



A Work of Irony

Authorship

The book of Ecclesiastes remains an enigma. Arguments about the book abound, from ideas about its literary, canonical and historical contexts right through its meaning. Although once believed to have been authored by Solomon, most modern scholars now believe this to be highly unlikely. Also, although expressed in the first person, there are differences of opinion about whether there is one voice or that it is in fact a dialogue between voices (Perry, 1993). Of those who argue for a single voice some (and I find this to be the most persuasive view) argue that it is not the voice of the author himself but rather the voice of a persona, a fictional character (Sharp, 2009). Those who hold this view regard the first verse and the final 3 verses of the book as kind of 'frame', the words of the author rather than the persona.

Meaning

As well as debates about authorship, many different interpretations of the meaning of the book have also been argued, among them the opposing views of Qohelet as a preacher of joy (Whybray, 1992) on the one hand and as “rigorously hope-less” (Watson, 1994) on the other. It is my view that whilst perhaps we can see both of these facets in the book, the words of Qohelet lean more toward the pessimistic than the optimistic and that, in fact, the book is more about challenge than either of the above.

Qohelet's view of life is deeply pessimistic and it is in the depth of the pessimism and its rejection of the values held most dear by its original audience that the purpose of the book becomes clear. It is designed, I believe, precisely to challenge and to elicit a response of discomfort and even disagreement from the reader. The views of Qohelet, the persona, are completely one-sided and omit the most important parts of the Jewish belief system: a just Creator God who is involved with them as a people through the Covenant. The gaps in the book begin to shout out, and the references to God as Creator together with the hints of the creation story (eg: 3:19-20, 12:7) constantly pull

the readers back to an image of a deity very different from the one being portrayed by the character whose words we are reading. These references are reminders of the God of the Torah, the God whose primary commands are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself. This God is not distant and arbitrary as Qohelet would have the reader believe, and we inherently *know* this: we know that there is good to balance the evil, that there are those who not only comfort the oppressed but seek to end oppression, committing their lives in the fight against injustice.

The original audience and we the readers now, also know that not everything is erased from memory - the people of Israel and their faith in Yahweh alone are testament to that. Qohelet's words too remain, in what Sharp (2009) describes as an ultimate irony, still read and contemplated thousands of years later. Sharp also makes a very persuasive argument that quite early on our suspicions are aroused and we soon begin to see that Qohelet's views are not to be trusted. (2009, p199). As readers we gradually begin to argue with his conclusions. Certainly we see the injustice, the oppression and the struggles he notes. We know that is true. But we also see the other side, the actions taken to right the wrongs, the good which shines out in the darkness, the love and care expressed by one human being to another. We see another side and find ourselves wanting to argue: "No, Qohelet, your view is too one-sided, there is more and you have missed it".

Sharp (2009) argues that the book is heavily ironised and that we are being directed by its hyperbolic pessimism to see what happens when we disobey God, thereby encouraging the reader to instead "fear God and obey the Torah". This reading is very convincing. The book is clearly unbalanced, exhibiting a bleak view of a life lived without hope, relying on human strength and finding it wanting. It also portrays a view of God as distant, uninvolved and arbitrary. The opinions of the persona Qohelet are the result of this image of God and of reliance on epistemological enquiry and wisdom. By this clever use of irony, the reader thus finds themselves challenging Qohelet's opinion and filling the gaps with the God of the Prophets, the God of the Covenant, the God who cares about humankind, in short the God of the Torah. As Christians we find ourselves answering the darkness and hopelessness of Qohelet with the light of Christ and the resurrection. Whilst the original audience would not have had the Christ revelation, they would certainly have been able to see the God of Covenant between the lines and in the gaps of the book. Viewed in this light the Epilogue does not seem anomalous; it is rather a direct statement of what the rest of the book has indicated and led us toward.

Conclusion

It is difficult to see the book of Qohelet as a book of joy, even if joy does not necessarily mean happiness but rather hope in the face of despair, or peace in the midst of difficulty. There is no sense of this is my reading of the book of Qohelet. Whybray's (1992) argument that the calls to joy dominate the book and consistently bring us back to a positive note is not convincing. The negative is too overwhelming and the few calls to enjoyment cannot begin to alleviate this, much less completely reverse it. As Sharp notes the passages on enjoyment "...cannot serve ironically to undermine the relentless cynicism and despair of the rest of his discourse"(2009, p211). They appear more as the resigned sighs of a grudging acceptance of impotence in the face of a random world and a distant God. Rather than being a journey to joy Qohelet's musing are a path to pessimism and despair, exhibiting a bleak view of the world resulting from of a concept of God as distant and remote, and a view of the world as chaotic and random with no sense of justice or peace. This is challenging: it challenges conventional wisdom literature, it challenges the Prophets and the historic writings and it challenges us as modern readers. We find ourselves pulled into its vortex for a while and then we begin to pull away, to push against Qohelet's musings and his bleak conclusions. This kind of literary device has been used many times. In a lecture on the work of William Blake, Christopher Rowland (2008) noted that the inconsistencies in Blake's world arouse the intellect and the faculties to act. Entering Blake's world brings disorientation before it brings clarity. This, for me, is what the book of Ecclesiastes is designed to do. We enter the disorientation of Qohelet's world and it arouses us to think, to challenge, to question, to act. We are eventually thus brought to clarity and back to the God of the Covenant and of the Torah, so conspicuous by direct absence, so alive in gaps and between the lines. We find ourselves sorry for Qohelet and his demise in brokenness and despair, ultimately hope-less. But we find *ourselves* brought to a new vision of hope: hope in a God of relationship, hope in a Creator God who calls us not to hand-wringing anguish but to loving committed action. "Fear God and obey the Torah" says the author at the end of the book and in spite of, or perhaps because of, Qohelet's advice to the contrary, we find ourselves willing and ready to do so.

Adapted from "Qoheleth: Journey to Joy or Path to Pessimism" Dawn Glen, Yale 2008

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