

Ecclesiastes

It has been a while since I tackled a theological subject. But a recent need for self-criticism and introspection drew me back to one of my favorite biblical books, Ecclesiastes (or Kohelet).

Traditionally it is attributed to King Solomon. Of course, like all the books of the Bible, there is much debate about its origin, date, and author. But I find it an amazing short book for lots of reasons. Not least because it contains phrases that have become deeply engrained in Western culture. "Vanity of vanities...all is vanity," says the King James translation ("It's all just hot air," in our parlance). Folk songs have been composed to its lyrics: "There is a time for everything... a time to give birth and a time to die...a time to love and a time to hate." It has verses that challenge accepted theology: "Who knows if the souls of humans rise and those of animals goes down?" And convention: "Of making books there is no end," and, "There is nothing new under the sun."

It opens with a very ancient and yet very modern question: "What is the point of life?" It sounds very much like the weary pot-induced mental meandering of an overindulged teenager. Or indeed a hormonally excited but unemployed addict who cannot get a date. Yet instead of answering the unanswerable question, the author responds by trying to see if there is one way, the secret, the magic bullet, THE answer, the answer to life's challenge.

He tries wisdom and then pleasure, stoicism and epicureanism, and finds them inadequate. It seems there IS no single, one answer. The message superficially seems to be one of skepticism, until one gets to the very end. Indeed the rabbis of the Talmud had their doubts about whether to include this in the canon altogether. A somewhat similar "Wisdom Book" called Ben Sirah, or Ecclesiasticus, although mentioned in the Talmud was excluded and only comes down to us via the Apocrypha. In the case of Kohelet, it is only because of the last two lines, "In conclusion, having heard everything, respect God and keep His commandments, for this is (the purpose of) humankind," that Kohelet is deemed kosher. Whereas Ben Sirah is not. (Though having King Solomon's name on the publication surely helped sell it!)

These last two verses are always given as the core message of the book. But It does very much sound like an after thought, tacked on to get the approval of the authorities the way Chaucer always adds an apology every time he makes fun of Christianity or uses Greek myths. I have another theory.

There one line that is repeated seven times throughout Kohelet in slightly different ways. It is the single most recurring theme of the book. It first occurs in Chapter 2 verse 23: "The only good for a human being is to eat and to drink and to show himself what is positive in his work." Official translations suggest alternatives such as, "Is it not good for a man that he eats and drinks, etc." I take the verse to mean that one should actively participate in life and try to enjoy its pleasures (legally of course).

In other words, to quote Monty Python, "Always look on the bright side of life." One has to be positive, to enjoy what one has, to appreciate the gifts of life, whatever they are, and whenever we are fortunate to receive them, because too often we do not or cannot. In modern parlance, one is reminded to consider the cup half full not half empty.

Now this is great advice. Most therapists will push it. Instead of thinking of this earth as a vale of tears, one should try to be positive, and enjoy it much as one can (without causing harm to others or breaking one's moral or religious code). And if a pill or two or more will help, well everyone will be happy, from doctors to parents to the drug companies, because pill-popping is so easy.

Our societies are dominated by bestselling books that peddle feel-good, easy answers, the secrets to happy living, the solutions to all our problems, without too much trouble, effort, or obligation or losing any sleep. This is the religion of the twenty-first century. A simplistic reduction of a complex religion or ideology that functions as a placebo, just so long as it doesn't make any demands. But the sad fact is that without a structured way of life, without a framework and constraints, the possibility of a considered, valuable life is all but zero. Nothing of real value can be acquired without effort.

Yet simplistic, banal versions of Kabbalah, Sufism, Buddhism all are peddled to the credulous, disturbed, and dissatisfied world as answers to all problems. No one is willing to talk about discipline and self-control and creating a way of life with values or constraint that serious religion requires. It's like slimming. How many books, how many diets, how many new fads of prepared low-calorie foods and meals come out all the time, one after another, and how many people join gyms and let their memberships lapse? Yet we are still overwhelmingly overweight and unfit. All because everyone wants the quick and easy fix.

The truth is that Kohelet knows that we humans are weak and limited. Because the rest of the sentence I quoted above continues, "But this [ability to be positive] is a gift from God." Isn't that true? Some of us seem not constitutionally equipped or genetically programmed to achieve this. It is like trying to tell someone who is depressed to snap out of it. It's like all those people who are addicted to therapists and carry on year in, year out, talking but not doing.

I am always amazed at how modern Kohelet is. How it speaks to us now. But I am also surprised how many who are drawn to the book do not pick up on the one message that is its most repeated theme: The challenge of life is to integrate the physical and the spiritual and to find the balance. Not to be destroyed by either extreme.

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