

Excerpts from – “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist Or Godly Sage?”

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The enigmatic character and polarized structure of the book of Qoheleth is not a defective quality but rather a deliberate literary device of Hebrew thought patterns designed to reflect the paradoxical and anomalous nature of this present world. The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition – that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue.

Qoheleth's World and Live View Summarized

As Qoheleth made his investigation (1:13) of all that is done under heaven, he was governed by basic presuppositional beliefs which are expressed throughout his work. These presuppositions largely arise out of his knowledge of God's revelation of himself in Genesis 1-11. Foundational to his philosophical pursuit of meaning is his firm recognition that the world with all its systems, and man in particular as actor, operate under the curse of God. This he expresses in terms of things twisted and things lacking (1:15). The presence of evil is not to be attributed to the essence of creation but as a foreign element imposed upon it, for “Who can strengthen what he (God) made crooked?” (7:13). Furthermore, God did not capriciously impose this curse, but “God make mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes” (7:29). Thus, it is the curse which accounts for the inequity, the tyranny, the oppression, the disparity of providence, and especially for the presence of death and its haphazard encroachment without respect to men's characters (cf. 9:1-3).

This basic presuppositional belief that the world is not what it was *originally* nor what it will be *finally* governs Qoheleth's ethical world and life view. This is due to the fact that the transformation of the world is not accomplished by some evolutionary process inherent within creation itself, but by the God who created the universe and also subjected it to its present frustration under the curse and who will finally liberate it (cf. Rom. 8:19-21).

For Qoheleth, then, there is a second and much more ultimate presupposition which regulates all his observations of this evil world and his wise counsel on how to live in it. The entire book rests solidly upon the assumption that the Lord God of Israel is the Creator and Governor of all things. He is the *Creator* who set all things into motion (12:1; 11:5). He is the *Sovereign* who governs all that he has created. He does not merely permit or allow the present suffering and evil in the world.

Qoheleth acknowledges that it is God who *causes* both the good and the bad to befall men irrespective of their characters (7:14-15). It is God who gives man wealth and yet may not give him the enjoyment of it, and evil which is vexing to all men (6:1-2). Though it is God who gives both the good and the evil, he is not to be charged with doing evil; he is only to be feared precisely because of all that he does among men (3:14).

God is also perceived by Qoheleth as *Incomprehensible Wisdom*, for the creator/creature distinction, aggravated by the curse, hides God behind a frowning providence which hinders man from discovering life's meaning in this cursed world (3:11; 7:13-14; 8:16-17; 11:3-6). Man's knowledge of what God does as he observes the world is fractional and frustrated by the perplexing paradoxes. It is precisely this fact, namely, that almighty God has hidden his full character behind a disparate providence, that necessitates his special revelation.

Conclusion

Qoheleth was no enigmatic pessimist. He was not a man who recorded the battle of tormenting and conflicting thoughts that raged inside his own mind as he oscillated between orthodox piety and indulgent secularism. Qoheleth was a Godly sage. He was a righteous man regulated by his knowledge of and devout fear of the God of Israel. It is precisely because he was a God-fearing man that Qoheleth was capable of giving expression to such paradoxical and anomalous matter without denying the presence of evil in this world or without destroying his belief in God. Qoheleth records a Godly man's reflections upon a cursed world subjected by God to vanity and frustration. It is the character of such a world which accounts for the polarizing expressions and paradoxical observations in his book. It is precisely what one scholar dogmatically denied: "That the author of Ecclesiastes intended that the contraries of his book should...reflect and image forth the chequered web of man's earthly condition, hopes alternating with fears, joys succeeded by sorrows, life contrasting with death."

What Paul asserts in a few words in Rom. 8:19-21, Qoheleth investigates at length. Where Paul spoke generally, the Preacher descended to uncover the particulars. Though Paul had the privilege of knowing that Christ will restore all things and even now, in principle, has begun to do so (cf. 1 Cor. 15:54-57), both he and Qoheleth share one biblical assessment of the character of this world and of life in it since the fall. It is cursed! It is disjointed! It is upside down! It is in bondage to decay! It is meaningless! It needs to be liberated!

What Qoheleth saw obscurely in the coming day of final retribution, the apostle Paul makes clear: "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). It is for the final redemption of God's people that creation awaits, for then will it be set free from what is now twisted and lacking (Qoh. 1:15).