

*Full Length Research*

## KOHELET'S ANSWERS

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**Ecclesiastes is a book, pithy and profound, and poetic as well. This essay will focus on some of Kohelet's ideas in six main categories – 1. "I Have Seen," 2. Hevel, 3. Nature, 4. Overcoming Disappointment, 5. The Song of Times, 6. Stages of Life. He has much in common with many great thinkers throughout history, but arrives at ideas and answers that are deeply unique and both practical and spiritual. He rejects many of the solutions to human dilemmas that others have offered whether at individual or communal levels, e.g. communism, asceticism and drunkenness**

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### INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes is a book of 222 short verses divided into twelve chapters and so familiar in the English language that sixty-two of those verses are cited in the fifteenth edition of Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. Ecclesiastes' poetry and ideas have ever fascinated readers. Kohelet, as the author calls himself, was a thoughtful man who would have had interesting discussions with the world's noted philosophers. However, Kohelet was more a biblical man than a philosopher, and much of his monologue is to and about God. If he is not an Old Testament prophet, he yet knows their work and is himself part of a tradition of incisive, relentless, scholarly thinking that will see its fruition in the Talmud centuries later. Nevertheless, the sages of the Mishna raised certain issues about Ecclesiastes, even wondering whether it should be included in the Old Testament canon.

For what is he really saying? One line of modern thought sees him as a pessimist and a doubter who fits

well with the Hellenistic or Mesopotamian philosophers of his time (see for example, R. Gordis, 1958). The Talmud (Bava Batra 15a) views this book as teachings of the wise King Solomon, compiled generations later by the Men of the Great Assembly. In a recent, insightful study, *Shelter Among the Shadows*, R. Moshe Eisemann views Kohelet as a realistic optimist who is trying to determine the best approaches to appreciating God's world.

The writer calls himself Kohelet, (the gatherer) which may indicate one who gathers people to study wisdom, or who gathers wisdom itself. His search is narrated in a voice both pithy and poetic, which has lent itself to many interpreters, who because of the unique style of the text can easily try to squeeze it into ill-fitting molds. Kohelet certainly has things in common with other well known thinkers of antiquity – Socrates, Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Akhenaton (in his "Hymn to Aton"), and later Omar Khayyam. His book is perhaps closer to being a handbook of ideas in the style of Epictetus's *Enchiridion*.

Yet, he is unique and different. Kohelet describes himself as a king open to a wide range of experiences, knowing both the high and low places of the world. He is a thoughtful observer, not an armchair philosopher, nor an ivory tower academic, nor a daydreamer nor an alcoholic, nor an addict. He observes the world and the way its people behave, and he seeks the meaning and wisdom in it. Kohelet is not a *tabula rasa* as the book begins. He is already an advanced thinker and sage, but he seeks to know more. He does not remove himself from the physical. His journey is through this world. He troubles himself little with other-worldly answers or with philosophical constructs.

Let us look at how insightful and far-reaching Kohelet's ideas are by seeing some of them in the context of the questions and solutions compounded by other notable thinkers. Such people have always sought to make sense of the world around them and have developed a variety of plans and ideas. Kohelet too has his questions, but his solutions are of a different sort. Unlike many others, he does not offer a new plan for society, nor does he end by devoting himself to sinful pleasures nor to miseries, nor to self-pity nor, like Omar Khayyam, to wine, although he tries wine. He seeks to understand the problems in a very direct and specific manner, and he proposes a series of healthy answers that meet these issues. This is more important for him than trying to make massive but unworkable changes in the world or developing riddle solving statements that seek to explain things that people do not truly need to know in order to find some sense of fulfillment and completion. A quick list of solutions that do not interest Kohelet includes asceticism, isolation of individuals, isolation of a small group, utopias, communism, belief in cycle/nature/fate, drinking, extreme pleasure-seeking, sin, heroism, suicide, aging.

Let us look at six topics that Kohelet touches: 1 "I Have Seen", 2. *Hevel* (vanity), 3. Nature, 4. Overcoming Disappointment, 5. The Song of Times, 6. Stages of Life.

"I HAVE SEEN." One key to his procedure in this book is the frequent use of the word *rait* (I have seen) in the twelve short chapters. He speaks from what he has seen and questioned and sought to comprehend. Does he question God or his own basic faith? In some sense perhaps he does, although he never comes close to atheism or nihilism. The nature of the text may leave the reader feeling at times that the questions are vague or free floating, but they are not at all so. The questions tend to be in fact very specific, very focused, the careful work of a scholar easily familiar with intricate ideas but who never settles for mere pedantry. It is not enough merely to raise a plausible or brilliant answer to a question. The world is not really like that.

The first "I have seen" (1.14) constitutes a sort of general introduction. "I have seen all the deeds that are done under the sun, and behold they are vapor (*hevel*)

and striving after the wind." Kohelet fears that for all his work and all his wisdom he can have but little impact on the world. (1.3) Generations will come and go as usual, the sun will rise and set, the wind will blow and return, and all the rivers will flow into the sea without the sea ever being full. It seems that there can be nothing new in nature, and that history repeats itself. "There is a thing of which one will say, 'see this is new;' it is already from ages before us." (1. 10) Stoic philosophers believed that world history goes through 10,000 year cycles each of which ends in a great conflagration, after which the world begins again and repeats in new cycles the exact same history over and over. Kohelet saw what the Stoics saw, but he did not accept their belief and instead wondered what it meant that a loving God made His world in such an apparent *hevel*, a Hebrew term perhaps best translated as "ephemeral" but literally meaning "vaporous".

HEVEL. "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. (*hevel havalim...hevel havalim, hacol hevel.*" So reads the beautiful verse of Ecclesiastes I. 2. Seven times does the author use the word *hevel* (including the two plurals). The ancient Aramaic Targum suggests that Kohelet could see that in the future his kingdom would be split and eventually his beloved Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed, and his people sent into exile, and he was saddened by the apparent ephemerality of human existence.

But such feelings are, in fact, normal and, in measure, healthy for a thinking human being. It is important to recognize the ephemerality of the earthly and to recognize too that any human sense of permanence in this world is illusory. This sense of the ephemeral impresses us with the temporary and unsatisfactory nature of the illusory and leaves people unsatisfied and unhappy. Kohelet will find that pleasure can divert a person at least temporarily from thinking about matters that trouble him. However, it is far better in the long term for a person to find those truths that are important and that give human life its full meaning. Kohelet will seek the means of relating to God, to people, to the material world and to himself. He wonders why God loads man with physical duties and burdens when it is the spiritual that is truly important. He comes to understand that the physical world is not all self-defeating *hevel*, but is needed to enhance the search for joy and through this joy for sanctity. A person can learn to harmonize his spiritual and physical components. This will give his life both the joy and meaning which he needs. There will still be foolishness and evil, but Kohelet will find and teach productive ways of following God's plan both in the material and spiritual.

Instead of feeling satisfied with large numbers of bushels of grain in a harvest, we will find that the abundance is meaningless unless we recognize that it is God's bounty and blessing. It is the sense of blessing

that is important and not the number of bushels. Kohelet is troubled by the feelings of *hevel*. Large harvests, like human accomplishments, never give a feeling of permanence and security. Success is to be measured in awareness of God, not in having a big house and a full silo. Kohelet is disturbed that all this seems to be *hevel* and *hevel* of *hevels*. He is frustrated at how empty and meaningless any human accomplishment is, for he is wise enough to see the folly of living for *hevel* when people have an inborn yearning for something greater.

Kohelet continued to probe with his great wisdom and also sought ways of understanding worldly pleasures. Although he encountered considerable frustration, he found too that God would enable a good person to enjoy wisdom along with pleasure, while the sinner would seek to accumulate possessions which he might never enjoy. Yet, Kohelet is somewhat unsure of himself and his own position as regards his musings, "This too is *hevel* and striving after the wind." All this affected Kohelet deeply, yet he could see clearly that wisdom was superior to foolishness (2.13). The wise could still encounter difficulties and disappointments, but it is best for any person to eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of his labors.

The poetic, lyrical nature of Ecclesiastes helps to celebrate Kohelet's inquiry and also the physicality which he accepts and with which he makes his peace. A main theme of Kohelet is the physical world and how can man deal with it. It can be depressing and difficult and often unfair. How can the world seem in the long run other than *hevel* --purposeless and ephemeral. Yet it offers an essential and necessary means of relating to God and of personal and spiritual growth. A feeling of purposelessness is itself stagnating, for it blocks us from the beauties that the world does offer. People are troubled by feeling the impermanence of their own existence. This prompted ancient pharaohs to build magnificent pyramids as everlasting commemorations of themselves, American presidents to seek to fashion a "legacy" and mythological Greek warriors to perform one last act of military prowess by which to be remembered. Kohelet is not on a quest for immortality like Gilgamesh. The quest is itself *hevel*. Yet Kohelet finds that many things give a life value and purpose, so that one can hold infinity in the palm of his hand and eternity in an hour, as William Blake so beautifully said it.

## NATURE

Kohelet speaks of the difficulty of life "under the sun." This term expresses the Biblical approach to nature and its place in God's creation. Polytheistic peoples believed that nature preceded the gods and that people can not go beyond subservience to it. For the Hebrew Bible, however, God created and rules over nature, and people can attain great freedom when they realize that not

nature but God rules the world. Story after story in the Bible demonstrates that God rules over nature and that the whole earth is in His power. And that people should not let themselves be enslaved by earthly life.

## OVERCOMING DISAPPOINTMENT

In chapter 4, Kohelet seems to reach a low point. The world is full of oppression, and the tears of the victim find no comforter. It is better to be dead than alive and best never to have been born at all. Everything is prompted by jealousy. People waste their lives chasing wealth and are unalterably dissatisfied and disappointed. They do not seem to have proceeded beyond the primal jealousy of Cain and Abel. In a most telling metaphor, "The fool clasps his hands and eats his own flesh," (2.8) i.e. he expends his efforts in useless work and wears himself out. However, Kohelet offers a response which typifies the view of the world that he develops throughout this work: Philosophical answers are not definitive or even important. They are useful only to fill textbooks. What is necessary and ultimately most satisfying is to establish a working solution, a *modus vivendi*. Kohelet's approach is of this type – thus he emphasizes the benefits of companionship. Two are better than one, and a three-fold cord is not easily sundered. If one falters, his fellow will support him. Two together will warm each other. It is pointless to seek a utopia-like state where everything is ideal and perfect. Far better a life of continuing activity and development. The goal is not static, unchanging perfection.

Kohelet is deeply concerned with the idea that "there is nothing new under the sun," an idiom that has become common in English. However, beyond its poetry, "under the sun" seems to have the specific meaning of this-worldly. This material world is limiting and confining. People also feel a strong existential drive to seek a higher meaning. How far can one go with the physical? Plato, in the last book of his *Republic*, describes the perfect reality of the upper world of souls and deplors the ordinariness and lack of understanding in this world. Kohelet often speaks of the frustrations of this world "under the sun" where people seem unable to make an impact or to do anything truly "new" and creative. However, there is a way. A person can create and innovate in the world beyond the sun, i.e. the world of his relationship with God and His Teaching. Here Kohelet differs strongly and significantly from thinkers like Plato and Thoreau. The spiritual and material, in his view, are not in contradiction but in harmony. For Kohelet, a person does not need to divest himself of his physical body to gain the spirituality of the world of souls, unlike Plato who states that "the body is the prison of the soul." Nor does one need to divest himself of all the accoutrements of civilization and go to live in solitude in

the wholly uncivilized simplicity of Walden Pond as Thoreau did. Enjoy friends, savor pleasures and combine these harmoniously with spiritual pursuits in this world combined of both physical and spiritual, as God created it. Enjoy even the warmth of the sun. For as limiting as the world under the sun can seem, one need not be limited beyond the sun. As often as Kohelet has expressed his vexations with the world “under the sun,” he concludes (11.7) that “sweet is the light and good for the eyes to see the sun.” I.e. it *is* good to live in this world under the sun, as long as one keeps a proper focus on higher realities. Kohelet follows the Old Testament belief that both physical and spiritual are created by God, and that both are holy and are necessary components of a full human life.

Thoreau argued that that the amenities of civilization prevent a person from enjoying life at its best. People use too much heat where they do not actually need it. They wear fancy clothes more to compete with others than for their own benefit. He attempts a sort of minimalizing and simplifying of life that partakes of the long Western history of asceticism; but Kohelet is no ascetic. Kohelet may relish simple things, but he sees no reason to reject more complex amenities and pleasures. He is all for progress and the benefits of civilization. Pursuit of worldly goods is a normal if at times unpleasant part of living. What is important is that one should not be overwhelmed by physicality, by the world “under the sun.”

People disappointed with the society in which they live may decide to leave it. As Henry David Thoreau sought the loneliness of his hut at Walden Pond, so his contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, described in his novel *The Blithedale Romance* his own experience living in a small commune near Boston. In ancient Athens, Epicurus the philosopher isolated himself with a small group of friends in his estate called the Garden, where they sought peace from the bustling give and take of polis life in quiet study and resignation of ambition. . If one does not want something, said Epicurus, then he will not be disappointed if he does not attain it. Another type of loner was typified by St. Anthony, the third century father of Christian monasticism. Seeking spiritual intensity and freedom from sin and temptation, Anthony moved steadily deeper and deeper into the Egyptian desert to be alone where he could devote himself totally to freeing himself from physical pleasures and giving himself wholly to God. He avoided bathing and restricted his diet to water and to the simplest foods. To Kohelet, this was pointless. Pleasure was not the main focus of a life, but it certainly enhanced life. Asceticism was unnecessarily restrictive. Kohelet may have enjoyed times of quiet contemplation, but he shows no desire to isolate himself. He was a king in Jerusalem, he says, and if he is indeed to be identified with King Solomon, he had 1000 wives and concubines – hardly a loner. Clearly Kohelet accepts

the value of marriage and companionship. Kohelet did not seek political utopia like Plato’s Republic. He was troubled by injustice and praised a wise ruler. Good government is necessary, but it is not the entirety of a good life. It is the individual that is important not the government. For this same reason, Kohelet could not have accepted Karl Marx’s Communist society with its idealization of the society over the individual as well as its lack of faith in God.

## THE SONG OF TIMES

One very beautiful and oft quoted passage in Ecclesiastes is the so-called Song of Times, which opens chapter 3, and which served as words of a popular song of the 1960’s, recorded by the Birds among others. It responds to the sense in the first two chapters of the inexorable passing of time.

“For everything there is a time and a season under the heavens. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to breach and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to cast stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing... A time to love and a time to hate; a time for peace and a time for war.”

People so often approach a birthday in fear that it signals the ebbing away of their time on earth. The words of this song so beautiful and simple explain that many things happen and that each will come in its suitable historical moment. The very beauty and balance of the passage seem to give history a comforting mask, not the tragic mask of the Greek theater. “He made each thing beautiful in its time,” (3.11) says Kohelet. There is a guiding hand in the world, yet not a rigid, predetermined fatalistic order. The beauty of the passage is not merely a lace cover that hides an uncaring, capricious world. God rules history in benevolence and wisdom. For Kohelet, there is no fate or chance, but there is a divine plan. People can not understand every piece of the plan as it happens, although the need to understand drives them. However, they can understand that all things are in God’s hands (Alshich 15), and that whatever happens has a purpose. “People will not understand all that God has done from beginning to end. I have known that there is nothing better for man than to be happy and to do good with his life. And also, all that the person will eat and drink and will see good in this world, this is a gift from God.” Each event takes place in its right time in the divine plan for history, even if this is not easily apparent

to people. When the plan is completed, the individual parts will be more understandable.

God rules over history, and events happen under His purview and not by chance or fate. People do not control the world, but they have the very important power to make moral choices between right and wrong. The ancient Greeks, in contrast, tried different approaches to studying history. In one view, all is controlled by fate. People can, like Oedipus, try to affect the course of events, but only will manage to bring about what is anyway going to happen. This is an expression of mythological thinking. A second view is expressed by historians like Thucydides who ignore any thought that there might be divine interest in human affairs. Events happen according to impersonal, historical cause and effect.

## STAGES OF LIFE

There are certainties and verities, but the most important are not necessarily philosophical. There is a God, there are good and evil, and there is joy. At a simple practical level, there are things that a person can do that are better than other things and that will bring results. In the eleventh chapter, Kohelet offers a list of suggestions in a metaphor that is pastoral and highly effective. "Cast your bread upon the waters, for in many days you will find it," i.e., sow your seeds when the rains begin, and at harvest time you will have a crop.

"Apportion your land in seven or eight, for you do not know whether evil will come upon the land." I.e., sow different crops in different fields to protect yourself in case a part of the crop should fail. (11.4) "One who watches the wind will not sow and one who looks at the clouds will not reap." I.e., one who waits for the perfect day to sow or reap will find that good opportunities pass him by, and that the job will not get done.

(11.5-6) "As you do not know the way of the wind or the powers inside a seed, so you do not know the work of God, which way He will do everything. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening, let not your hand rest, for you do not know which will be successful, this or that or if both will be good." The Midrash adds that the verse applies not only to farming but also in the sense that a man should beget children when he is young and also in his later years for who knows which will be more successful. Indeed, perhaps all the children will be good. Many fine and even famous people were born to aging parents. A well known rabbinic sage has told that he was born ninth in his family of ten and that only he and his younger sister from among all the siblings survived the European Holocaust. Kohelet offers the opinion that

people should use opportunities and that on the whole success will come, sometimes in a manner that could hardly be foretold or anticipated. To proceed using your best information is itself a show of faith not only in a specifically pietistic sense but in life itself. One can never be sure what will result, but one can trust God and do his best.

Each stage of life has its own meaning. Youth is not a time merely to sow wild oats and experience entertainments that old age might not offer. It is more an opportunity to grow in wisdom and character so as to be prepared as well as possible to live a full life. Each moment in each stage is necessary and important in its own way. "Rejoice young man in your youth, and let your heart be glad in the days of your youth and go in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes; but know that on all these, God will bring you in judgment. Remove vexation from your heart and let pass evil inclination from your flesh, for youth and dark hair are *hevel*." (11.9-10) This disagrees with Robert Herrick's famous lines "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may for old time is a flying..." Kohelet is advising people to devote their youth to good deeds and growth. So many people reach their middle or later years chafed by deep regrets over times and opportunities wasted in their youth. Kohelet shows the simple means of preparing for that time, "Remove vexation from your heart..." before you reach the time of your greatest challenge. Use the opportunities presented at each stage of life both to enjoy the moment and also to prepare for the next stage.

Kohelet is a spiritual man and also very much a pragmatist. He does love God and the world and seeks and finds ways to live productively. He is sure that it is possible for a person to enjoy and to grow spiritually, intellectually and materially, to benefit from companionship and not to be overwhelmed by despondency or the sense of *hevel*. Nor does one necessarily have to accept extremes of strain or deprivation to live a positive life.

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