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# The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes

By FREDERICK W. DANKER

MUCH of the literature published on Ecclesiastes in recent years stresses the pessimistic tone of the book. It is felt that the author's philosophy of life is permeated with a sense of futility and hopelessness in the face of historical events and the experiences of individuals. The purpose of this essay is to challenge the validity of such an interpretation and establish the proposition that Ecclesiastes is indeed pessimistic, but more profoundly so than is generally indicated. An analysis of his own statements indicates that his entire approach is based on a consideration of man's total depravity. God, however, aims to rescue man. In order to work toward this rescue, God has subjected man to continual disappointment and reversal of his expectations. In his description of these reversals the writer's profound pessimism emerges most bluntly. But if man will see that the perplexing circumstances of life represent God's own judgment on man's futile attempt to fulfill his destiny in the things of this world, then the way is open toward a really purposeful life. That life is found in a joyful acceptance of the things of this world as God's gifts to be used, but not abused as ends in themselves.

Four major considerations are involved in Ecclesiastes' profound approach. He grapples with the problem of God's apparently arbitrary actions in history. He is concerned with death, because it spells an end to man's life on earth and brings him into judgment with his God. He probes the depths of man's sinful departure from the will of God. He analyzes minutely the fact that man's life is a constant series of disappointed expectations.

Around these four points we may conveniently group our author's pessimistic statements, although it is impossible to avoid overlapping because of the structural unity in his literary effort.

## I

## The Perplexing Nature of God's Providence

According to our author, God's works cannot be found out. They are extremely mysterious. Oppressions apparently go on unhindered. The wicked appear to prosper and the righteous to suffer. To many commentators these observations are indicative of a gloomy, and even morbid, outlook on life. On the contrary, it may be demonstrated that these observations are a vital part of the author's profoundly theological treatment. God's works are a mystery to man precisely because man attempts to achieve his destiny outside God's plans and purposes. On the other hand, according to the author's argument, God intends that man should be perplexed, so that he may despair of finding his life in a materialistic existence, instead of a grateful acceptance and moral enjoyment of God's gifts.

In 1:13-15 Ecclesiastes expressly states that man's life is filled with misery, v. 14, but that at the same time God has imposed this misery (termed "sore travail" in v. 13) on man. In v. 15 the nature of man's misery is defined: the plans of man are not realized in the way he anticipates because God interferes and upsets the expected order. The obvious reference to Gen. 3:19 [1] indicates that the writer views the problems from the side of man, implying a criticism of man and not of God. In his view, then, life was not originally intended to arouse dissatisfaction. The cause is a departure from the will of God, plainly expressed in 2:26, where it is stated God gives the sinner the toil of gathering and heaping up. Instead of defying God's providence and attempting to find a meaningful existence in material terms when it is impossible to do so (cf. 1:3, "What profit hath a man of all his labor. . . ?"), man ought to see the purpose of God in this vexatious toil imposed on him. He ought to see that God is leading him to a true recognition of his life's responsibility, namely, a grateful acceptance of God's gifts and an intelligent use of material things (cp. 2:24 and 11:9).

Chapter 3:10-11 underscores the thought of the previous passage. Barton, however, remarks that Ecclesiastes indicates that God is a jealous Being, who is afraid "lest man should become His equal." [2] Ecclesiastes' words are, however, not expressions of complaint, but statements of fact. He has concluded in 3:9 that man

can find no profit in his labor, no certain and abiding gain above his investment of time and energy, because life is composed of variable quantities, 3:1-8, such as a time for getting and a time for losing, 3:6. Man, notwithstanding, ignores this essential characteristic of life. He insists on looking for a profit, an abiding thing, which will withstand the reversals which others experience. In doing so he runs counter to the purposes of God, who governs these alternations in human affairs. The very fact that our author terms these alternations "beautiful," v. 11, indicates that he offers no complaint against God, but rather an indictment of man, as the rest of v. 11 shows. The A. V. has obscured the meaning of this portion of the verse by translating *ha'olam* with "world."[3] The usual meaning of the word is "eternity." This meaning is exactly what the author intends to convey. God has placed eternity in man's heart; that is, man's destiny is not to be achieved in material things, but in the identification of his life with the aims and goals of his Creator. Man's misery, then, results from his attempt to satisfy his eternal destiny inside the limited sphere of earthly things and sensations. He is so sure of his own efforts to find success, that is, a profit, though others have failed. Then reversal comes, or death proves his efforts futile, for he can take nothing with him, cf. 5:14 (15). He is bewildered, perplexed. That thought the author expresses in the concluding phrase: "so that (better: "except that") no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end." However, even this perplexity which man experiences because of his sinful stubbornness serves a beautiful purpose in the economy of God, who aims to lead man to the understanding that his life's purpose must find fulfillment, not in material things as ends in themselves, but in a grateful acceptance and a moral enjoyment of God's gifts, 3:12. Thus v. 12 is not a desperate conclusion proceeding out of a feeling that life is without purpose, but it is the moral goal at which the author's argument is aimed.

Chapter 6:10-12 at first appears to indicate man's powerlessness in the vise of fate. Barton believes that in the writer's opinion "man is so powerless against his Creator that discussion of the matter is futile."[4] Such a tone of despair, however, is foreign to the passage in question. The thought behind Ecclesiastes' conclusion is that

man strives to run counter to God's plans and purposes. Such efforts are doomed to failure, because man cannot "contend with Him that is mightier than he," v. 10. That is, God will not permit His own plans to be interrupted by mortal beings who think that they can fulfill their destinies inside history. Such folly only leads to vanity, v. 11, a sense of frustration and disappointment. The fact is, a man cannot tell "what shall be after him," v. 12, though his way of life indicates that he either is deluded into thinking so or madly attempts to defy the inevitable, being blind to the most obvious facts. In 7:13-14 God's purpose in this puzzling procedure is plainly stated, namely, "that man should find nothing after him." [5] Chapter 7:12 emphasizes the fact that the wise man will recognize God's purpose, by stating that "wisdom giveth life to them that have it."

In 8:6-7 Ecclesiastes states that man's evil is great upon him because he does not know what shall be. Barton interprets these words as a pessimistic reflection on the evils of tyranny. He arrives at his conclusion by attributing vv. 5 and 6a to an orthodox (*Chasid*) glossator.[6] But this passage, in its integrity, is essential to an understanding of the author's larger argument. A primary difficulty presents itself in the rapid succession of four clauses, all beginning with *kī*. The thought emerges quite clearly, however, if we work backward from v. 7. The thought there is that man does not know what shall be. A similar expression appeared in 6:12 and 3:22. In both these other instances the context indicates that the thought of God's perplexing providence is in the author's mind. The passage at hand also appears in such a context. According to v. 14 the sinner appears to prosper in his wickedness, while the righteous person appears to suffer. This is the opposite of what one might expect. Now the meaning of 8:7 becomes apparent. The sinner thinks that just because reverses do not accompany his wrongdoing, therefore his way of living must either be ignored by God or be "right." Success, he imagines, will always accompany his selfish activities. But, as v. 14 shows, the sinner's interpretation is wrong. Wickedness is not always punished, and goodness is not always rewarded, *in this life.* But because of his erroneous interpretation of God's providence (cf. v. 11), the sinner's guilt (rendered "misery" in v. 6 by the A. V.) rests heavy on him.

This thought brings us to the initial clause. Since man's guilt is heavy on him, a final judgment, outside history, is necessary, v. 6 a.[7] In this final judgment God will examine not only external actions, but the attitudes wherewith men lived, namely, whether or not they gratefully received His gifts and dedicated their lives to Him, cp. 3: 12-13. Therefore it will not go well with the sinner, 8:13, who misused God's Providence and interpreted His goodness as indulgence. The wise man, on the other hand, discerns time and judgment, 8:5, that is, he is anxious to make the right ethical decisions at the times such decisions are called for, because he anticipates a final accounting, *mishpat,* cf. 11:9.[8]

In 8:16-17 (cf. 11:5) man's work is embraced under God's total work. The Hebrew expresses very plainly the two points of view from which the author looks at the human problem. He employs the word *'inyan,* translated "business" in v. 16, as a description of man's toilsome activity. Then in v. 17 he speaks of God's activity, *ma'aseh.* The logical conclusion is that the author considers God's activity, or work, in history the cause of man's work becoming a wearisome toil.[9] Since, however, God directs and bends to His own purposes the works of man, it may be said that whatever is done on earth is done not only by man, but also by God. The composite nature of God's providential activity and man's efforts is termed in v. 17 "the work that is done under the sun." However, because man's moral problem is so great, and because God must work in ways that seem quite arbitrary, it is impossible even for a wise man to understand what goes on in this world, v. 17 b. It is apparent, then, that the author is not pessimistically critical of God,[10] but admits the limitations of human knowledge. His faith in God's purposeful moral government was just expressed in 8:11-12.

In 9:1-3 our author appears to plunge to the depths of hopelessness. Barton goes so far as to say that "as Qoheleth had no faith in anything beyond death, this seemed to him to reduce good and bad to one level regardless of moral distinctions."[11] The alleged pessimism appears to be linked with God's inscrutable ways. Death comes to all indiscriminately under His providence.[12] Is this said in criticism of God? The context answers negatively. In 8:12 Ecclesiastes had stated that it "shall be well with them that fear

God," despite the apparent lack of equitable judgment, 8:14. In 8:17 he reiterated the thought that man is unable to find out the work done under the sun. The question naturally arises then: How can the righteous know what course to follow since their righteous way of life seems to find no commendation or support in terms of external fortune, while the wicked appear to prosper? Chapter 9:1-3 then comes as a summary with a statement of the thesis that the righteous and their works are in the hands of God, and of the antithesis, that no one can judge from the events of life whether God loves or considers this or that person His enemy. In other words, it is impossible, because of the circumstances outlined in 8:14, to judge God's attitude toward the individual.[13] Chapter 9:2-3 merely underscores the proposition of v. 1. The author does not mean to imply, then, that the righteous man must live in constant doubt as to the state of God's affections toward him. A positive answer to that problem is given in 9:7, "God now accepteth thy work." In this passage he only wishes to state conclusively that one cannot judge moral activity in terms of prosperity or adversity, or any other events of life.[14] And precisely because he wishes to emphasize that point so strongly, critics have wrongfully interpreted his expressions as evidence of a hopeless pessimism.

Chapter 9:11-12 appears to advance a pessimistic mood akin to cynicism, due to God's apparent arbitrariness. These verses, however, continue the thought reached in 9:10, containing the admonition to make the most of one's opportunities. A caution is in order to temper the enthusiasm of his reader. Therefore he speaks to this effect: Do not forget that life does not follow a fixed pattern of retribution. Wisdom does not necessarily spell prosperity, nor does folly necessarily spell material failure (cp. 10:6). Time and chance happen to all. That is, life appears to erase any distinction between wise and fool, and even between man and beast (see 3:19). Generally, men fail to realize that (v. 12: "man also knoweth not his time"). Confidently they continue in their wickedness, and then the evil time entraps them. Death finds them unprepared to meet their God in judgment. The wise man, however, keeps in mind that God's final judgment is the time of retribution. This thought governs his life as he makes the most of his opportunities, undisturbed by the observation that the wicked often appear to prosper

and the righteous to suffer. The reference to the wise man, v. 16, whose words are not heard, supports the interpretation here presented.

Under the subject of God's mysterious modes of Providence we might very well have treated 2:14-23, 3:16-22, and 6:6-8, but because of the emphasis they place on the thought of death we have reserved them for Part II of this essay. The passages we have discussed, however, prove that our author is not satisfied with a superficial complaint about the perplexing nature of God's providence. He has thought the matter through, and his conclusions, though expressed in most serious terms, make a positive contribution to the understanding of man's moral problem, as well as its solution. We might summarize briefly as follows:

1. God, in His providence, exposes man to continual wearisome toil. Thereby He aims to show man the futility of attempting to fulfill his destiny in a materialistic existence.
2. God bewilders man with the express intention of directing him to the one way out of a futile existence, namely, a grateful acceptance and moral enjoyment of God's gifts.
3. But in order to eliminate all bargaining concepts from man's moral life, God permits the wicked to appear to prosper and the righteous to suffer. This circumstance indicates that an acceptable morality does not consist in external obedience, but in right attitudes toward God.
4. Finally, the acts of history are not the whole drama God is producing. The final judgment is also part of God's total plan. Failure to remember this leads to erroneous conclusions concerning God's work in time.

## II

## Emphasis on Death

Ecclesiastes' statements on the subject of death are also adduced as proof of a pessimistic temperament. The following discussion, however, endeavors to show that the writer's apparently morbid outlook springs from a desire to impress fundamental theological truths. His emphasis and re-emphasis on the thought of death is designed to make the final impression indelible. No one who reads his work ought ever forget that man is horribly depraved by nature; that true morality cannot be determined by external events;

and that this brief life which God gives man is all the time he has in which to decide forever his eternal destiny.

Chapter 2:14-23 represents a fairly complete introduction to the author's views on death. Many modern scholars have not hesitated to pronounce it a completely pessimistic passage.[15] A correct interpretation depends on a recognition of the stylistic device employed here. All who reject the Solomonic authorship [16] will grant that the writer, whoever he may be, does not claim the experiences solely as his own. In that case the conclusions expressed in 2:17, 20 may possibly indicate something else than the critics suppose who consider them *results* of the author's "experiments." [17] The impression created by the writer is that the experiences mentioned in 2:1-11 are representative of the gamut of mankind's experiences (cf. 2:23).[18] This means that his reactions must be viewed as value judgments, not merely as the results of a long life of profitless and vexatious toil.

As our author subjects the experiences and achievements of other people, as well as his own, to a searching analysis, he discovers that one element only stands out — joy in one's labor, 2:10. This joy, however, appears to contradict his later conclusion that everything under the sun is "grievous," 2:17. The intervening thought on death provides the link which solves the problem. He looks at all the achievements and activities of men and asks: In view of death, which comes to wise man and fool alike, what are all these accomplishments? If that is all a man lives for — material achievement or sensory delight —what does he gain? In other words, unless a man lives his life in terms of God's will and considers the material products of his toil as *non-essential* ingredients of happiness, he has failed. For if toil and achievement are made the chief end of life, they are bound to disappoint one; for toil and achievement considered purely as such, apart from a moral purpose to serve God through them, are *hebhel* (disappointing). The hatred of life mentioned in 2:17 represents, then, not only a result, but a rhetorical device to emphasize this judgment. Verses 18—23 merely underscore the point our author wishes to make. Then in v. 24 he concludes with the point he made in v. 10. Man's purpose in life consists not in material achievements, but in a recognition of his dependence on the Creator.

Chapter 3:16-22 has taxed the ingenuity of each one of the hundreds of commentators who have endeavored to clarify the alleged obscurities of Ecclesiastes. Needless to say, the author is once again charged with a pessimistic outlook. His thought in 3:22 appears to be a desperate alternative — therefore enjoy life as best you can.[19] It is impossible, however, to attribute such pessimism to the writer unless it can be demonstrated that the author's viewpoint on death is based on a conviction that God is arbitrary in His government of the world and actually aims to obliterate the difference between man and beast, if difference there be. Is there any evidence of such a criticism of God's actions? 3:16 seems to imply dissatisfaction, but its validity as an unimpassioned utterance is substantiated by 3:17, in which the writer expresses his conviction that the wicked will finally be judged according to their deserts. Barton considers this latter thought too orthodox for our writer,[20] but vv. 16 and 17 together make up a single concept intimately related with the following argument. The composite idea is that God to all appearances gives wickedness a free reign, reserving retribution for the Day of Judgment. A question now rises in the author's mind. Why does God work this way? Verses 18 ff. provide the answer. The expression *'al-dibhrath,* "because of," introduces God's purpose. He works in this puzzling fashion to prove men ("that God might *manifest* them," v. 18).[21] In what does the "proving" consist? That people might see that they are beasts (cf. Ps. 49:12). Verse 19 is purely epexegetical, explaining the peculiar identification mentioned in v. 18. This identification of man and beast, however, raises a new problem. The author appears to deny all hope of immortality. But v. 21 expresses a question opposed to the dogmatic assertion of v. 19. If v. 21 and v. 19 pose the problem of immortality, then the two verses are irreconcilable. Another interpretation is demanded. The words obviously indicate that Ecclesiastes merely levels man and beast in the fact of their common fate — death.[22] He is not at all concerned with the question of immortality at this point. The fact of their common fate emphasizes the lack of a pre-eminence in man, v. 19, reinforced by the echo from Gen. 3:19 in v. 20.

The writer's purpose begins to emerge. In 3:18 he states that God's objective is to "prove" man, that is, point out to him that

he is no better than a beast. This divine objective implies that the writer compares man and beast on two different levels. It implies the recognition at once of a distinction, and again of no distinction. In one respect man has a pre-eminence, in another respect he has none. The ideal and the fact are contrasted. The writer's intention, then, is to demonstrate wherein man's pre-eminence lies. He charges man with obscuring his real advantage over the beast which he received at the time of creation. How has man obscured that pre-eminence? By limiting his outlook to the things of this world.[23] Like the beast, man has limited his thinking purely to the satisfactions of his flesh. In God's providence, man's common fate with the beast is to awaken man to a realization of that fleshliness and promote an interest in achieving the moral pre-eminence God intended when He made man a living soul. Thus vv. 19 and 20 harmonize very well with our author's thoughts on moral accountability (especially in 3:17, 8:8, and 11:9).

How, then, does v. 21 fit into the context? By his question, "Who knoweth?"[24] the author at first creates the impression that the immortality of the soul is subject to doubt. But if we interpret so, we run into difficulty at 11:9 and 12:7, where the writer expressly refers to a final judgment and the return of the spirit to God, who gave it. An interpretation which harmonizes with the immediate context and obviates the necessity of adopting an interpolation theory or attributing to the writer varying moods would appear more desirable and probably nearer the truth. It has been demonstrated that Ecclesiastes' purpose in 3:19-20 was not to deny man's immortality, but merely to stress a particular fact which man fails to interpret profoundly enough, namely, that the beast dies, and so does man. The author's interest in man's moral nature was pointed out in the discussion of vv. 18 and 19. Verse 21, then, must have a similar moral emphasis and be related to the preceding argumentation, for it proceeds out of vv. 19 and 20, which in turn are connected with the closing clause of v. 18. The argument was this: In view of man's failure to live the life of God, the Creator subjected man to the same fate as that of the beast to show man that he actually is a beast *insofar as his way of living is concerned.* Ideally he is not a beast, but actually he is.[25] Verse 21 now asserts that this is the real meaning. A periphrasis is necessary to translate

the author's argument: "Who knows, in view of the *hebhel* which men pursue, whether they are different from beasts?" From actual observation *of man's life* it would be impossible to predicate a difference. But that he is different is certain, for he is liable to a judgment (3:17, cf. 12:7), and God's providence aims to make man pause and consider his higher destiny. This destiny is fulfilled in a recognition of one's dependence on God (v. 22, cf. 2:24 *et al.*) and a joyful acceptance of His gifts. Therein lies man's moral responsibility.

Chapter 4:1-4 is closely connected with the passage just discussed. Barton remarks: "The oppressions which men suffer make Qoheleth feel that the only happy men are those who are dead. This was, however, not his settled opinion (cf. 9:4). It was rather a transitory mood, though intense while it lasted."[26] Such a view of the passage indicates that this eminent critic finds no argumentative purpose in 4:2. But to term the thought even a passing mood does not correspond with what we perceived in passages of like import. Again we inquire into the connection. In the preceding passage, 3:16 ff., the author stressed the total depravity of the human race — in moral nature on a level with the beast. In 4:1 he proceeds to demonstrate how this depravity is revealed in human relationships. The result is oppression. So great is this oppression that one could wish himself dead so that he would not be compelled to look on it any longer, v. 2. Indeed, not to have seen it at all would be even better, v. 3. It is quite apparent that vv. 2 and 3 are highly rhetorical in the sentiments expressed to emphasize the totality of man's corruption, and the fact that our author refers to man's "*evil* work" in v. 3 underscores this conclusion. There is no evidence whatsoever of hopeless pessimism in this passage. Theological earnestness prompts the peculiar choice of words.

5:14-15 (15-16 A. V.). Rylaarsdam states that these verses indicate a denial of a hope after death.[27] His conclusions seem to be based on the fact that Ecclesiastes asks: What profit is there? Pfeiffer seems to share the opinion, for he includes these verses in a list of passages supporting the statement that "there is no reward . . . after death."[28] The text, however, says nothing about the future. It simply continues the thought of the *hebhel* in riches,

v. 13. As one came in with nothing, with nothing he goes out, and that fact proves that riches are not to be made the end and aim of life. Death itself is employed as the proof. For the writer's purpose that is sufficient.

The fact that in 6:6-8 Ecclesiastes states that all go to one place and that both wise and foolish are treated alike is also construed as evidence of pessimism in Ecclesiastes' philosophy.[29] The thought, however, is in perfect harmony with the author's earnestness expressed elsewhere. In 6:2 he spoke about riches. In 6:3 he pointed out that his evaluation of riches is based on a consideration of the enjoyment he spoke about in 2:10, 24 and which he developed in 5:17 ff. (5:18 ff. A. V.). Without this element of enjoyment man's life lacks real purpose. All go to one place, v. 6. Death proves the futility of riches as the good one should seek. It only leaves an unsatisfied craving, 6:7; for all man's labor is for his mouth, and, 6:8, both wise and fool are one in this respect. Therefore the wise man will realize that in this life he has his one opportunity. He does not come this way again. His eternal destiny is decided in the way he spends his days here, and he must spend them in the fear of God (cp. 5:6 [5:7 A. V.] and 8:12).

It is strange that Barton should consider 7:1-4 a pessimistic passage.[30] Ecclesiastes has repeatedly emphasized that death proves all material aims and achievements to be *hebhel.* Yet men apparently disregard the thought and still pursue them, 6:12. Then follows this exhortation on the benefits proceeding from a right thought on death. The writer here expresses once again his earnestness. His words in 7:2, "the living will lay it to his heart," are noteworthy. The wise man will think through the meaning of death and realize that it puts an end to his moral opportunities as far as this world is concerned.

In 9:4-6, 10 the preceding thought is brought out even more strongly, though Barton finds a "strange mood of pessimism" in 9:5, and remarks that "the dead are denied participation in the only world of which Qoheleth knows, this to his mind makes the pathos of death a tragedy."[31] What our author really says is that all opportunity to serve God in preparation for the life of the world to come ends with death (cp. his expressions on the judgment which takes place outside history, 3:17 and 11:9). It is not the actual

*condition* of the dead with which he is concerned, then, but their relation to the opportunities this life offers. Verse 10 implements the writer's earnestness in vv. 4-6. Chapter 9:10 a emphasizes the thought of work. Chapter 9:10 b stresses the fact that there is no opportunity after death. Life with its bodily instrument is a channel for moral activity. The opportunity ceases with death, and after this the judgment, 11:9.[32]

On 11:8 Barton says: "Qoheleth is oppressed by (life's) brevity and the dread of death."[33] A specific exhortation, however, follows in 11:9 ff. In 11:9 the judgment is referred to, and in 11:10 the writer admonishes his reader to practice moral discrimination, in the words: "put away evil from thy flesh." Our author's theological earnestness once again emerges. You have a life to live (v. 7), he says, but remember, the days of darkness are many (v. 8). With the grave ends all opportunity. Therefore enjoy yourself (v. 9 b). It is readily observed that the thoughts of vv. 7 and 9 a are parallel, and those of vv. 8 and 9 b likewise. Furthermore, v. 8 emphasizes the significance of v. 7, just as v. 9 b emphasizes that of v. 9 a. Briefly stated: The thought of death's finality (writing *finis* to all opportunity experienced in this life) impresses the importance of life now. The thought of the coming judgment stresses the importance of living that life in the right way.

As in his treatment of God's puzzling modes of providence, our author again demonstrates his theological earnestness. We may term his statements pessimistic if we wish, but dare not do him the injustice of implying thereby that he is depressed in spirit and mind. Rather, the pessimistic tone of his work stems from a serious attempt to write in large letters the urgency of living the life of God now, while there yet is time. Because man's problem is so acute, and because man is tragically unaware of his grave condition, the author spares no words. And his method is successful, as is apparent from the following propositions we glean from his treatment of, and emphasis on, death:

1. Death proves that a life limited to materialistic aims and goals is folly.
2. Man's common fate with the beast proves that such a materealistic life, or a life lived apart from God, is a purely fleshly (beastly) existence, with no positive moral quality whatsoever.

3. The common fate of man and beast proves, moreover, that the moral enjoyment of God's gifts is man's intended responsibility.
4. Death, finally, proves that in this temporal existence man has his one opportunity to effect that responsibility — in this life he decides forever his eternal destiny.

## III

## Man's Depravity

The total depravity of man has already been alluded to, especially in the treatment of 3:16 ff. But the subject demands a special treatment, though brief, because of 7:23-29. In this passage our author becomes extremely pessimistic, but again, not in the sense commonly understood. It is because he sees the abysmal depths to which man has fallen from his first estate that the writer sounds almost bitter, especially in his description of women, of whom he concludes that there is not in a thousand one who measures up to the ideal.

Most of the commentators obscure the connection of this section with the preceding argumentation by interpreting the remarks concerning women as expressions of personal feelings. Delitzsch and Hertzberg both find in this passage an echo of Genesis 2 and 3, but fail to demonstrate the author's argumentative purpose. The context, however, indicates that Ecclesiastes' view of man's total depravity is a designed conclusion. It proceeds out of his original inquiry (cf. 3:18 ff.) and is a partial answer to his main problem in that it gives the reason for the complexity of the problem in which man is involved. The problem briefly is this: In view of God's perplexing modes of providence, what is man's moral responsibility? [34] This is the right way to pose the question. Man, however, turns the question around. He asks: In view of the fact that I am following the commands given me, why does God not reward me according to my deserts? In short, man is always tempted to justify himself by making inquiries concerning the rationality [35] in God's providence. The problem of theodicy can never be solved from such a one-sided point of view. It is precisely at this point that Ecclesiastes makes his greatest theological contribution. He tells us that we shall never find a satisfactory answer to the problem until we see that the fault lies in us. To state his answer more

fully: Man has contributed his share to the problem by his departure from the will of God. Thereby he has subjected himself to *hebhel,* that is, to a continuous disappointment of his expectations, and to the *necessity* of the particular modes which God's providence takes. This necessity is not absolute but relative; for, as we have seen, God works in mysterious ways with the purpose in mind that man should realize the futility of his self-chosen way of life. This profound relationship between God's perplexing moral government and man's moral responsibility is signaled by the warning in vv. 8 and 9 against impatience directed at the oppressions noted in v. 7. The thought in the author's mind is that such impatience is indirectly aimed at God; cp. 5:7 (8). He then follows with the thought of v. 10, an admonition against dissatisfaction voiced in the question so often heard, "What is the cause that the former days were better than these?" Verses 11 and 12 then state that the wise man should think things through a little more deeply, for wisdom represents a profit, and it gives life to those who have it. He who thinks things through will see that God is responsible for all that seems perplexing (v. 13), but that He has a purpose in His peculiar mode of providence. That purpose is that man "should find nothing after him," v. 14. That is, man should not judge the rightness or wrongness of his actions on the basis of resulting prosperity or adversity. Then he goes on to state in v. 15 the most disturbing aspect of God's perplexing mode of providence: The righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper. What attitude shall one take toward this circumstance? Verses 16-18 treat this question. On the one hand, the believer may conclude that perhaps he is not really righteous enough. Consequently he may go to the extreme of pietism, v. 16. On the other hand, one might conclude that God is completely oblivious to man's actions, v. 17. Both these reactions are rooted in a false interpretation of God's providence. The right way is not moral utilitarianism,[36] but the golden mean of the fear of God, v. 18. But the wise man thinks through the problem still more deeply, v. 19. He really has no cause for impatience and dissatisfaction with God's mode of providence because not even he is without sin, v. 20. (Vv. 21 and 22 present a practical example of a righteous man's indignation concerning the very thing of which he himself is guilty.) But if even the righteous are guilty of

actual misdeeds, how complicated the problem is! A superficial theory of rewards fails to do justice to the seriousness of the problem. Then follow vv. 23-29. The author despairs of finding any really rational explanation, vv. 23 and 24. There can be only one answer, and that lies hidden in the deepest depths of man's own corrupt nature. Woman must bear a great share of the blame, but let none of the male species boast too exultantly. The whole human race, with no exceptions, has gone off the beaten way of God's will. God made man "upright, but they have sought out many inventions," v. 29. With these last thoughts Ecclesiastes summarizes his argument that not God but man is to blame for his misery.

It is apparent from this brief outline of Ecclesiastes' argument on the depravity of man that he is extremely pessimistic. So seriously does he view the human problem that his language approaches a note of bitterness. But an earnest search into his argumentative purpose has shown that his pessimism is not a superficial "Weltschmerz,"[37] but profound theological thinking. The reality he paints is dark, very dark. His words and his illustrations well fit his subject — man, lost in the dense darkness of sin, unaware that even when God inflicts pain, He does so not out of caprice, but out of love for man's soul. If man is to find meaning in the universe, he must first bow down in dust and ashes. A sincere acknowledgment of guilt is the only way to see at last God's smiling face behind His frowning providence.[38]

## IV

## Man's Disappointed Expectations

A consideration of the word *hebhel* concludes our study of the profound pessimism of Ecclesiastes. This word occurs no less than thirty-nine times in his brief treatise. Yet in all commentaries to date one finds very little space given to this important technical term.

The original meaning of the word seems to be "breath." It is translated "vanity" in the Authorized Version and rendered with "eitel" by Luther. The commentators variously render "transitory," "to no purpose," and "futile." The impression given by almost all expositors is that Ecclesiastes employs the word to give vent to feelings of gloom or despair. However, as we have discovered,

the author is not pessimistic in the sense commonly understood, but theologically earnest. We may expect the same earnestness to appear in his use of the word *hebhel.*

Staples seems to be the only scholar of repute to challenge the idea that *hebhel* means "vanity" or "futility." In a penetrating article he maintains that the author's concept is better rendered by the term "incomprehensibility."[39] With this rendering he comes very close to the author's intention in the use of the word *hebhel,* for the writer is seriously concerned with the strange modes of God's providence. But "incomprehensibility" is not general enough in scope to account adequately for all the relationships in which the word *hebhel* is employed. We propose, therefore, to render "disappointment," or, more fully and adequately, "disappointment of expectation."

The concept "disappointment of expectation" accords well with our author's views concerning God's providence. He states quite frankly, as we have observed, that God's works are perplexing to man. At times they seem even capricious. But God, according to our writer, has a purpose in this mysterious procedure. Man should find nothing after him; cf. 3:11, 22, and especially 7:14. That is, if man were allowed unlimited success and realization of his plans, he might actually believe that he was self-sufficient and could live independently of God. Therefore, in order to show man the error in his philosophy of life, God exposes man to circumstances which are the reverse of what one might expect.

In 2:15 such an unexpected circumstance is pictured for us. As it happens to the fool, so it happens to the wise man. This is contrary to expectation. It does not seem to be fair. Therefore the author says, "This also is *hebhel.*" That is, this circumstance is a disappointment of one's expectation.

We have already noted the problem of God's providence in 3:19. Here we are interested in the phrase "for all is *hebhel.*" Man lacks a pre-eminence over the beast, according to the preceding words. But one has a right to expect a pre-eminence. Since there is none, one's expectation is disappointed. But this circumstance is only one of many things that are disappointing. The writer therefore includes this one particular in the general statement: "all is *hebhel.*"

Again, in 6:12 our author considers how under God's providence

man's life becomes *hebhel.* God exposes man to constant reversals, as illustrated in 6:1-8. Therefore he is correct in saying that man's life is *hebhel,* that is, it is characterized by constant disappointment of expectation.

In 7:15 we find the word *hebhel* used in a passage which states the most perplexing aspect of God's providence, namely, that the righteous person suffers adversity while the wicked prospers. This circumstance is to our author's mind diametrically opposed to man's expectations. But he has learned to interpret life as a constant series of disappointed expectations. Therefore he says: "All things have I seen in the days of my vanity (*hebhel*)." A thought parallel to that expressed in this verse is found in 8:14. Again the word *hebhel* appears; in fact, twice. And again the thought "disappointment of expectation" fits the thought better than any other expression.[40]

It is possible to validate the rendering here offered in all the passages in which the word *hebhel* is employed.[41] But enough examples have been adduced in connection with the author's main argument to show that the word *hebhel* cannot mean "futility." On the contrary, our author maintains that God's ways are extremely purposeful. He also maintains that man's life has a purpose, but man has obscured that purpose by seeking to find his destiny within the limits of material things and sensations. In order to arrest man's dreadful condition, God has subjected him to *hebhel.* He ought to see that a life which attempts to fulfill itself in material elements is bound to be disappointed.[42] Therefore he should realize that the one way out of disappointment, or *hebhel,* lies along the way of the fear of God, which expresses itself in a joyful acceptance of His gifts. In short, our writer once again sounds gloomy because he faces blunt facts, and man's unwillingness to face these facts squarely makes it necessary for our author to express them with all the vehemence and rhetoric at his command.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion reveals that various lines of thought converge instead of running parallel to one another in the writer's argumentation. The basic concept underlying the expression *hebhel* is God's sovereignty in the affairs of men. The alleged pessimism

is due to an earnest grappling with the problem of man's moral responsibility in relation to God's moral providence. The writer's interest in the problem of theodicy is practical, not theoretical; for he does not seek to understand the ultimate reasons of things, such as the cause and origin of evil, beyond man's part in it. He rather aims to locate such plan and purpose in God's perplexing modes of providence as is necessary to stimulate faith. His answers still do not accord with rational expectations, because they are the answers of faith and must be received on faith. Nevertheless, they are answers which deepen the resolves of faith and direct that religious faith to an earnest appraisal of life and individual responsibility.

With that end in view our writer discovers that God's perplexing modes of providence are designed to make men aware of their perilous condition as prodigal sons.[43] The apparent lack of discrimination between righteous and wicked is included in this perplexing mode of providence, but evaluated as a purposeful procedure, designed to instruct man that moral worth is something inward rather than outward, unconditioned or unaffected by external events. The natural tendency to self-righteousness, manifested in the complaint of the righteous that the wicked prosper, marks the additional need of such procedure.

A vital element in the author's thought is the final judgment.[44] He does not employ the concept to cut the knot of the difficult problem with which he struggles. Nor does his emphasis on the judgment represent his return to solid theological ground after alleged speculations and agonized soul tossings.[45] No, our author knows the way he wishes to go, from the first verse to the last, and he views the final judgment as an integral part of God's total plan. The dismay of the righteous as they see the wicked prosper is due to the fact that they omit the final judgment from their thinking as they attempt to understand God's activities in history.

In connection with the judgment our author thinks of death. He looks on it, not as a tragedy, but as a necessary thing, lest man, involved in a temporally limited viewpoint, continue undisturbed forever in his loss of God and never realize the full stature God intended for him as a distinctive creation, but remain on the level of the beast, to which in his moral defection he has descended.[46]

Thus viewed, death is a severe preaching of the Law. However, it serves more than this limited purpose in God's economy. It helps make the righteous aware that the allotted years of their lives are precisely the area in which they accomplish their service to the Creator.[47] The apparently epicurean sentiments[48] are geared to this thought in most arresting fashion. They express the thought that life is to be enjoyed by a grateful acceptance of God's gifts. True religion, therefore, does not consist in the mere observance of religious forms or rituals. Rather, it begins with a devout hearing of the Word of God,[49] with the objective in mind to achieve a happy and contented way of life around the clock; for true religion and honest worship, according to our writer, are developed through a sincere acceptance of the commonest, everyday aspects of life as opportunities for service to God.[50] Therefore Ecclesiastes considers such simple things as eating and drinking in a profound light. To him they are not merely satisfactions for the flesh, but means to render the flesh an effective instrument for active, holy living. Domestic relationships, business, building, or whatever labor one may undertake, whether held in low or high esteem — all these represent the area in which man must undertake his stewardship of life. But man dare not delay. This life is all one has. And it is short! Soon the assizes will be held! Therefore, "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, whither thou goest."[51]

This serious, and at the same time happy, religion God's providence has in mind. But only when man realizes that life is a constant series of actual or potential disappointments of expectations, and that death is the last disappointment, can he be prepared to undertake his moral responsibility in purposeful terms. The apparent pessimism is designed to write that responsibility — large, because the deceits of life are such that a man might forget that all is *hebhel,* and might even employ death as an incentive to make the most of this brief span, without regard for a future accounting, in the spirit of those who say, "Let us eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die," instead of in the spirit of Him who said, ". . . for the night cometh when no man can work."

Bay City, Mich.

## REFERENCES

1. There is a temptation to interpret the thoughts of one writer in terms of another. But the marginal reference in the A. V., referring the "sore travail" of Eccl. 1:13 to the curse pronounced on man in Gen. 3:19, is certainly to the point. The underlying emphasis in both passages is on the psychological response of man. He is aware of his mortality, but still desires to rise above it through material achievements. But he faces continual obstacles ("thorns and thistles," Gen. 3:18; *hebhel,* or disappointment of his expectation, according to Ecclesiastes). Hence the work he does, which in Paradise was a blessed occupation, now outside Paradise becomes a "sore travail."
2. G. Barton, *Ecclesiastes,* in the ICC series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1947), p. 101.
3. See H. Odeberg, *Qohaelaeth, A Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Uppsala: Almqvist Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1929), *ad loc.,* for a rather complete list of the various interpretations offered by commentators.
4. *Op. cit.,* p. 137.
5. The phrase is a technical term in Ecclesiastes. It is employed to express two concepts: a) man can find no lasting success in his material achievements; b) man cannot determine the moral value of his life and/or actions in terms of events, such as prosperity or adversity.
6. *Op. cit.,* p. 150.
7. See H. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932), p. 145, on the connection here between sin and judgment.
8. Wm. A. Irwin, "Ecclesiastes 8:2-9," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies,* IV (1945), p. 131, obscures the connection in thought by giving the second *kî* a concessive force, "even though a man's troubles [?] grow many against him."
9. Cp. Eccl. 3:10.
10. Hertzberg, *op. cit.,* p. 152, states: "Die schlechten Zustaende in der Welt sind also fuer Qoh wieder kein Grund, Gott anzuklagen, sondern nur, die Eitelkeit des Menschenwesens erneut festzustellen."
11. *Op. cit.,* p. 159. He compares 2:14 and 3:19.
12. Cf. 2:15 and 3:19. Martin Luther, *Ecclesiastes Salomonis, cum Annotationibus* (Halae: P. Brub., 1536), R. O ii, interprets the one "event" as the treatment of the world, which grants both good and evil the same reward. The context opposes such a view. It is God's apparently arbitrary mode of providence that is the cause of the believer's perplexity.
13. Cf. M. Chemnitz, *Examen Concilii Tridentini* (Berolini: Gust. Schlawitz, 1861), p. 198 b, who quotes Bernard: "rationem per se ex eventibus non posse statuere de amore Dei erga nos, sed fidem ex veritate verbi divini hoc statuere, et posse, et debere."
14. The correct understanding of what appears here to be a criticism of the "Lohntheorie," as Hans Meinhold, *Die Weisheit Israels* (Leipzig: Quelle und Meyer, 1908), pp. 12 and 142, would lead us to believe, is essential for a true conception of Hebrew religious thought. Ecclesiastes, Ezekiel, and the writer of Psalm 73 certainly take exception to a theory of rewards based on the assumption that good is rewarded and evil punished *in this life,* and *in every instance.* On the other hand, this does not mean they rejected the truth that goodness has one set of consequences and evil another, also *in this life.* What they teach is that in view of God's larger plans and purposes, to which He subordinates this principle of retribution, man is in

error in determining his moral relationship with God on the basis of life's circumstances. The earliest Hebrew writings never taught this erroneous evaluation; cp. Genesis 7 and 8. It was the popular mind which applied the general principle to each specific instance, and against this popular error Ecclesiastes inveighs. J. Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 48, *et passim,* repeats Meinhold's error. R. H. Pfeiffer, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), overworks the same theory, especially in his criticism of the historical books. See, e. g., pp. 831 ff.

15. See, e. g., Barton, *op. cit.,* p. 83; Hertzberg, *op. cit.,* p. 79; E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes,* in *The Cambridge Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1887), p. 120; A. L. Williams, *Ecclesiastes,* in the new Cambridge Bible Series (1922), p. 27.

16. The Solomonic authorship has been so generally repudiated, mainly on the basis of linguistic criticism, that very few scholars would have the temerity to attempt a refutation of the elaborate evidence marshaled by Delitszch in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes.* See the recent reprint of M. G. Easton's translation (including the *Song of Songs*) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 190 ff. Delitzsch also reminds us that Luther in his *Tischreden* asserts that Ecclesiastes is one of the most recent books in the O. T., p. 190. The most elaborate attempt to defend the Solomonic authorship is found in Bernhard Schaeffer's *Neue Untersuchungen ueber das Buch Koheleth* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1870). His effort has, however, gone unnoticed in the commentaries. Because of the uncertainty regarding the author we have preferred to use the familiar "Ecclesiastes," although most commentators use the Hebrew form, "Qoheleth," generally interpreted as "one who speaks in an assembly."

Even G. Aalders, whose reputation as a conservative Bible scholar is well established, asserts that the book is one of the latest in the O. T. canon, *Het Boek de Prediker* (Kampen: J. H. Kok), pp. 11 ff. See also Ed. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 339 f.

17. See, e. g., Herbert C. Alleman, "Personal Religion," *Interpretation,* II (1948), 305 ff.

18. Dr. Wangemann, *Der Prediger Salomonis* (Berlin: Verlag von Justus A. Wohlgemuth, 1856), p. 83, remarks on 2:12 that Solomon (he accepts the Solomonic authorship) begins his reflections "ueber diese seine und anderer Leute Unternehmungen."

19. So Barton, *op. cit.,* p. 110.

20. *Ibid.,* p. 108.

21. Wm. A. Irwin, "Eccl. 3:18," *Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature,* LVI (1939), 299, says, "it is practically certain we should read *lbar am* ... 'that God has created them.'" But such a rendering makes it necessary to take *'al-dibhrath* as meaning "in regard to" the sons of men, which Irwin so renders. The phrase, however, as Barton demonstrates from parallel usage of the variant forms, means "on account of," or "because of," *op. cit.,* p. 111. Cf. also F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms,* trans. by David Eaton (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n. d.), III, 170, on Ps. 110:4. Irwin follows Luther and the A. V.

22. Luther, *op. cit.,* R. F. vii, argues that the author speaks of the uncertain hour of man's death, not of death itself, and that the uncertainty of man's hour of death is similar to that of the beast. The thought, however, does not harmonize with the context and misses the blunt fact Ecclesiastes wishes to impress.

23. See *supra* on 3:10, 11.
24. For a discussion of the exegetical difficulties in this verse see Barton, *op. cit., ad loc.*
25. Edward J. Reynolds, *Ecclesiastes* (London: Matthews and Leigh, 1811), p. 110, compares Micah 3:3 and Zeph. 3:3. Reynolds' commentary is chiefly valuable because of its many Scriptural references.
26. *Op. cit.,* p. 114.
27. *Op. cit.,* p. 84.
28. *Op. cit.,* p. 726. The position taken by Pfeiffer in his monumental work is substantially the same as that appearing in an article he wrote some years before, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* LIII (1934), 100—109.
29. Barton, *op. cit.,* p. 130. He compares 2:14 ff.
30. *Ibid.,* p. 139.
31. *Ibid.,* p. 160.
32. Cf. Joseph Carlebach, *Das Buch Koheleth* (Frankfurt a. Main: Hermon-Verlag, 1936), p. 10: "Der Tod gerade zeigt dir, wie unendlich wertvoll der Augenblick zum guten Wirken ist." Carlebach's whole discussion is worthy of greater consideration than it has been accorded.
33. *Op. cit.,* p. 184.
34. Cp. the author's statement in 2:3, "till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do. . . ." This statement of purpose comes after the first chapter, which discusses the fact that man is exposed to constant reversals. See also 9:1, "I considered in my heart even to declare all this. . . ." Then note the admonition of 9:7-10. God's providence and man's responsibility — these are the two main threads in the Book.
35. On the futile attempt to rationalize the perplexing elements in God's providence, specifically the presence of pain and evil, see I. Kant, "Ueber das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee," *Berlinische Monatschrift* von J. E. Biester, Berlin, September, 1791. It may be found in *Saemmtliche Werke,* ed. G. Hartenstein (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1868) VI, 77—93.
36. The idea that Ecclesiastes sinks to the level of advocating, or even expecting to find happiness in, a utilitarian ethic, is supported by many commentators. See, e. g., H. Alleman, *op. cit.,* p. 307.
37. Plumptre, *op. cit.,* p. 132, on 3:11 says, "He is oppressed with what German thinkers have named the *Welt-Schmerz.*"
38. Cp. Job's "repentance," Job. 42:6. Note that he was still unconscious of any particular offense, such as Job's friends hinted at.
39. W. E. Staples, "The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies,* IV (1943), 95 ff. His attempt, however, to show that the word originated with a cultic flavor is not convincing. The concept of "mystery," without the implication of a religious cultus is, however, a derivative idea, or result, of the *hebhel.* Man is bewildered, even dismayed, by the ways of God's providence.
40. The thought of "disappointment" (i. e., something either *actually* or *potentially* a source of disappointment) is also found behind the use of the word *hebhel* in other O. T. writings. Cf. Ps. 31:6. The Lord can deliver, as the context shows; the *hebhels* cannot, but will rather disappoint those who trust in them. See also Ps. 39:5. In Ps. 78:33 it is said that the Israelites wasted away their days in *hebhel.* The concluding phrase regard-

ing their troubles indicates that they experienced constant reversals, or disappointments. The ultimate result might be *futility,* but the word *hebhel* describes the intervening psychological fact, that of *disappointment.* A further argument in support of the concept "disappointment" is the fact that a connotation of *deceit* often attends the use of the word *hebhel.* Something that disappoints can be said to deceive. Hence idols, compared with Jahweh, are *hebhels,* and their prophets are deceivers (cf. Jer. 14:22 and 51:17-18).

In the N. T. the thought of St. Paul in Rom. 8:20 corresponds closely with the argument of Ecclesiastes. The creature was made subject to the experience of reversals, or disappointments. Note the contrasting "expectation" of v. 19.

41. E. g., in 4:4 it is stated that competition is the motivation of man's labor. This circumstance is *hebhel,* i. e., it only promotes disappointment. In 4:16 we find that the crowd quickly shifts its allegiance. Its fickleness disappoints one's expectation. In 6:4 the arrival of an abortion is described as *hebhel.* Its expectation of life was frustrated, or disappointed. Or, if one were inclined to be captious and deny any expectation to a foetus, we may say that to an observer the fact is a disappointment. In 11:10 childhood and youth are called *hebhel.* The following verses explain why. Old age, with its weaknesses, soon follows.
42. Such a life is also futile, of course, but the concept is strictly derivative. Cp. *supra,* n. 40.
43. Cf. 3:18 and 7:14.
44. Cf. 3:17, 8:11, 13, 11:9, and 12:14.
45. Delitzsch's whole approach is based on this idea.
46. Cf. 3:18-19.
47. Cf. 3:10.
48. Cf. 2:24, 3:12, 22, 5:17, 19 (18-20), 9:7, 11:9.
49. Cf. 4:17 (5:1).
50. Cf. 9:7-10, as well as the passages *supra,* n. 48.
51. Cf. 9:10.