

Theology Proper and Philosophy of life as presented in Ecclesiastes

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Theology Proper and Philosophy of life as presented in Ecclesiastes

I. What is God like based on Ecclesiastes?

A. The name of God

The predominant view of God in Ecclesiastes can be recognized in part through the Hebrew name for God utilized in Qohelet's writing. This name, "Elohim", is utilized to heighten God's transcendence (NIDOTTE, 1,402). Phrases such as "The mighty one" and "The one far away," have been used to translate this name of God that relate to His position as creator and ruler above all. The Hebrew word "Jehovah" is not used in Ecclesiastes. This name, used to describe "God with men," or "God of the covenant," is clearly relational and evidently not the subject of Qohelet's text.

While authors such as Longman and Fox suggest that "Qohelet fears God, certainly, but without warmth or fellowship" (Fox, 137) and "in context we see Qohelet's God as distant, occasionally indifferent, and sometime cruel." This writer would suggest the opposite is in fact the case. Through displaying God's attributes as a powerful creator separate from His creation, Qoheleth is placing an even greater emphasis in the wonder that such a removed and powerful being would have any regard for man or his happiness. Perhaps of greater importance to Qohelet is the message that mankind's search for happiness and fulfillment begin through recognizing our appropriate place before God: after all "no man can contend with one who is stronger than he" (6:10).

B. References to God

"What a heavy burden God has laid on men" (1:13), these words begin to establish Qohelet's definite acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. "I know that

everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it" (3:14). The proper attitude toward such a God is awe and respect: "guard your steps when you go to the house of God...stand in awe of God" (5:1, 7). Qohelet continues to affirm the holy and transcendent nature of God above His creation, in his writing, "I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow" (8:12-13).

With the transcendent nature of God clearly established, it is important to also see God's gifts to humanity as highlighted in Ecclesiastes "to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given Him" (5:18) and

"God gives a man wealth, possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is a meaningless and grievous evil" (6:2).

Thus those that cannot see beyond themselves are warned against fostering a distorted view of God. Ecclesiastes 2:24-26 makes it plain that God is the source of good things while other passages site the importance of maintaining an appropriate attitude before God through proper attitudes in: worship (5:1-7), relations with the King (8:2-3), the handling of money (11:1-6) and the encouragement to make the best of one's youth (11:9-12:1).

C. Conclusion

As Qohelet concludes, he reminds the reader one last time of God's place above creation "for God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (12:14). Hence we see in Ecclesiastes the God of creation as the ultimate author and evaluator of all meaning. Ecclesiastes serves to remind those

who might see religion as a means of manipulating God that He is Immutable; He alone determines justice, value and worth. We must not forget the transcendent and omnipotent nature of God and we are compelled to maintain an appropriate attitude in our relationship to such a God. Surely the view of God in Ecclesiastes is consistent with all of scripture and displays His providential nature clearly to a fallen people. For this writer, mankind is viewed in Ecclesiastes as harsh, cold and distant; and not God.

II. What is the philosophy of life in Ecclesiastes?

A. What is discredited? What is valued?

We all have witnessed something that violates our sense of what is right; Qohelet is no different. As he confidently discredits specific life experiences, he takes part in the human struggle of frustration and at times our cynicism. Qohelet calls into question our values and priorities. "What surplus for toil?" is the question of 1:3 and the reply of 2:11 states, "there was no surplus under the sun." Eccl. 2:2 states, "laughter I said is foolish and what does pleasure accomplish?" while 6:8 affirms, "what advantage has a wise man over a fool?" Here we see toil, pleasure and wisdom all called into question. There is no surplus for toil, pleasure accomplishes nothing and the wise have no advantage over the fool.

Qohelet criticizes other choices and values such as the desire for lasting fame (2:16;9:5,15) work for its own sake (4:7-8) individualism (4:9-12) injustice (7:15;8:10-15) and even the possibility of no existence beyond death (3:19-21;11:7-12:7). Wealth and power are called into question and discredited as well. All values and priorities are compared to "Hebel" which has been translated as vanity, absurdity and by Frank

Zimmerman as "flatulence" (Peterson, 153). Now with the sum total of human experience torn away, we look again to find what is of value in Ecclesiastes.

As Qohelet identifies the problems and frustrations of human existence and highlights our inability to overcome them, there are recurrent themes of how to rebuild.

The first of these alternatives is presented in 2:24-26

"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

How does this value relate to the discredited values of 2:2? Phrases such as "from the hand of God" and "for without him who can find enjoyment?" clearly establish God as the source of these good things. With God the creator honored as the one who provides standards; life, work and wisdom are to be enjoyed. Utilizing this method, Qohelet promotes toil which involves cooperation (opposing individualism) (4:9-12) which leads to enjoyment. He also advocates simple pleasures of food, drink, rest and one's spouse (2:24;3:12;22:4:6;8:15;9:7-10). Qohelet stresses the brevity of life (11:8) and the proper place of human beings who receive the enjoyment through honoring God and regarding the human appetite appropriately. Only then do we truly enjoy what God has given (7:18-19).

B. How can a meaningful life be led?

Michael V. Fox and others have argued convincingly that Qohelet identifies certain paradoxes of human experience and allows them to remain unresolved. For example, Qohelet expresses confidence that justice will happen, yet also recognizes situations in which justice does not occur (3:17-21;8:10-14). How can these obvious

tensions provide guidance in achieving a meaningful existence? For this writer, true representations of the apparent inconsistencies of life are being expressed by Qohelet as a means of honestly addressing the problematic circumstances that we live in. Qohelet dispels any hope that any one of us within ourselves could find a source of security or satisfaction. Qohelet allows us to see that all hope is a gift from a benevolent God. As gifts, these should be enjoyed for what they provide us. Through identifying the problems, contradictions and frustrations of this world Qohelet also criticizes the inadequate ways we attempt to deal with them. While injustice and at times chaos still exist, Ecclesiastes teaches us that a meaningful life can only be lived when we accept the things that we cannot control, focus to find pleasure in what we can control and be happy being the creatures that we were made to be.

C. Conclusion

Through a process of tearing down all that we value in life and then rebuilding these values among the chaos that continues to persist, Ecclesiastes seeks to spring us from a trap. This pitfall entices mankind into viewing every part of our lives, including our religious practices, as a means of controlling our own success and security. However in our continued determination to achieve the good things in life, we are actually missing these very things. The philosophy of life in Ecclesiastes is this: there is another way to live. Fear and obey God's commandments (Fox, 144) and await God's ultimate judgment. Therefore we should learn to properly assess work, pleasure, wisdom and worship, so that we make the most of both the "good" and "bad" day (7:14).

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