

ECCLESIASTES.

CHAPTER I. VERSES 12-18.

12. *I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Ferusalem.* 13. *And I gave my heart to search and to investigate by means of wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven : it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith.* 14. *I have seen all the works that are done under the sun ; and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after the wind.* 15. *That which is crooked cannot be made straight : and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.* 16. *I communed with my heart, saying, Lo, I have gotten far greater wisdom than all that were before me over Ferusalem : yea, my heart hath had great experience of wisdom and knowledge (lit. my heart saw wisdom and knowledge in abundance).* 17. *And I gave my heart to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly : I know that this also is a striving after the wind.* 18. *For in much wisdom is much vexation : and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*

THE Preacher has uttered his disappointment, and the utterance has been a relief. He can now begin in a somewhat more collected mood to give us some passages of his autobiography. These will justify his complaint. He tells us who he was and how he came to form his opinions. He is speaking from his own experience and observation. He is no recluse, meditating in his cell on the vanity of life, and indulging in philosophical speculations upon nature and man. He was a king, and a despotic Eastern king, whose word was law, and who could follow his own bent ; he reigned over a united people ; he was wise and accomplished ; he had had the most favourable opportunities of forming a judgment on men and things, and had made the best possible use of them.

It is in perfect keeping with the whole character of this Book, as reflecting the experience of Solomon,

that Wisdom occupies so prominent a place in it. Here at the outset, when recording his experiments upon life, the Author tells us how he had used wisdom as the instrument by which to conduct his experiments; how he had enlarged his wisdom as he went on by his careful observation of men and things; how he had hoped, but hoped in vain, to find satisfaction in wisdom.

Verse 12.—We learn from the Midrash that some of the Rabbis had remarked, that this was properly the beginning of the Book. Rabbi Samuel, the son of Rabbi Isaac, observes: "The Book seems as if it ought to begin here;" and he accounts for this irregularity on the general principle that "there is 'no before and no after,' no systematic order in Scripture." Rabbi Ishmael repeats the same maxim, and illustrates the principle by reference to a number of other instances, amongst which he cites the Sixth Chapter of the Prophecy of Isaiah, which, he says, might naturally have been the opening of the prophecy; the Second Chapter of Jeremiah, the Seventeenth Chapter of Ezekiel; and the Twenty-second Verse of the Seventy-third Psalm. The last parallel is very instructive and significant, but it is by way of contrast rather than by way of likeness. For the Psalmist tells first of his victory over doubt, and then of the struggles through which he had passed; Qoheleth begins with his sorrow and weariness, and traces the steps by which he was led to faith and peace. But we must not linger now on a comparison between the Poet and the Philosopher. I shall hope to return to this subject hereafter.

I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. We

seem here to be furnished with some definite information concerning the author of this Book. He begins his confession by telling us who he was. Taking the words in connection with the inscription in the first verse, we might almost suppose that the question was settled. The treatise, according to the title, is "The words of Qoheleth, the *Son of David*, king in Jerusalem." And Qoheleth himself says, "I was king *over Israel in Jerusalem.*" There was but one son of David who was king "over Israel in Jerusalem," and that was Solomon. And yet this very passage has been mainly relied on as convincing evidence that the author is not the historical Solomon, but some one in later times assuming his character; and we cannot do justice to the Verse, or to what follows, without some discussion of the question it raises. The argument rests (1) on the past tense of the verb, "I *was* king;" for how could Solomon have so spoken of himself, when he remained king to the end of his days? Is it not plain that a later writer uses the past tense because to him the reign of Solomon is long past, the fictitious Solomon of the Persian period looking back through the vista of centuries on the real Solomon, and describing what he was? (2) On the words "over Israel in Jerusalem," which indicate a writer living at a time subsequent to the division of the kingdom, when there was a "king over Israel" whose royal residence was not "in Jerusalem." And when we add to this the expression in Verse 16, "I have gained more wisdom than *all that were before me* over Jerusalem," the difficulty of supposing Solomon to be the author is immensely increased (see note on that Verse) and we are forced to the conclusion that

the writer is not Solomon, but a great literary artist reproducing in vivid imaginative touches, and with a singular knowledge of the human heart and a wide experience of human life, what he felt must have been the inner history of such a man as Solomon. The force of this latter argument is indisputable. That which turns on the use of the past tense in the Verse is not quite so conclusive as it may appear at first sight. The difficulty of the past tense was felt long ago by the Jewish interpreters. The story told in the *Targum* and in the *Midrash Yalquth* was probably an attempt to explain it. It runs thus: "When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart was greatly lifted up because of his riches, and he transgressed the word of God, and he gathered many horses and chariots and horsemen, and amassed much gold and silver, and married wives of foreign extraction; whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent against him Ashmodai the king of the demons, who drove him from the throne of his kingdom, and took away the ring from his hand (the ring famed in legend throughout the East for its magical virtues), and sent him forth to wander through the world. And he went through the towns and cities of the land of Israel with a staff in his hand, weeping and lamenting, and saying, 'I am Qoheleth, whose name was formerly called Solomon, and who was king over Israel in Jerusalem; but now I rule only over this staff.'" ¹

In the *Midrash Qoheleth* we read: "*I Qoheleth was king. I was when I was, but now I am nothing.*

¹ This legend received subsequently still further embellishment. See Jellineck, *Beth ham-Midrash*, ii. 86, 87.

R. Chanina, the son of Isaac, said (quoting these words) : He saw three periods in his life. R. Yoden and R. Oniyah discussed the question. R. Yoden said : He (Solomon) was first king, then a private person, then king again ; first wise, then foolish, then wise again ; first rich, then poor, then rich again. But R. Oniyah said : First a private person, then a king, then a private person again ; first foolish, then wise, then foolish again ; first poor, then rich, then poor again."

I give these illustrations as shewing how the past tense has perplexed the oldest interpreters, and how deep was the interest felt in the question of Solomon's destiny.

Ibn Ezra, still clinging to the traditional authorship of the Book, tries to defend the use of the past tense by saying that Solomon puts himself in the position of his readers in future times, as though one of them might say, "He who speaks here *was* king," &c. His words are, "Solomon wrote it in his old age, as if saying to the generations to come, Such and such things I tried in my lifetime."

It is worth while to go a little deeper. Grammatically, the past tense of this verb may be rendered in three ways :—

1. (a) *I have been*. A strict perfect, implying that this state continues at the present moment : "I have been and still am." *E.g.*, Psalm lxxxviii. 4 [5] : "I *have been* and still am as a man that hath no strength;" or (b) at least a past duration, as in Joshua i. 5 : "As *I have been* with Moses, so will I be with thee."

2. *I was*. A simple aorist, as, *e.g.*, in Deuteronomy xxiii. 7 : "Thou *wast* a stranger;" Nehemiah i. 11 : "For *I was* the king's cupbearer."

3. *I am become*, as in Psalm lxix. 8 [9]: "*I am become* a stranger unto my brethren." This is the sense which Grätz puts upon the verb here, as supporting his theory that the Book was written in the time of Herod the Great, so that the allusion is consequently to a *parvenu* king, who had not come to the throne in the way of legitimate succession.

Of these three possible meanings of the tense one only seems consistent with the context. All the tenses which follow are aorists; all refer mainly to a past experience. The obvious rendering, therefore, of the tense here is as an aorist, as it is rendered in our Authorized Version: "I the Preacher *was* king," and as it is rendered in the LXX., ἐγενόμην, and in the Græc. Venet., ὑπήρξα.

Still even this rendering is not absolutely decisive as to the question of authorship. Broken down in spirit, looking mournfully on the glory which he felt was passing away, seeing already about him the signs of decay, his kingdom impoverished, taxation ruinously heavy, the murmurs of disaffection rising on all sides, the monarch whose word had been law, and whose power had stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, and whose name had been renowned for wisdom above all the children of the East, might well, in the bitterness of the contrast, speak of himself as one who once was king. "Du temps que j'étais roi," said Louis XIV., at the close of his reign, looking back on the past;¹ and "the saying," remarks a recent writer, "is one of deep meaning and terrible truth."²

¹ When this note was first written, I was not aware that the parallel had been suggested by any other commentator. I have since been informed that it is to be found in the Speaker's Commentary.

² Arsène Houssaye, *Galerie du XVIIIe Siècle. La Régence*, p. 46.

He, too, was a king whose will had never been questioned, and who had been almost worshipped as a god; and he, too, felt his power slipping from his grasp before he was carried to his grave. History repeats itself; and of all the parallels in history there is none more striking or more complete than that between "the Wise King" of the Hebrews and "the Great Monarch" of the French nation. May not Solomon, therefore, in his last days, writing bitter things against himself, have indulged in the same vein? and is not this the explanation of the words, "I the Preacher *was* king"?

The similarity at first sight seems striking; and yet there is an obvious difference of tone between the words, "When I was king," meaning, "I could do such and such things; I could lead armies to victory; I could speak and be obeyed;" and the quiet tone of narrative with which a writer beginning his autobiographical reminiscences says, "I was king in Jerusalem;" and then goes on to enumerate the various experiments he had made and the pursuits in which he had been engaged. The one expression can hardly be adduced as an adequate illustration of the other.

Verse 13.—*I gave my heart, &c.* Here is a man not talking at random, but giving us the results of deliberate, careful, thoughtful inquiry. He had set himself "to search and to spy out concerning all that is done under heaven." The first verb is the more general, the second the more specific: the word to "spy out" is the word used of the spies who were sent by Joshua to explore the land of Canaan. Qoheleth wished in like manner to explore the whole field of human action. He wished not merely to collect and tabulate the facts,

but to understand the rationale of them. It is plain that by "all that is done under heaven" he means not physical facts and the Divine order of the universe, but the *doings of men*; the tangled web of human existence, with its strange moral contradictions, the phrase "under heaven" answering to the more common phrase "under the sun," so often repeated in this Book. "Like the good Caliph of Arabian story, 'the good Haroun Alraschid,' we may suppose that Qoheleth goes forth in disguise to visit all quarters of the city; to talk with barbers, druggists, calenderers, with merchants and mariners, with husbandmen and tradesmen, mechanics and artizans; to try conclusions with travellers and with the blunt wits of homekeeping men. He will look with his own eyes, and learn for himself what their lives are like; how they conceive of the human lot, and what, if any, are the mysteries which sadden and perplex them." ¹ And he set himself to the investigation *by means of wisdom*. His wisdom is that which characterizes him; that which entitles him to speak; that which remained with, or stood by, him (Chap. ii. 9) in all his investigations. But he has scarcely mentioned his purpose when he complains also of the burden it cast upon him. Two things are to be noticed here: (*a*) the impulse under which he acted; (*b*) the manner in which he followed the impulse.

(*a*) If the outward world is a series of recurring phenomena leading to no discernible result, the study of human life, of character, passion, interest, motive, is not more satisfactory. And yet this is a task

¹ *The Quest of the Chief Good*. Expository Lectures on the Book Ecclesiastes, by Rev. S. Cox, p. 127.

from which man cannot withdraw himself. God has *given* it to him; it is the law of his being. He must weary himself with the everlasting riddle. The fascination is such that he cannot push it aside and forget it, if he would. Every seeker returns baffled from the attempt to solve it, and yet new seekers succeed, with fresh, eager, undaunted hope. This is God's *gift* to man, and there is surely a bitter irony in the words. This is the only gift, not the power to interpret the riddle, much less the power to effect any changes in the world, but only the power and the doom to carry on the weary search as long as man and the earth shall last. When the Preacher says that God has given this "to the sons of men," he does not of course mean to imply that the dull unthinking mass, who live merely for the day and for animal indulgence, busy themselves with such problems. It is himself of whom he is thinking chiefly. It is the master of wisdom who is thus driven to make proof of his wisdom. All men have not the wisdom, and therefore all have not the unquenchable impulse, nor taste the bitterness of the cup.

(b) It is of importance to remember that Qoheleth warns us at the outset that his self-imposed task had proved unsatisfactory. If he thought the impulse which he obeyed was one given of God, he does not profess to have obeyed it in a religious spirit. Hence it had become a torment to him. He was merely practising experiments upon life, its various charms, allurements, gratifications, to see what it had to offer. And such experiments exposed him to the peril of a secret pride and a secret selfishness, because he measured life by his own arbitrary standard, settled for

himself what constituted its perfection and imperfection, its good and evil; and instead of seeing men and things in the light of God, which would have given them their true harmony, saw them only in the mirror of his own human wisdom, which refracted and distorted them.

Verses 14, 15.—This is all that comes of his philosophical examination of man and his pursuits. The quest ends in nothing. The old cry of disappointment breaks from his lips, “All is vanity and a striving after the wind.” The whole world seen in such a temper is out of joint. There are glaring disorders, there are grievous imperfections, whether in the social system or in the body politic, patent enough to a thoughtful observer. There is a perversity in human affairs which is terribly disheartening; there are great gaps where we look for completeness; instead of one harmonious plan, there are nothing but broken fragments; and the worst of it is that no wisdom avails to remedy these evils. Wisdom can discern them, can investigate their causes, but cannot permanently correct them. “That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be supplied,” so as to complete the broken series.¹

Having gained such a result in his investigation and

¹ It is surprising that a verse, the meaning of which is so obvious and grammatically so certain, should have been so strangely misinterpreted as it has been by the Targum, with its Midrashic explanation, by Jerome, and by the Rabbinical interpreters generally, who explain it of the impossibility of those who have dealt corruptly in their lives appearing righteous hereafter in the presence of God, and being numbered with the righteous. This personal reference is totally out of the question. The LXX. are perfectly right in keeping to the neuter rendering. The Vulgate is as completely wrong: “Perversi difficile corriguntur, et stultorum infinitus est numerus,” which may be an unquestionable truth, but is certainly not a rendering of the original.

research by means of wisdom, he reaches the conclusion that wisdom itself is nothing.

Verse 16.—"I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I have gained great and ever greater wisdom (*lit.* I have made great [my] wisdom and added to it) above all who were before me over [or, in] Jerusalem."

Again the Preacher reminds us of the singular advantages he had enjoyed in conducting this investigation. Not only was he a king, but he was a king whose reputation for wisdom was notorious. He had surpassed all his predecessors in this respect, "all who before me were over Jerusalem." If this rendering, "*over* Jerusalem," is correct, it points to a long line of kings, and then the obvious difficulty presents itself, How could such an expression be appropriate in the mouth of Solomon? There had been only one king before him over Jerusalem; for to suppose that the allusion is to Canaanite monarchs, beginning with Melchizedek and coming down to the times of David, is surely most extravagant. On the other hand, the difficulty is not much lessened if we render "*in*¹ Jerusalem," and suppose that not kings but sages are meant;² for who were the great sages who had preceded Solomon in Jerusalem with whom he compares himself?

We must leave this difficulty where we find it for the present. The point of Verses 16-18 is this, that the

¹ There is a different preposition in some MSS. ך instead of ם, and the LXX., Syriac, and Jerome render "in Jerusalem;" but this does not prove, as Delitzsch infers, that they had the preposition ך. For that ם does not necessarily mean "over" in such a collocation as this, is plain from such a passage as Psalm lxxviii. 29 [30], where the same preposition occurs with the same noun, and can only be rendered either "*in* Jerusalem," or, "*up* to Jerusalem.

² So the Targum: "All the sages that have been in Jerusalem before me."

Preacher, confessedly the wisest man of his age and nation, had found no satisfaction in his wisdom. It had not helped him to read the riddle of life. It was as surely "vanity" as everything else "under the sun."

Verse 17.—"And I gave my heart to know wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly."

There is not the slightest reason for any change of the text here, such as is proposed by Ginsburg and Grätz, who stumble at the words "madness and folly," as being out of place where the writer is giving us his judgment concerning wisdom. Ginsburg would strike out the words altogether, "as having crept into the text through the carelessness of a transcriber;" and Grätz would follow the LXX. (*παραβολὰς καὶ ἐπιστήμην*) in reading *m'shâlōth* for *holêluth*, and taking the second word in the sense of *knowledge* (which has some support in its orthography) instead of *folly*. But surely the contrast here gives a deeper view of the wisdom. There is something to be learned in "madness and folly." In that reckless abuse of powers designed for better ends, in that waste of mind and body in sottish pleasures and criminal indulgence, is there no lesson for wisdom—no lesson of pity and sweet charity and heavenly mercy, on the one hand, as well as of thankfulness for having chosen the better part on the other? and may not a man be made richer and purer and stronger by knowing "madness and folly" as well as "wisdom and knowledge"? The error, no doubt, in the case of the Preacher, lay here, that he did not seek to know "madness and folly" in this spirit. He looked at them with the eye of a critic, with the eye of a man who wanted to dissect the world, keeping his head cool and his hand steady. But even with this

end in view, he was right in weighing "madness and folly" in the scales, as well as "wisdom and knowledge," that he might gain a larger and a riper and a deeper judgment of that strange existence whose contrasts were so alluring and so instructive. The tree of the knowledge of good *and evil* still stands, and still tempts man with its fruit, though Paradise is lost.

Verse 18.—But wisdom cannot heal the wounded spirit. It is fruitful in sorrow. Is not this the pathetic confession of all who have ever tried the experiment? Melancholy sits throned on the forehead of all the masters of earthly wisdom. He who can take the largest survey of the human theatre, sees also most plainly, feels most deeply, the littleness of the actors, the fragmentariness of the scene, the hollowness of the mummery and the painting. In much "knowledge" of the world "is much sorrow." Byron calculated that he had passed in his whole life eleven happy days. And Nelson envied him alone "whose undisturbable possession lies six feet below the earth." And Goethe puts this into the mouth of Mephistopheles as the only consolation for Faust—

Oh, credit me, who still as ages roll
Have chew'd this bitter fare from year to year ;
No mortal, from the cradle to the bier,
Digests the ancient leaven,

We shall see later on in the Book how heavy the miseries of men, "the burden and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world," lay on the Preacher's heart. Even in the light of a clearer revelation the burden is not wholly removed. It is still often true that he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

Incarnate Wisdom itself was sorrowful in profound sympathy with the woes and griefs of mankind. In all the disciples of that Wisdom there must be sorrow as well as joy. It will only be in another world that the curse of knowledge shall cease, and "sorrow and sighing flee away."

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A BIBLICAL NOTE.

COLOSSIANS I. 3-5.

THE consensus of Erasmus and Calvin, De Wette, Meyer, Ellicott, and Lightfoot, with the Greek commentators, ought surely, one would expect, to mark a *certain* interpretation. Yet there seem to be strong reasons for hesitating to accept their judgment—united and confident, and therefore all but decisive as it is—in regard to *the connection of* *διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα* (in Verse 5) *with the foregoing context.*

a. They hold that this phrase is an adjunct of Verse 4, stating that which 'evokes and conditions' *the Colossians' love* (Meyer and Ellicott); or *faith and love* (so De Wette and Lightfoot).

b. The alternative view regards it as dependent on *εὐχαριστοῦμεν* (Verse 3), and giving the reason of *the Apostle's thanksgiving*: "Ex spe patet quanta sit causa gratias agendi pro dono fidei et amoris" (Bengel). The names of Athanasius, Calovius, Michaelis, Storr, Hofmann, Conybeare, and Eadie, amongst others who unite with Bengel in adopting this connection of the words, are sufficient to shew that, after all, the weight of critical authority is divided, and that the question may be regarded as still open to discussion.

It may be observed, in passing, that the various reading in Verse 4 does not materially affect the point at issue, although *ἦν ἔχετε*, now generally preferred, makes the connection of *διὰ τ. ἐλπίδα* with *ἀγάπην* somewhat easier and more regular.

The grounds on which *a* is based by Meyer, Ellicott, and Lightfoot are chiefly negative, consisting of objections to *b*. Let us examine them one by one.

i. Meyer is determined by two considerations: the first—adopted by Ellicott and Alford, both of whom regard it as fully conclusive by itself—is that "this preliminary *εὐχαριστία* in St. Paul's Epistles is