangely stern and harsh aspect, and must have staggered many of those who were now following Jesus. And I have no doubt that the paradox was intended to stagger them, and to arouse them to thought. The crowds now flocking around Christ were attracted by diverse and mixed