Vanity of Vanities

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THE Book of Ecclesiastes, one of the shorter books of the Old Testament, has had, from a very early date, a profound influence upon English Literature. It has been asserted that no book in the Bible has been quoted so frequently. It has been all things to all people. The cynic, the materialist, the hedonist, and the evangelist, each has attributed to this Book his own concept of the meaning of life.[1]

A ballad by W. E. Henley may be said to illustrate the impact of Ecclesiastes upon the cynic:

> Life is a smoke that curls—
> Curls in a flickering skein
> That winds, and whisks and whirls,
> A figment thin and vain,
> Into the great Inane.
> One end for hut and hall!
> One end for cell and stall!
> Burned in one common flame
> Are wisdoms and insanities.
> For this alone we came:
> O Vanity of Vanities.[2]

The materialist seizes upon the concept of the fate common to man and beast. Both come from the dust, and to the dust they both return. It is a sort of Epicurean re-shuffling of the atoms.[3]

The hedonist expatiates on our author's excursions into the joys of this life. He greedily seizes upon the concept of the enjoyment of gardens, orchards, parks, irrigation works, male and female servants, cattle and sheep, silver, gold, singing men and women, as the central theme of his argument; and he receives some corroboration for his views in 1 Corinthians 15: 32[4], "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die", which is, perhaps, a mis-interpretation of Ecclesiastes, 8: 15, "And so I praised contentment, for man has no good under the sun but to eat and drink and be content"; to which may be added Ecclesiastes 9: 10, "Whatever thy hand findeth to do, do with thy might, for there is no accomplishment, or reckoning, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol, whither thou art about to go". A somewhat similar idea may be found in these well-known lines:

> A book of verses underneath the bough,
> A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou
> Beside me singing in the wilderness—
> O wilderness were Paradise enow.[5]

Because of this similarity of concept, Ecclesiastes has been called the Omar Khayyam of the Old Testament.

The evangelist, his eye intent upon the two birds in the bush, is inclined

to deprecate the one bird in hand, and interprets "Vanity of Vanities" in this light. To him this world is transient and futile, while the life to come is eternal and infinitely worth-while.[6]

Koheleth, which the Greeks translated "Ecclesiastes", wrote about the middle of the Third Century B.C.,[7] well after the influx of Greek culture into Western Asia. It is quite possible that he was more or less familiar with such authors as Theognis, Hesiod,[8] Aristophanes,[9] Zeno,[10] and Epicurus.[11] Phrases and idioms appearing in the writings of these men seem to find a place in Ecclesiastes. Whether our author used these phrases consciously or unconsciously it is impossible to say. At any rate, he used them strictly for his own purposes, and with his own meanings—as has been done by writers down through the ages.

Koheleth seems to reflect certain misgivings as to the merit of philosophy, a feeling which may be deduced from his repeated intimations that "many words mystify, rather than clarify" (5: 2, 6; 10: 14). In spite of this, however, the Book of Koheleth, of all the Books of the Old Testament, is the closest in content to a philosophical treatise. Yet, although one might expect such a treatise to outline a systematic progression of thought, Ecclesiastes does so as little as do the Prophets, Job or Proverbs. Indeed, it might be described as a series of "Guesses at the Truth".[12] Being a Semite, and so fundamentally a Theist to whom God reveals Himself, Ecclesiastes has no place for the Socratic type of argument. To him when God speaks, man must not question. Thus Koheleth, in common with the other Books of the Old Testament, offers no systematic study of Theology: the student must assemble his data from isolated passages, and arrange this data in an order in keeping with his own sense of logical sequence.

We must remember always that Koheleth was a Semite of the Third Century B.C.; that his language was Hebrew, a tongue in which many individual words have no absolute equivalent in English. Because of this, misconceptions have arisen. The fault is not that of the original manuscript, nor is it the fault of the translator, since he had, perforce, to use the vocabulary at his disposal. The difficulty is, that the reader takes the words of the translator, and endows them with concepts of the Western World of the Twentieth Century, instead of the Semitic World of the Third Century B.C.[13]

We must always recognize that we are the heirs of Greece and Rome in the Philosophical and Legalistic point of view, the central theme of which is Man. But our religious literature has come to us from the Semitic world, in which the central theme is not Man, but God. So there is within us a continuous clash between the humanism of our Greek and Roman teachers, and the Theism of our Semitic missionaries; and it is not always easy for the lion and the lamb to live comfortably together—unless the lamb be in the stomach of the lion. In this case the lion, at least, is content.

"Vanity of Vanities" is a most euphonious expression, and for aesthetic reasons, perhaps, it should be retained. The Hebrew word "*hebhel*"[14] was

used by earlier writers in connection with the mystery cults, and should be equated with our word Mystery or Incomprehensibility, rather than with the word Vanity, although it may be remarked in passing, that man has been always prone to equate what he does not know, or does not understand, with the futile or the vain.

Our English translation, "Vanity of Vanities", seems rather incongruous in other respects. Rarely does a preacher declaim in this fashion. Scholars have translated the Hebrew *koheleth* by such varied terms as, Assembler, Compiler, Collector, Debater, Just Orator, The Ideal Teacher, The Member of an Assembly (Ecclesiastes), Penitent, Philosopher, Preacher, Sage, Sophist, Teacher.[15] None of these is fully satisfactory: a better translation would be "One who Meditates". This concept is derivative of a Syriac word of the same root as *koheleth, "kahal"*, which means "to consider".[16] This translation fits in very well with the idea in 12: 9, "He weighed, and searched out, and arranges many proverbs". Dr. DeWitt has shown how St. Paul reacted to Epicurus, being repelled by certain of his ideas, and attracted by others.[17] Koheleth may very well have reacted in the same way, although the very name "Epicurus" must have been anathema to him as a pious Jew.[18] St. Paul seems to have been attracted by the phrase, "Meditate upon these things", a phrase which Epicurus used in a letter to one of his Disciples.[19] "Meditate" seems to mean "to calculate the pros and cons of any activity". This concept is certainly inherent in the argument of Koheleth and may well have an Epicurean origin. Thus "One who meditates" would seem to be a happier translation of *koheleth* than the familiar "Preacher".

I have noted before, that our author was a pious Jew who believed that God created the world and all that is in it. It would be incredible that Koheleth could think any creation of God futile, mere nothingness. On the other hand, it would be quite natural, and in keeping with his tradition, that he should acknowledge himself unable to understand the world in which he found himself. We may now re-translate our text—Mystery of Mysteries, says one who meditates, all is Mystery.

Koheleth repeatedly advises his reader "to fear God". The significance of this phrase is of prime importance. I need only note the oft-quoted passage, "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs, 9: 10), which is repeated with variations in the Psalms (111: 10), Job (28: 28), and Isaiah (11: 2; 33: 6). They affirm that God is the Creator and Director of all: everything in the world is God's private property, to do with as He sees fit. These passages imply also, that man should recognize God as his Creator and Owner. It is an assertion of unquestioning trust in God. This is reflected in the Semitic-Moslem *uslim*, "I submit", and in the Semitic-Christian "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done". Koheleth would say, "I find the world in which I live, and the ways of God with Man, quite inexplicable. But I am confident that God knows what He is doing, and that He has a plan for His world". I do not believe, as Professor Jastrow has suggested, that Koheleth was even a gentle cynic.[20]

The primary motive behind Old Testament literature is the glory of God, and not the portrayal of Israel's religious and political progress. That the Hebrews believed God to be a God of History (that is, One who directed all human activity in accordance with His plan for the world), is almost universally accepted. But it has impinged upon the minds of very few, that such a concept is often at variance with far-reaching moral and ethical standards among men.

Two passages may be cited to illustrate the Hebrew concept of Divine Government, in contrast with human ethical standards. According to Genesis 42: 21ff., the brothers of Joseph admit that they have sinned against him, clearly indicating their feeling of responsibility for their actions. Genesis 45: 5ff., gives the other side of this picture. In speaking to his brothers, Joseph says, "Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me here, for it was not you, but God, who sent me here". Chapter 50 gives another version of this same story; the brothers fear that Joseph may wreak vengeance upon them for their treatment of him, so they send a messenger to Joseph, confessing their sin, and asking pardon. Verses 19ff. note Joseph's reply: "Fear not, am I in the place of God? While ye did devise evil against me, God devised it for good, in order to keep much people alive, as is the case to-day." Joseph's view is that the past of his brothers, as well as their future, is in the hands of God, and that their treatment of him was all part of the Divine plan, all their actions were directed by God to this end.

In Isaiah 10: 5-34, we have the story of an Assyrian invasion. The Assyrians considered that their invasion of Israel was undertaken on their own initiative, and by their own might. In reality, however, the Assyrians were acting only as agents of Yahweh, who had incited them to invade Israel for His own purposes. It seems evident that, while man feels himself to be a free agent, and behaves as such, in reality he is not free—it is God who is directing man towards the fulfilment of God's own purpose. It was the failure to recognize that these two views might be held by one author, that has led some scholars to assume a multiplicity of authorship for the Book of Ecclesiastes.[21]

One of the Hebrew words whose translation has created considerable misunderstanding is the word *"ruach"*, which is almost always translated "spirit". The English reader immediately clothes this word "spirit" with all its modern Anglo-Saxon grandeur and significance. To understand the full meaning of *"ruach"*, we must trace its history from earliest times.[22]

Roughly speaking, the course of Hebrew development passed through four major phases: the Patriarchal, the Period of the Judges, the Prophetic (allied with the Period of the Monarchy), and the Post-Exilic Period. During the first phase, the Patriarchal, society was tribal, being composed of a unit of people with a leader. The second phase, the Period of the Judges, was tribal also, but more sedentary in character; the third phase, the Prophetic, was national, being composed of a larger unit than the tribal, with a King

as leader; the last phase, the Post-Exilic Period, was largely a society of individuals.

During the first phase God ordered affairs by speaking directly to the leader, it being understood that his followers would follow him. In the second phase, that of the Judges, whenever God had a special task for a leader, He granted that leader a special *ruach* which enabled him to carry out the task God had given him to do. It is true that each man and beast was endowed at birth with a *ruach* which remained with him until death, but in the Period of the Judges it was understood that a special task required more *ruach* than ordinary: Judges 6: 34, "The *ruach* of Yahweh clothed Gideon"; Judges 11: 29, "The *ruach* of Yahweh was upon Jephthah". In Judges 9: 23, when Yahweh wished to stir up trouble between two peoples, He sent an evil *ruach* between them. The *ruach* was, in every case, the agent of Yahweh. In the third phase, the Prophetic, God made His will known to the King through a prophet whom He had selected as His mediator, it being understood that as the King went, so went the nation. In the fourth phase, the Post-Exilic, God directed each person individually, as society was no longer a unit, and since the old concept of King and prophet had receded. In this period of Hebrew development, when the concept of the importance of the individual as over against the older concept of the social group became prominent, the idea of the *ruach* as a divine agent directing the affairs of the individual came to the fore. Each individual had from God a *ruach* which entered the foetus before birth, and which returned to God at death. This *ruach,* the activating force in man, caused him to act strictly in accordance with the divine plan, the *ruach* being always a divine agent.

Up to the time of the Revised Version, translators interpreted the Hebrew *"re'uth"* or *"ra'yon ruach"*[23] as *"vexation of spirit"*. At that time they noted its proximity to *"hebhel"*, vanity, and, recalling the theory of Parallelism, translated it as "a striving after wind". Parallelism, however, does not always involve a strict synonym sequence—sometimes it involves contrasts, sometimes progression. I would understand the phrase *"ra'yon ruach"* to mean not a "striving after wind" but rather "the striving of the *ruach*". This translation, it seems to me, is much more in keeping with the Hebrew idiom, and also more in keeping with the spirit of the Book itself. Our author notes repeatedly how irrational is life from man's point of view, yet man cannot stop striving, since his *ruach* continually urges him on—a primitive concept somewhat analogous to our "divine discontent".

This *ruach* is above reason. Epicurus considered Nature as the Creator and Director of the Universe. He explained the frequent irrationality of human activity by the theory that Nature is above reason. The analogy between the "nature" theory of Epicurus and the *"ruach"* of Ecclesiastes, is striking.[24] If Koheleth were familiar with the writings of Epicurus, the resemblance may not be entirely coincidental. There is of course a profound difference in the points of view of these two men. To Koheleth, God is the sole Creator and Director of the Universe; He is the Creator of the *ruach,* and the One

who appoints to each individual his task on earth. To Epicurus, on the other hand, Nature is the Creator and Director not of man only, but of the gods as well. While Koheleth is a strict Theist, Epicurus is a Humanist, but evidently a Humanist with Nature at the helm.

The insignificance of Man's knowledge and power, in contrast with the power and knowledge of God, is ever present in the minds of Hebrew writers: Job 11: 7,

> Can you discover the very nature of God?
> Can you discover even unto the limits of the Almighty?
> It is higher than Heaven, What can you do?
> It is deeper than Sheol, What can you know?

and again, Job 38: 3,

> Gird up like a man your loins, that I may question you,
> And do you tell me!
> Where were you when I founded the Earth?
> Tell, if you are acquainted with understanding!
> Who established its measurements? Surely you know!
> Or who stretched a line upon it?

Koheleth was quite in agreement with these sentiments, when he said, in 5: 21,

> Do not set rashness in your mouth,
> Let not your heart speak a word hastily before God,
> For God is in His Heavens, and you are upon the earth,
> Therefore, let your words be few!

Surely a man who held God in such reverence could hardly have considered that any of God's creations were vain, transitory or futile. He might however, say in all honesty and reverence, that he was unable to understand things as he found them in the world: mystery of mysteries, says one who meditates, mystery of mysteries, all is a mystery which I cannot understand.

"Man has no profit[25] in return for the toil at which he toils under the sun." This passage may be considered as the sub-title of Koheleth's dissertation, and to him a basic reason for the incomprehensibility of the purpose of life. The following lines would seem to point to an explanation of this thesis: "A generation comes, and a generation goes, while the earth remains for an age. The sun rises, and the sun sets, and goes panting unto the place where it rises. Going to the south, rounding unto the north, around and around goes the wind, and returns upon its course. All streams go to the sea, without the sea becoming full; unto the place whither all streams go, they continue to go. Everything grows weary without one of them being able to speak, the eye seeing little and the ear hearing little."

These lines would seem to indicate that succeeding generations of man, the constant courses of the sun, wind and rivers, make up the Order of God's Creation. Each generation of man is very brief, thus limiting the extent of his experience, and hence of his wisdom. However, other creatures

of God, His sun, His wind, His rivers, have been doing their allotted tasks since the beginning of the age, yet they have added to Creation not one iota, and so have done their work with no profit to show for all their toil. Man then, who is also a creature of God, but whose life, is so brief in comparison with these other creatures of God, may expect to do only the work God has allotted to him, and he can (or should) expect a profit infinitely less than can the sun, the wind, and the rivers. Like the other phenomena, whatever man does, he is acting only as the agent of God, and his accomplishments, therefore, must be attributed to God, and not to man himself. Furthermore, these other creatures of God, sun, wind and rivers, cannot tell man of their experiences, which have extended from the beginning of the age, so man must continue to be mystified as to the purpose of life. He can be certain of one thing only—that profit is not a part of this purpose.

The early Sumerian, Babylonian and Hebrew creation and flood myths would seem to show that the Semites held a theory of a cyclic order of the Universe. The fertility and mystery cults, native to the same areas, seem to confirm this point of view. Such a concept entailed a series of ages, beginning with a Creation, continuing with a Golden Age, and then a gradual decline, a catastrophic Destruction, the salvation of a few, and a New Age, which would presumably follow the pattern of the preceding ages.[26] Koheleth seems to have this in mind when he says, 1: 9ff.,

> That which was, is that which shall be.
> That which has been created, is that which will be created, there being nothing new under the sun.
> Should there be a thing of which one may say,
> "Look at this! It is new!" Already it has belonged to the Ages before us.
> The former ones have no memorial, and the later ones, who shall be,
> Shall have no memorial with those who follow.

3: 13, may be considered as supplementary to this concept:

> I am confident that whatever God creates will be for an age,
> One cannot add to it, nor subtract from it,
> God having already made that before which men stand in awe.
> Whatever was, already is, and that which is to be, already was,
> Since God seeks out that which has gone before.

We must, therefore, envisage an ordered Universe, moving according to the Divine plan, from Creation to Destruction. In such a Universe, every creature must play his allotted part in his allotted time, since any deviation would be disastrous to the plan. "One cannot add to it, nor subtract from it."

I have noted elsewhere that the directing force in man, as well as in beast, is the divine *ruach,* the activating principle, which is allotted to each before birth. The idea of this constant and precise control of the individual is not confined to Koheleth alone. Amos 4: 13, "For behold, He Who has

formed the mountains and created the *ruach,* and told man what is his thought, Yahweh is His name". This is valid even for pleasant illusions which are inspired by God. 2: 24, "That one should eat and drink and *make himself see a profit* in his toil, is not in reality a profit, for this too is from the hand of God, for none can eat or drink apart from Him". He might well have included the thinking that he has obtained a profit from his toil as a gift of God.

Whatever a man has is a gift from God. There is no idea of merit involved. Evidently God gives certain individuals desirable things, and gives others undesirable things, not because one man is better or more deserving than another, but simply to carry out His divine plan. In his ignorance, man calls one who has received desirable things "He who is good before God", and the other, who has been the recipient of undesirable things, man calls "a sinner".[27] In reality, each has performed his allotted task. 2: 26, "To the man who is good before Him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and contentment, and to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and amassing, in order to give it to the one who is good before God". This sort of favouritism is incomprehensible to man, yet his *ruach* drives him on to do his appointed task. 5: 18 repeats this concept, as it has to do with the more fortunate: "As for every man to whom God has given wealth and possessions, and granted him the ability to enjoy them, and to take up his portion, that is, to be content in his toil—this is the gift of God." 6: 1 reflects the other side of the picture: "There is an evil which I have noted under the sun, which is very frequent to man. A man, to whom God is wont to give wealth and possessions and honour without any limit, and God does not permit him to enjoy it. This is incomprehensible, and an evil sickness."[28] I do not need to point out that it is the misfortunes that come to man that are incomprehensible to him. Man has been content always to accept the good things of life as his due. Koheleth, however, would hasten to deny that man has earned anything. Whatever he has is his only by the grace of God, and not because he has deserved or earned it. Merit has no place in our author's concept of the order of the Universe. Koheleth's idea of pleasure is pertinent to this concept of God's gifts to man. "Pleasure" is such an easy word to interpret! It becomes all things to all men. In Chapter 2, in his search for the meaning of life, Koheleth turns to the possibility of pleasure. "Of laughter, I said, it is madness, and of pleasure, it is useless." This pleasure to which he refers, is, of course, the lighthearted kind, connected with laughter. For this type our author has little use. The second type has to do with vast possessions. Koheleth continues:

> I amassed more than all who were before me in Jerusalem,
> My wisdom serving me well.
> All that my eyes asked for, I did not withhold from them.
> I did not restrain my heart from any pleasure.

This type of pleasure, accepted simply as gifts from God, was in no way a

result of his own endeavours. In the following lines Koheleth defines his own concept of pleasure:

> Indeed, my heart found pleasure from all my toil,
> And this was my portion, out of all my toil.

We may conclude, therefore, that to Koheleth "pleasure" meant that peculiar consciousness of contentment which comes from hard work, a contentment not in any way connected with possessions, except in so far as their accumulation has involved toil. This concept of pleasure is not greatly at variance with that of Epicurus. To sum up: Koheleth believes that possessions come from God, that toil is the lot of man, and is the sole source of his contentment.

In a very special sense, God was to Koheleth no respecter of persons. All alike were God's creatures, and to each He assigned a task. The task of one may be more pleasant than the task of another, but each has his place in the divine plan. Obviously creatures of God included those whom man in his ignorance had labelled wise men, fools, righteous, wicked, saints, sinners and madmen. The fact that all these fared alike added to the incomprehensibility of the ways of God to man. 9: 2, "Everyone will fare the same: the righteous and the wicked, the good and the evil; the clean and the unclean; the one who offers a sacrifice and the one who does not offer a sacrifice, will have one fate. The sinner is like the good man, and he who swears is like the one who fears an oath. This is an evil in all that is created under the sun, for all have one fate." ("Evil" here simply implies what is incomprehensible to man.)

7: 14 is pertinent to this denial of rewards and punishments. "Note the work of God! Who can straighten what He has made crooked? On a day of good fortune, enjoy it; and in a day of evil fortune, note. The latter, like the former, God has made, as a result of which, man cannot discover what is coming next." Good does not derive from good, nor evil from evil—God apportions good or evil in His own time, and for His own purposes.

The authors of Genesis concluded that, although God had created man in His own image, and although He had endowed man with His own breath and *ruach,* man had eventually gone wrong, and so had to be destroyed. The prophets also, were quite certain that man was heading in the wrong direction. Koheleth's thesis, that God had a plan, even though it was hidden from man, and that man acted always in accordance with this divine plan, would seem to show that our author doubted the belief of these earlier writers that man had gone wrong. Koheleth thought that man had gone in the way God intended him to go, a way necessary to the working out of His plan.[29]

7: 29, "However, God made man upright and, as a result they sought many reckonings." 7: 27 defines "reckonings" as adding one and one together. It must be understood that "reckoning" is the natural result of having been made upright. In other words, God made man as He intended

him to be, and man behaved as God intended him to behave. Man was intended, therefore, to toil without any appreciation of God's purposes.

God, the Creator and Director of the Universe, owns all peoples, and He grants to each His gifts, but not according to man's sense of merit. The greatest gift God can give, is not to be born, and so not to suffer. The second greatest gift is, having been born, to die. 7: 1, "To be born is better than fine oil; and the day of man's death is better than the day of his birth; for death means that he has accomplished the task God gave him to do; his sufferings are over. I congratulate the dead who are already dead, more than the living, who are yet alive. But better than either of these is he who has never been, who has never seen the evil works created under the sun." (Evil is, of course, simply the unpleasant, and so the incomprehensible thing.)

Koheleth believes that the feeling of accomplishment gained through toil is the only thing that makes life bearable. It had been traditional among the Hebrews, that long life and many children were the natural rewards of piety. Koheleth denies this. "If a man begat a hundred children, and lived many years without enjoying any good—that is, without feeling that his toil had accomplished something (one of the gifts of God)—I state that the still-born child is better than he, for into an incomprehensible world he comes, and into darkness he goes, and his name is covered with darkness. Yea, he who has never seen the sun has more peace than he."

But, having been born, Koheleth advises man to make the most of it. Toil is the real boon of humanity, and man should bear his own cross with a cheerful disposition. 9: 8,

> Always let your garments be white, and let not oil be lacking on your head.
> Enjoy life with the woman you love, during all your incomprehensible life, which He has allotted to you under the sun,
> For that is your portion in return for life, and for the toil at which you toil under the sun,
> Whatever your hands find to do, do with all your strength,
> For there is no accomplishment, or reckoning, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol, whither you are going.

It may be noted in passing that the evangelist uses only those parts of our author that he can interpret for his own purposes, and neglects what would modify his interpretations.

There is a proper time in which the various activities of life must be carried out (Chap. 3): a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, a time to root up what has been planted, a time to slay and a time to heal, a time to break down, and a time to build up, etc. From none of these activities does man derive any profit, for God has given man an unprofitable occupation with which to be occupied, but everything God has made fitting in its time (3: 11). With these verses we might place 10: 7, "go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a good heart, for already God has

accepted your works". The accomplishments of man are simply the accomplishments of God through His agent, whom God has made upright.

According to Genesis 1 man was created in God's image as His vicegerent on earth, with control over all things upon the earth. Man, therefore, was superior to the beasts. Koheleth, on the other hand, denies that man is in any way superior to animals, or that man has any property rights over them. He says that beasts are creatures of God, just as man is a creature of God. Koheleth's idea is more in keeping with Genesis 2. Ecclesiastes 3: 18, "I considered concerning the matter of mankind, in regard to God having set them apart, and in regard to their thinking that the beasts belong to man: surely, as regards the fate of mankind, and the fate of the beasts, they have one fate. The death of one is the same as the death of the other; both have one *ruach;* there is no advantage for man over the beast. This is incomprehensible. Both go to one place, both come from the dust, both return to the dust. Who knows whether the *ruach* of man goes up and the *ruach* of the beast goes down to the earth?" Scholars have concluded from these verses that Koheleth was a Sadducee, who believed that there was no life after death; or that he had an Epicurean concept that explained life and death as variations in the grouping of the atoms. It will be noted that our author does not deny a future life. He says only that no one knows about it. However, from Ecclesiastes 11: 5 we learn that the *ruach* is deposited in the bones of the foetus before birth; from 8: 8, that man has no power over the *ruach* during his life; and from 12: 12, that the *ruach* returns at death to God, who gave it. This concept is not that of the world-soul of the Greeks, for the *ruach* of the Hebrews, although an agent of God, seems to have an individuality of its own. It seems to me that in Koheleth we have a glimmering of the concept of immortality.

An important portion of the Book of Koheleth portrays a conflict between the concept of the order of the Universe as man thinks it should be, and the order of the Universe as God intended it to be, and so, as it is.

In Koheleth's mind, a wise man should be better off than a fool. In actuality, he says, this is not so. 2: 13

> I thought that wisdom should have a profit over folly, like the profit of light over darkness; the wise man's eyes being in his head, while the fool walks in darkness. But I, myself, am convinced that one fate befalls both. I said, if the fate of the fool befall me, why do I behave with wisdom, there being no profit. So I concluded that this was past understanding. Surely, neither the wise man, nor the fool, has a memorial for the age, because in the days to come, all will be forgotten. How then does the wise man die? Exactly like the fool!

It had been traditional for the Hebrews to believe that righteousness was rewarded, and wickedness punished. This was quite in accord with Koheleth's idea of a proper order of the Universe. In his experience he had discovered that such was not the case. 7: 15ff.,

> I considered everything during my incomprehensible days. There may be a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness; and there may be a wicked man who prolongs his days in evil.
> Be not excessively righteous, and be not more than ordinarily wise.
> Why should you be astonied?
> Be not excessively wicked, and be not a fool; why should you die before your time. [These are rhetorical negatives.]
> It is proper that you cleave to one, and not let go of the other, for one who fears God may evolve from either of them.

That this concept disturbed Koheleth greatly is indicated by the repetition of this experience in 8: 14:

> What has been done upon the earth is incomprehensible, for there are righteous men unto whom befalls what should befall the wicked,
> And there are wicked men unto whom befalls what should befall the righteous:
> I concluded that this was incomprehensible.

and 8: 12,

> The sinner may do evil a hundred times and prolong his life,
> Yet I am certain, that which is profitable to those who fear God, is that they fear Him.
> And that which is not profitable to the wicked who does not prolong his days like a shadow, is that he does not fear God.

From these rather obscure passages, which must fit into the pattern of our author, we may deduce that it is a good thing to fear God, that is, to recognize oneself as His personal property, not because of advantage to be gained by doing so, but simply because it is seemly so to do. This concept seems to underlie the tenor of our Book, and indicates the beginning of an ideal ethic—the doing of right for the sake of doing right, without reference to rewards or punishments.

To return to the problem of righteousness and wickedness: Koheleth notes their presence in a quite irrational sequence, and shows that the difficulty lies really in his own ignorance. 3: 16,

> Again I noted under the sun,
> Where there was right order, there was wickedness,
> Where there was righteousness, there was wickedness, I concluded,
> The righteous and the wicked, God will put in their proper order,
> For a time for every matter and for every work He has appointed.

Everything which we call wickedness, or right order, has its own proper time, just as birth and death have their own proper time. And, as our author says in 3: 11, "He has made everything seemly in its own time. And so there is a time for wickedness, and a time for righteousness." But

the world is not run by man; and so things do not happen in accordance with man's sense of fitness. 9: 11,

> The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor wealth to the understanding,
> Nor grace to those who know, for a proper time and chance befall all.

Merit is a human concept. The slow, the weak, the foolish and the ignorant are also God's creatures, and are often granted by God the gifts which man would give to the swift, the strong and the wise. God creates the evil, as well as the good, and no man knows what is coming next, because human concepts of cause and effect are in reality invalid.

> Indeed, man knows not his time,
> Like a fish caught in an evil net,
> Like birds taken in a gin,
> Like these, man is ensnared at an evil time,
> When it falls upon him suddenly.

To Koheleth, injustice seems to be rampant in the world. 9: 13,

> This I noted under the sun, and it was important to me,
> There was a small city, with few inhabitants
> Against which came a great King,
> And surrounded it, and built against it great siege works.
> And there was a poor wise man
> Who delivered the city by his wisdom—
> But no one remembered that poor wise man.

Even in Koheleth's day, it would seem "the paths of glory lead but to the grave"—to oblivion. 10: 5,

> There is an evil I have noted under the sun, an error emanating from the Ruler,
> Folly is placed in many high places,
> While wealthy dwell in low places,
> I have noted slaves upon horses,
> And princes walking like slaves upon the earth.

This sequence of past events, which Koheleth found so incomprehensible, and the uncertainty which he felt in regard to the future, should not, he thinks, deter man from living industriously and courageously. Our author preaches a gospel of toil, and advises man to live dangerously, to take chances, simply because he cannot know what the future may have in store for him. 11: 1,

> Cast your bread upon the waters, for you may find it in many seas.
> Divide your estate into seven or eight parts, for you do not know what misfortune may be upon the earth.
> He that watches the wind will not sow, and he that watches the clouds will not reap.

> Just as you do not know the way of the *ruach* in the bones of a pregnant woman, so you do not know the work of God, who doeth all things.
> In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hand rest, for you do not know whether the one or the other will prosper, or whether both alike will be good.

Koheleth says that from the divine point of view, all is pre-determined and cannot be altered by man; but from the human point of view, the future is unknown, and man should be active and venturesome in his investments.

Man, an agent of God, was created to carry out God's purposes. This certainly entails toil, misery and often a sense of frustration. Man therefore, becomes synonymous with the oppressed ones, while God is the Oppressor. 4: 1,

> I again noted all the oppressed ones who had been created under the sun, and lo, there were the tears of the oppressed ones without any comforter, and from the hand of the oppressor came power without their having any comforter, and so I congratulated the dead who were already dead, more than the living (the oppressed ones) who were yet alive.

With this passage we may compare 5: 7, "If you see oppressions of the poor, and exploitation of right conduct in the provinces, do not be astonied because of the matter, for one official keeps watch over another official, and the most high over him." Thus, even what appears to be a crass miscarriage of justice becomes a part of the divine plan, since each official is acting as an agent of God. With a theological concept such as was held by Koheleth, there is no place for the anthropological attributes of God commonly expressed by the pious. There is no room for anger, or mercy, long-suffering or justice in Koheleth's theology, for God rules the world in accordance with a rigid, pre-determined plan, and all creatures in the world are subject to this plan.

In summing up the philosophy of Koheleth as shown by his writings, may I suggest that he seems to base his theology on these premises: Life is a gift of God, and it is closely allied with toil and disappointment. Man has no choice in the matter of being born: he has no control over the *ruach* that directs his activities, since that is directed by God. He has, moreover, no say in the timing of his death—his is a war in which there is no discharge. It is fitting for a man to make the best of his misfortune in being born, to show a cheerful countenance at all times, to put all his energy and skill in whatever task may be assigned to him by God, and to enjoy to the full the labour involved, for in labour alone does he find true contentment. 11: 9,

> Go in the ways of your heart,
> And in the seeing of your eyes,
> And know that concerning all these,
> God will bring you into the right order.

The final chapter of Ecclesiastes gives a vivid description of the last days of an old man, noting his failing powers—his teeth gone, his eyes dim, his voice flute-like, etc. Many of the phrases are uncertain in meaning. 12: 2,

> On the day when the keepers of the house tremble
> And the strong men are bent,
> And the grinding women cease, for they are few,
> And the women peeking out of the windows are darkened,
> And the doors in the street are closed,
> When the sound of the grinding is low,
> And the bird-like voice is dumb,
> And all the musical notes are low.
> Yea, they fear what is high!
> Terrors are in the way,
> The almond trees sparkle,
> And the locust goes humping along,
> And the caper berries fail,
> For man goeth to his eternal home,
> And the mourners go about in the street.
> Before the silver cord is broken,
> And the golden bowl is broken,
> And the vessel is shattered at the fountain,
> And the wheel at the well is broken,
> And the dust returns upon the earth, as it was,
> While the *ruach* returns to God, who gave it.

"Mystery of Mysteries," says one who meditates, "Mystery of Mysteries, all is a mystery which I cannot understand." Koheleth's speculations end with a final assertion of his faith in God, and in God's plan, a statement that may be strangely comforting to sinners such as we. It is a vision of God assembling the most unlikely bits and pieces of the world and of our activities into a complete and perfect whole. "Surely every work God will bring into its proper place, concerning all that is hidden, whether good or evil."

I began with Henley's reaction to the problems and speculations of Koheleth. I cannot do better than close with these words of Pope, which seem to echo Koheleth's philosophy:

> All nature is but art, unknown to thee,
> All chance, direction which thou canst not see,
> All discord, harmony, not understood,
> All partial evil, universal good,
> And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite
> One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.[30]

NOTES

1. Cf. E. H. Plumptre, Century Bible, *Ecclesiastes,* pp. 7-10.
2. Quoted from G. C. Martin, Century Bible, *Proverbs etc.,* p. 221.
3. N. W. DeWitt, *Epicurus and his Philosophy,* pp. 16f. A. D. Power, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 30.
4. Although this verse is usually considered as a quotation from Isaiah 22:13, the similar passages in Ecclesiastes would mean: Since food and drink are gifts of God, and since contentment is closely allied to toil, and since death interrupts our work; let us

accept God's gifts, and work with the utmost diligence at the tasks God has assigned to us, for death will come soon.

5. Plumptre, *op. cit.*, p. 263; Power, *op. cit.*, p. 31. W. B. Forbush made a translation of Ecclesiastes in the metre of Omar Khayyam in 1906.

6. Possuet, *Oraisin Funèbres*, de Henriette-Anne d'Angleterre.

7. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 215; Power, *op. cit.*, p. 11. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth the Man and his World, pp.* 63ff.

8. H. Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature.*

9. Eccles. 1:7 is a paraphrase of Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 1. 1293.

10. A. H. McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 44f.

11. DeWitt, *op. cit.*, p. 199. Plumptre, *op. cit.*, quotes several parallels to Ecclesiastes from Lucretius.

12. Hare, *Guesses at Truth*, 1827.

13. There seems to be a serious tendency for students to take it for granted that the various authors of the Old and New Testament were members of their own churches in good standing.

14. Staples, JNES II, pp. 95ff.

15. Power, *op. cit.*, pp. 4f.

16. Payne-Smith, *Syriac-English Dictionary*, p. 491.

17. DeWitt, *Saint Paul and Epicurus*, pp. 22f.

18. Sanhedrin X: 1.

19. DeWitt, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

20. Morris Jastrow Jr., *A Gentle Cynic, Being the Book of Ecclesiastes.*

21. Barton, ICC., *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 18ff.

22. Staples, AJSL XLIV, pp. 145f.

23. For a more complete argument for this rendering, see Staples, JNES II, pp. 96f.

24. DeWitt, *Epicurus and his Philosophy*, pp. 128 ff.

25. Staples, JNES IV, pp. 87ff.

26. Apocalypse and Prophecy would appear to be related to this concept.

27. Staples, JNES VI, pp. 65ff.

28. The persistence of this Semitic concept, in which one person is favored at the expense of another without any moral significance, may be noted in a brief poem in the *1001 Nights*, in the story of the fisherman:

> "Do you not see the sea with the fisherman diligent in pursuit
> Of his daily bread, while the stars of night are in tangled skein?
> He has waded into the centre of it while the waves buffet him,
> His eyes continue to follow the billowing of his net,
> Until he has spent the night. He is happy with the fish
> Whose gullet has been split with the spit of death.
> He who had spent the night free from cold,
> In the most desirable of conditions bought it.
> Praise be to the Lord who giveth to one and denieth the other.
> One catches the fish, while the other eats it."

29. There is always the possibility that Koheleth was not at variance with the prophets in this.

30. Pope, *Essay on Man*, I, 11, pp. 289ff.