

Ecclesiastes

The Book of Ecclesiastes, found in the Old Testament, has numerous commentaries. Some wonder why it is in the Bible. It is so different from all the other books. Some Christian writers call it flippant. Some non-Christian writers call it nihilistic. Others call it pessimistic.

In some translations of Ecclesiastes, the word God has been inserted more times than it appears in the original text. Some translations give Ecclesiastes a happy ending. The original has no happy ending. Although the word God appears in the original text, its meaning remains unclear. The popular Judeo-Christian, anthropomorphic conception of God was not yet in use.

Ecclesiastes includes virtually every standpoint upon the human condition. It was written by Solomon, son of David, King in Jerusalem. Solomon is considered one of the wisest of men.

Ecclesiastes is, in fact, not flippant, nihilistic nor pessimistic. If, for example, I wish for the world to be a certain way, a world in which there is permanence, in which I will not become old and die, Ecclesiastes will appear to be pessimistic. It teaches we live in a world of constant flux, of ceaseless beginnings and endings, in which royalty, knaves and fools each alike come and go. “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” is a theme of which many have heard. Properly translated it is rendered:

“Emptiness, emptiness says the speaker. Emptiness. All is empty. What does man gain from all his labor and his toil here under the sun? Generations come and generations go while the Earth endures forever.”

Solomon has looked at everything under the sun. He has looked at people working to obtain earthly goods without finding happiness: no happier when accomplishing goals than before they set out — all is emptiness. Solomon experienced all these things; had gotten everything he thought he wanted: palaces, beautiful women, gardens only to become more covetous. He then, we are told, dipped into pleasures, all the pleasures. They, too, came to nothing. They all passed, became mere pleasant memories. At worst

Ecclesiastes

they were, too late, recognized mistakes. His overriding awareness is the inevitable fact of death. Solomon repeats the latter again and again and again. Why the continued speaking of death? He knew all ends.

The final section of Ecclesiastes has its own title: “Advice to a Young Man.” Its essential advice is to realize one is mortal as early as possible. Do not pretend, do hide. Death is inevitable — we know not when. This is not pessimism, but realism.

Ecclesiastes is a book of questions. Solomon is not willing to accept ideas on faith, not willing to believe handed-down views from other’s thoughts or writings. He is willing only to accept what his reason can comprehend. He rejects what reason cannot comprehend; always questioning. He comes to realize man’s fundamental questions have no answers. The ways of God are inscrutable — not to be understood. Even the wise have not plumbed the very depths: whatever God is transcends understanding, yet God does exist. The universe is organized. There is time for everything, for peace, for war, for life, for death, for happiness, for sorrow, a time for everything under the sun. We all have memories of times. The meanings we assign to them are our own. They are empty. We have our wishes, projections and hopes for the future. These too, he says, are empty because we do not know the future.

In so far as there is a nemesis, it is time. There is no stopping it. Like Faust, in the midst of a lovely poignant moment says, “Stay this moment,” we find it will not stay. If, as Solomon recommends, we think upon this deeply, we will become disorientated. We will wonder why all life is happening and may realize it has happened before: “There’s nothing new under the sun.” Like Plato at a later time, Solomon points to the endless replications of noumenol archetypes. God, Wisdom, Reality are universal, unchanging. In speaking of emptiness, it is not meant that nothing exists, but rather that all is temporary, lacking inherent existence.

In Ecclesiastes the beginning of wisdom is awareness of emptiness. Emptiness, we learn paradoxically, is both the beginning and the end. Misunderstanding this concept, some become nihilistic, claiming “nothing matters.” Solomon, in his wisdom, portrays virtually every philosophical and spiritual standpoint. He warns against

Ecclesiastes

becoming enmeshed in any one of them. Each is a mere construction placed upon an empty flux. The flux is real, the constructions are not.

Human existence is a great mystery. We do not, upon awakening, know what the day will bring. At day's end, the day is seen as different from what we may have imagined. While knowing change will occur, we do not know its nature, its form. This is why it is wise to function in terms of probabilities. In Hebrew, the word emptiness can also be translated as vapor, fog, or haze. From this standpoint, it can be said that our understanding can never achieve perfect clarity.

What to do with the realities of human existence? Ignore them? Such Solomon calls fools. Because something is ignored, it does not cease to exist. It will, now or later, catch the fool from behind, usually causing disillusionment. In "Advice to A Young Man," Solomon advocates enjoying youth, meanwhile remaining aware of God. The young man will be called to account for every deed, for every secret. All actions incur reactions, all secrets are revealed. He says the only way to walk through this fog called life and not be a shadow is to seek wisdom.

Solomon speaks of wisdom, of the wise. Wisdom exists as do foolishness, madness, folly. To be wise is to know the fundamental emptiness of the apparent. This realization leads to detachment, to not beginning to drown in the vast ocean of change. The wise never lose track of mortality. The wise person is comfortable in a house of grief. The fool is comfortable only in a house of merriment. The wise do not concern themselves with tomorrow, nor with the past. Only the moment is real. The moment is changeless, though as perceptions flow through it, the illusion of time is produced. The wise regret neither an illusory past nor anticipate an equally illusory future.

For Solomon, life is not about making the world the way one wants it, but rather about knowing the meaning of the moment and working with it. One cannot understand the meaning of the moment if one imposes upon it forms, expectations, and judgments. One must shed illusions to perceive what is occurring, its momentum and the direction it appears to be headed. Is it a beginning? Is it enduring? Does it appear to be ending? These states can be sensed. The wise person understands the moment's meaning:

Ecclesiastes

What to say, when to say it and to whom, as well as, what to do and when to do it. The wise have mastered time and timing.

The mind of the wise, teaches Solomon, is turned to the right; the mind of the fool is turned to the left. Thus, wisdom lies to the right. In that motion ever is, the motion of wisdom is clockwise.

Within the text are found many enigmatic statements regarding the attempt to understand the inscrutability of God's will. It is best, Solomon teaches, to come to realize one has no ultimate understanding of God's will. It is best to realize this before "the cord is snapped." Ends are better than beginnings, yet, "It is better to be a live dog than a dead lion." Trees don't suffer, he says, only humans. To become more human is to begin to think. To begin to think is to begin to realize how little one knows. This realization leads to awareness of suffering as the human condition. At the same time, suffering is the touchstone of wisdom. Suffering brings opportunity to learn. No suffering, no learning. This is not to say one must bring suffering upon one's self — life will itself provide the suffering. The wise do not harbor resentments — these too are empty. They do not yearn for things to be other than they are. Desires and expectations, teaches Solomon, are empty. The less one knows, the emptier one becomes, and the more ironic becomes one's point of view. The wise possess a sense of humor and a sense of irony. Solomon teaches wisdom to be possible, it is not anything abstract. It is an ongoing awareness of flux and unknowingness. The omnipresent flux is not, he says, random. If we learn from experience, we become able to more accurately predict our course, although we cannot be certain of it. The only certainties are flux and death. The wise know not who they are. They are, of course, aware of whom, if anyone, they think they are, but that too is emptiness.

The more one thinks, the less one knows, the lighter one becomes, the lighter the load. In time, the struggle is gone. The wise, having become empty and light, carry no message. The Sage, he teaches, is one of few words. The few words are like cudgels, no fun to hear.

As one commentator states:

Ecclesiastes

“As nothing is certain, permanent, real, or unreal, the secret of wisdom is detachment without withdrawal. The speaker needs this detachment to loosen up for his life to become an attitude and not a program, a scene and not a plot.”

Barrett Culmback

May 6, 2005.