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Volume XIX  
Issue 467

## Studies in Ecclesiastes

### The Words and Work of God and Man

Part 1 of 5

by — Vladimir Gelesnoff (1877-1921)

#### INTRODUCTION

Under the general title, “The Words and Work of God and Man,” I am presenting a series of studies in Ecclesiastes. While the exposition developed in these pages must be allowed to speak for itself, a few explanatory remarks regarding the process by which the conclusions advanced have been reached seem both desirable and necessary.

Those seeking the mind of God through the Scriptures are confronted with a critical obstacle of an unusual kind. The current versions of the Bible often translate the same Hebrew word in various ways, and quite as often one English word is made to do the duty of several words in the Original. In this way a veil of mystery has been thrown over many a passage, and a certain amount of human opinion and guesswork has been imported into God’s truth.

The Book of Ecclesiastes has severely suffered from this inconsistency in translation. Evidence of this fact will come before us in these studies. Meanwhile, an illustration will serve to show the way in which the Scriptures have been unconsciously obscured. The noun *cheshbon* in :25, 27, 29 of chapter 7 is represented by “reason,” “account” and “invention” in the *Authorized Version* (AV). It must be evident to the least critical reader that the author’s thought is necessarily obscured when in a brief paragraph with a sustained argument the same word is rendered by different terms conveying divergent, and even unrelated, ideas.



Another powerful factor in determining one’s concept of Ecclesiastes is the question of the Hebrew text. The Massoretic accents are used not only as signs of interpunction,<sup>1</sup> but often as a Rabbinical commentary on the text. We are not bound by the accents in any case and should scrutinize them carefully, especially in Messianic prophecies. Of great value, yet they are *no part of the sacred text*. It is possible also that we may not fully know the reasons of their location in important places, and may impute wrong motives to the Jewish editors of the text. That they can be perverted is plain enough from the fact that the vocalization often foists upon a passage a meaning out of harmony with the context.

#### AIM

No sacred book has ever been so much misunderstood in its whole aim and spirit as Ecclesiastes. The opinions of men have been put on a level with sacred writings. Eventually, the views, which became popular, have been considered “authoritative” – to this day theology is unable to free itself from the trammels of tradition and confess that authority in matters of exegesis rests exclusively with facts derived from the Bible itself. Our aim should always be to adjust our thoughts to the facts, and never to adjust the facts to our thoughts.

Applying this principle to the matter in hand, our prime concern is to ascertain what the book of Eccle-

1. The making of points between sentences or parts of a sentence. But punctuation is generally used. *Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)

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STUDIES (continued from front page)

siastes has to say about itself. In the epilogue we read,

*The terminus of the whole matter has been heard: Fear the One, Elohim, keep His instructions, for this is the whole duty of humanity. For the One, Elohim, shall bring every deed into judgment concerning all that is obscured, whether good or whether evil (12:13-14).*

Hence, we may say that the book aims at achieving a threefold object: (1) Recognition of God as God; (2) Reception of His revelation; (3) Regulation of life in view of a future rectification or judgment.

### CHARACTER

What the author wrote was upright and true. *"The Assembler sought to find words of delight, and what was written is uprightness and words of truth"* (12:10).

This statement explodes the idea in vogue, which reads into Ecclesiastes the pessimism of a broken-spirited debauchee. Some have even placed this gem on a level with the works of Byron, Heine and the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

To substantiate this theory, appeal is made to the speeches of Job's associates as examples of utterances by misguided critics, who had less understanding of God's ways in providence than the man whom they sought to correct. Concurring in this opinion of the discourses of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, we would point out that the case of Ecclesiastes is by no means analogous. At the end of the book of Job, Yahweh informed his associates that they had not spoken concerning Him what was rightly so (Job 42:7). The opposite is true of Ecclesiastes. The categorical statement of the epilogue describes its contents as words of uprightness and truth.

### AUTHOR

We are now prepared to consider whether Ecclesiastes asserts itself as the work of Solomon. When we turn to the prologue and epilogue, where it is most natural to expect information respecting authorship, we find no mention whatever of Solomon, nor anything to suggest his personality. On the contrary,

there are many things in the book incompatible with the historic Solomon; but it may be said that, while Solomon is not mentioned by name, the designation "Son of David" is equivalent to it. This seemingly decisive argument is, in reality, of no weight. The Hebrew "son" equally may well mean "descendant;" hence evidence from the book itself must decide between the alternative meanings.

The thrice repeated reference to those who were "over Jerusalem before me" (1:16; 2:7, 9) proves that Ecclesiastes looks back on a series of predecessors, a thing Solomon could not do. To say that the writer may have had in mind the old Jebusite princes is gratuitous. What Israelite, not to say anointed of the Lord, would think of identifying himself with the rulers of an accursed nation?

There are three problems which preoccupy Ecclesiastes: death, succession, the just suffering as a sinner. Death occupies a large place (*cf.* 2:16; 3:19; 4:2; 7:1, 17, 26; 8:9; 9:3-5), the special point of perplexity being the just dying the death of the unclean. The prominence given to Succession (2:18-19; 4:8; 6:2) is not surprising, seeing that the writer himself is a king, for with royalty it is a paramount question, especially in Israel, where the Messianic hope was bound up with the perpetuity of the Davidic house. Hence the kings of Judah occupied a place which no other kings ever have, or could, occupy: they were *forerunners* of the Messiah. The violent fate overtaking the just – his being carried off from the holy place – is also a matter of grave concern (7:15; 8:10-14; 9:2,3).

A moment's consideration will show that the problems contemplated in Ecclesiastes do not fit with Solomon's experience. As to death, in his old age Solomon lapsed into idolatry; therefore death, in a manner indicating the Lord's displeasure – a possibility which dismays Ecclesiastes – would, according to Hebraic concepts, be a just reward of his deserts. As to succession, Solomon reigned forty years. As Rehoboam, his son and heir, was forty years of age at the time of accession to the throne, he must have been born the very year of his father's coronation. Solomon's succession was thus assured from the beginning of his reign. As for the trials of the just, the calamities which marred the close of Solomon's tranquil reign were inflicted by the Lord because of his apostasy. ►

The author of the book, being a king of the Davidic line, the question of date is restricted within definite bounds. It cannot be earlier than Rehoboam, nor later than Zedekiah. Now, there is only one king possessing the necessary requirements: Hezekiah of Judah.

The problems, which engage Ecclesiastes, present a striking analogy with Hezekiah's experience. When Israel came out of Egypt, Yahweh promised not to put on them the diseases of Egypt if they would heed His commandments and keep His statutes (Exodus 15:26). King Hezekiah gave himself to Yahweh's service, loved His law supremely and trusted in Him implicitly. Yet he is smitten with the disease of Egypt, and his death is decreed by the God he served: "Thus speaks Yahweh: Give instruction to your household, for you are going to die; and you shall not remain alive" (Isaiah 38:1). Surely here is an experience to stagger faith and arouse questions.

Succession was no less pertinent with him. He faced a dynastic, and therefore a Messianic, crisis when brought to the gates of the Unseen having neither "son nor second." The word of Isaiah announcing his certain death involved another grave fact: as his disease was a species of leprosy, it meant burial with the unclean, and this, coupled with childlessness, was to him, and to the nation at large, a sign that Yahweh had rejected him.

The problems in Ecclesiastes find an echo in the psalm of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:9-20). Here is mourning over death and the rejection by Yahweh, which parallels the somber mood prevailing in the first part of Ecclesiastes.

*My lifespan is uprooted and is deported from me like*

*a shepherd's tent; I have rolled up my life as a weaver does; He is clipping me from the thrum. From day unto night, You are finishing me up (38:12).*

Even as hopefulness is on the ascendancy in the second part of Ecclesiastes, so also Hezekiah's psalm concludes with acclamation:

*The living! the living one! he is acclaiming You as I do today (:19).*

The conclusion emerging from these considerations is that to designate the Book of Ecclesiastes as a "dissertation" and its author a "skeptic" is to ignore the practical intention or purpose enunciated in the book itself. The purview of this book is much broader and grander than Bible students have hitherto been willing to allow. It approaches no less a theme than the place of evil in the Divine plan.

This need not surprise us after what we have already seen of the relation it sustains to King Hezekiah. The character and experience of the man preeminently fitted him to assume a representative capacity in his discussion of the universe.

The affliction of Hezekiah, which paved the way to a glorious aftermath of prosperity and peace, furnished a concrete illustration of the gracious purposes subserved by evil. We cannot but believe that such unique experience would crystallize into a masterpiece of literature.

The view here advanced puts a different complexion on the alleged materialistic ideas. If we identify the words of Ecclesiastes with the unusual trial of a



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particular personage – Hezekiah, for instance – then the texts can be put into context. The so-called “materialistic” ideas are but reflections on the possible meaning of events which were suggested to the writer as he observed life. The occasion which brought this book into existence enables us to discern in it the plaint of a saint, holding fast to his faith in God, who is brought into perplexity before the strange dispensation of God’s providence.

## WORDS AND WORKS

While the place of evil figures large in Ecclesiastes, it must be borne in mind that the problem of evil, rather a certain phase of it, is not faced at once; it is approached gradually and arrived at by successively subjecting to review the strange riddles of individual and racial experience.

The introduction, or prologue, to Ecclesiastes (1:2-11), touches two subjects: The vanity of “works,” and the weariness of “words,” and marshals an array of facts in support of each thesis. Subsequent chapters embody a detailed discussion of those themes. Of the five “books” of the treatise the first (1:12-2:26) and the third (5:10-7:12) analyze the *works* under the sun; the second (3:1-5:9) and the fourth (7:13-11:6) discuss *words* relating to God’s plan of the universe; while the fifth (11:7-12:7) takes in both fields at once, and dwells on the two positive thoughts which analysis has yielded. The epilogue (12:8-12) draws the inference from the data attained and formulates the moral.

## THE PROLOGUE

- 1 I *myself*, the Assembler, came to be king over Israel in Jerusalem.
- 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Assembler;  
Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.
- 3 What advantage has a human in all his toil  
Which he toils under the sun?
- 4 One generation goes, and another generation comes,  
Yet the earth *is* standing for the eon.
- 5 The sun rises, and the sun sets  
And gasps *back* to its place,  
That it may rise there *once more*.
- 6 Going to the south and turning around  
to the north,

Around *and* around the wind *is* going,  
Yet on its courses the wind returns.

- 7 All the watercourses are flowing to the sea,  
Yet it is not filling the sea;  
To the place *from* which the watercourses *are* flowing,  
There they return to go *forth again*.
- 8 All the words *are* weary; A man cannot utter *it*.  
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
Nor is the ear filled with hearing.
- 9 What occurred *once*, it shall occur *again*,  
And what was done, it shall be done *again*.  
There is *nothing at all* new under the sun.
- 10 Is *there anything of* which *one* may say:  
See this, it *is* new? It has already occurred  
In eons that were before us.
- 11 *There is no remembrance of former generations*,  
And also for *those* who shall come after *us*,  
A remembrance of them shall not continue  
With *those* who shall come *afterward*.

The prologue (1:2-11) states the two questions which the quest is to answer:

- (1) “Vanity of vanities,” says the Assembler; ‘vanity of vanities, all is vanity’ (1:2). This is not everything ►

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in the universe, as the reading “*all is vanity*” might imply, but every department of human toil, as indicated in :3. The word “*vanity*” is used of that which soon vanishes. The point here is the fleetness of the works done under the sun, which is elaborated, in :7-9, in a series of illustrations from the natural world. In things of nature, as in the succession of events, there is no advance; everything moves in a circle, like motion *in a treadmill – an unceasing round of monotonous repetition without novelty or progress.* “*What was done, it shall be done again*” (:9).

(2) “*All the words are weary; A man cannot utter it*” (1:8). The Hebrew term *dbrim* is best rendered here by its primary meaning of “words.” besides being more natural than the AV “*things*,” this emphasizes a differentiation between words of weariness and words of delight and truth, a differentiation sustained all through the book and finally established in the epilogue (12:10-12).

The verses immediately following expand the thought by showing that the continually recurring circle of history underlines the inadequacy of human theories to account for the vanity of man’s works under the sun (1:9-11). Existing theories are insufficient, and fail to satisfy the mind. Though one theory has replaced another, nothing new has been evolved; the changes that have taken place have only modified their form. Formulae have changed, methods of expression have altered to suit the speech of succeeding generations, but the substance of man’s theories of the universe is unchanged.

## THE EPILOGUE

- 8 Vanity of vanities, says the Assembler,  
The whole *is* vanity.
- 9 Yet furthermore, because *the* Assembler was wise,  
He still taught the people knowledge,  
And he listened and investigated  
*And* set in order many proverbs.
- 10 *The* Assembler sought to find words of delight,  
And *what as* written *is* uprightness *and* words  
of truth.
- 11 *The* words of *the* wise *are* like goad points,  
And like imbedded bolts *is the* possessing of  
gathered *sayings*;  
They are given by one shepherd
- 12 Yet furthermore, my son, beyond these, be  
warned;

*Of the making of many scrolls there is no end,  
And much study is weariness to the flesh.*

At the close, then, we get the epilogue (12:8-12), in which the author returns to the questions with which he started his quest, and restates them in the light of the results which his analysis of things has yielded. The vanity of man’s works on the earth is reaffirmed (12:8). Extensive experiment embracing various fields of human toil has but accentuated and confirmed the transient character of present activities.

Examination of the various theories of the universe, however, has demonstrated certain fundamental principles which carry a self-evident, self-manifest light, by which the truth is sealed to the conscience in the sight of God with a certainty transcending all conjectures, and superior to all changes of human feeling. We can surely appreciate the contrast between the words of weariness and those words of delight and truth which, in the absence of power to solve the mystery of the whole, warn us against indulging in fruitless speculation and profitless discussion.

The Divine purpose behind things as they are is so far off and so exceeding deep, that man can never reach it. Nevertheless, reason can lay hold of principles which instill reverence for God and enjoin conformity with His instructions. To discover these principles was the aim or “terminus” of our author’s word or treatise. The function of reason is limited to the gathering of wise thoughts which stimulate an ordering of life in the light of a coming rectification or “judgment,” but to go further is to take a leap into the realm of fancy.

*(To be continued)*



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