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Time and fear of god in the old testament book of *qoheleth*

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Abstract

One's subsistence on earth, according to *Qoheleth*, is perforated with conundrums, the pieces and puzzles can be assembled only by the creator. Life has no formula; to deploy wisdom and cleverness or any other thing or means to master the world is ineffective. God is sovereign over time in the sense that he foreordains a time for everything. The world system is closed and has fixed, immutable order that man is unable to alter. Order and regularity in time are God's blessing and the failure of man to fathom the system because of the eternity in his heart is designed by God to evoke in man a situation of fear of God. God is not to be limited and coerced by human wisdom. The only wise way to live is to be in awe of the incomprehensible God who lives behind the appearances of things known and unknown, comprehensible and incomprehensible. To exploit *Qoheleth's* guide points to cope with life in times of unavoidable and inexorable situations in the world of ours, replete with complexity and mystery, is a mark of religious maturity.

Keywords: Time, Eternity, fear, Old Testament and Qoheleth

1. Introduction

Qoheleth is the English transliteration of the Hebrew word קֹהֵלֶת. The name means collector (collector of sentences), preacher, great orator, deep investigator, debater or speaker in assembly. The term designates one who has some relationship to a congregation, perhaps indicating a particular office such as preaching (Murphy, 1977). The name appears seven times in the book and nowhere else in biblical literature. The meaning of the name, however, is not clear. The customary rendering, 'the preacher', is not satisfactory. This translation goes back to the Latin commentary of Jerome, who interprets the word as *concionator*, meaning 'speaker before an assembly' but preacher really is a poor translation because whatever *Qoheleth* may be doing in his book, he is not preaching (Blank, 1962). Actually, he is relating his experience about life and its incomprehensible mysterious occurrences that take place at appointed times.

Qoheleth is sharply critical of the wisdom movement before him. The earlier sages, in their attempt to recognize nature and human conduct, had allowed themselves the luxury of fixed and certain positions. For them, justice or obedience leads to life while wickedness leads to death. In exercising dominion over creation, the wise men seemed to be engendering the divine prerogative. The oversimplified and optimistic theory of divine providence and retribution epitomizes this position. It is against this perspective that the truly religious nature of *Qoheleth* can be appreciated. *Qoheleth* strikes a blow for divine sovereignty and independence; God is not to be limited and coerced by human wisdom.

The Hebrew wisdom books, including *Qoheleth* emphasize the general types and values of experience, reasoning and morality. Their focus is on the individual in social relationships (Drane, 1990). In the main, Wisdom literature is associated with the Hebrew word for 'wisdom' (חֵכֶמָה). Through aphorisms (sayings) and reflections, the wisdom texts describe a life that strives to achieve a right order and equilibrium in all things.

In our world of today, just like that of *Qoheleth*, we seek to think and reflect on occurrences in our lives too. Not all expectations come to fulfillment, not all investments bring profit, not all handiwork and labour produce results. Many of us believe that consequences are usually as a result of conducts. In some situations it could be true and in very many other circumstances it fails. Anxiety, worries, pain and anger always set in when expectations fail. In reacting to ugly and unalterable situations, some people go to the extreme to commit suicide, kill and do all sorts of bizarre things without considering that things and times are

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foreordained, hence the focal hub of this work.

Life keeps flowing in the same channel no matter what a person is or does. Life, death, war, peace, love and hatred are all the inevitabilities of time. They all have meaning, but we cannot in any way find the meaning. That God allows unpalatable occurrences to you may be inexplicable, but should not only be acceptable but also be understood so. The only wise way to live is to be in awe of the incomprehensible God who lives behind the appearances of things.

Taking advantage of *Qoheleth's* lessons on time flux and fear of God remain important aspects of religious maturity needed to cope with life in a world of ours stuffed with involvedness and inscrutability. The method is hermeneutical.

Time and Eternity in *Qoheleth*

Qoheleth's reflection upon time and times (fixed) is very famous in Old Testament wisdom literature. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

to kill a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war; and a time for peace. (3:1-8).

Qoheleth relates events as they come off in an order decreed by God, and he distinguishes man's situation thus - man cannot know God's purposes in the world because of "the timeless" God has put in his heart (9-11). Hence, man should resign himself to whatever comes to him as a gift of God. The importance of the right time is recognized many places in the wisdom literature before *Qoheleth* (e.g. Proverbs 15:23; 25:11) but he gives notable emphasis. The rule of God over the event that occurs in time is taken for granted here. Man cannot even dispose of such times as planting, much less of birth and death; the necessary conditions, it is assumed, stand within the power of God alone.

According to Gese (1983), earlier wisdom had never considered the world order without taking account of human conduct; rather, for it this order was directly realized in the conduct of the person. This was strongly implied in the maxims and proverbs of different books of wisdom. But *Qoheleth* says that if a person disengaged oneself from the happenings around, if one saw oneself in an absolute way, only then could that person describe the absolute, objective order. This eternal sameness of the world is described and supported by the doctrine of circularity. All changeable elements - sun (light), wind (Air), rivers (water) - return to their place. As everything in this eternal circular movement in space works and produces so humankind does not cease from speaking, from seeing, and from hearing. People speak and see and hear continually the same thing because being and doing repeat themselves eternally. For *Qoheleth* the contemplative person must perceive oneself as a foreigner in relation to this world.

The teaching on the doctrine of circularity, finds its counterpart in that of an eternal flux of the right time. For every type of doing and being and for its opposite there is a "time" (Hebrew עֵת). Whenever there is a time, there is a specific activity suited to it, and every doing is beautiful in its own time. Weeping, hatred, war, mourning and death are all associated with evil and they are afflictions. Laughing, love, peace, joy and good life are all associated with happiness. God made them to be occurring at the times suited to them and they are good or beautiful in their own times. But they find their meaning only in the passage of time (עוֹלָם) for which God has created everything. There is a substratum from which time emerges. This passage of time or this arrangement of individual right moments is hidden from humanity which sees neither beginning nor end and can neither add to it nor subtract from it. Thus, divine action is hidden from the person even though God has given humans the aspiration of perceiving the order of events.

The lack of insight into the succession of time leads to an opaqueness with regard to life because one's destiny is "time and chance" (עֵת וְקֶזֶעַ), the particular moment which overtakes a person (9:11). Thus, fate - the happenstance of "time" - breaks in on one from the outside just as a net and trap capture animals (9:12). The wise can at most understand the moment (8:5) while the universe remains closed to them (8:6-8). World events are unintelligible.

It is important, however, to understand that despite this humanity-world discrepancy, *Qoheleth* comes neither to a dualism which separates completely between an outer and inner sphere nor to one which sees a unity of the two spheres by means of analogy. Later wisdom took this spiritualizing or transcendental route, but *Qoheleth* on the contrary held fast to a single world in which God accomplishes and orders all things.

Qoheleth's treatment of the matter by saying that everything is beautiful or good in its own time looks like some theoditics' discussion of the problem of explaining evil by appealing to the Greater Good Principle. For instance, Schuuman (1996), in explaining this principle said that evil exists because it is in some way necessary for God's realization of good which outweighs or defeats it.

Qoheleth's explanation is different from the above for his own goodness of a thing depends on time. The broad structure of life and the individual fixed times within it are known in general, but man does not know the particular hour and is never sure of getting results from his actions. The reason for man's plight is that God has put "indefinite duration"-hence "eternity", "world" "indefinite time" "duration without beginning or end" (עוֹלָם) into his heart. There seems to be a deliberate contrast between the fixed time (עֵת) and the timeless (עוֹלָם). God runs things off at his own time (the continuum of experience in which events pass from the future through the present to the past), and man is not geared to this scheme because of the timeless in his heart. Hence, he cannot discover the work which God has done - a limitation that earlier sages failed to fully appreciate. To live better or happier, man ought to glorify and fear God. For everything, there is a time, is *Qoheleth's* way of saying that life is repetitive, boring and therefore vanity, temporal and worthless.

No one can reproduce time. Time is a necessary precondition for change and change is a sufficient requirement to establish the passage of time. Whenever there is change of any type we know that time has passed. We see this as we go through life, as we age. Alexander the Great recognized the soul of time as one of the three lessons learnt in life. At a time he took titles like the *Basileus* (high king) of Macedon, *Hegemon* (commander) of the Hellenic League, *Shahanshah* (king of kings) of Persia, Pharaoh of Egypt, and Lord of Asia (Poopola, 2012). He conquered the then known world at the age of thirty. At a time he became bored and took to drinking orgies (parties at which there is a lot eating, drinking and sexual activity).

On his death bed he told his generals three things. First, that the best of doctors should carry his coffin to demonstrate that at the time of death the best of doctors have no power to heal. Second, that his wealth (money, gold, precious stones) should be scattered along the procession to the cemetery to show that material things acquired on earth, stays on earth at the time of death of the possessor. Finally, that his hands should be let loose, hanging outside the coffin for all to see that we came to this world empty handed and we leave empty handed after the most precious treasure that makes the difference in life is exhausted and that is time. Time is precious; it can reproduce wealth, it can make more doctors but nothing can reproduce time. It was time that made Alexander to be ruler of the world, to acquire wealth and to value orthodox medicine. It was also time that made him to realize at the time of his death that everything on earth, except the fear of God, was vanity.

Fear of God in Qoheleth's fluxation of time

The concept of fear of God (*יראת ה'אלהים*) occupies a central place in *Qoheleth's* flux of time. It is in the development of this concept that *Qoheleth* apparently takes 'righteousness,' the chief virtue of earlier wisdom before him to absurdity (7:15-18). The fear of God takes the place of earlier 'righteousness'. The concept of godly fear appears prominently in *Qoheleth* 8:12-13 inside the complex of *Qoheleth* 8:9-14 which show the equation of act to situation to be invalid. *Qoheleth* says here that everyone who truly fears God will experience good as a result. It remains open as to how far this "good" (*טוב*) is tangible apart from the subjective abstract sphere of godly fear.

This good to be experienced is inbuilt in the fear of God which is not to walk in paths of light which secure for those who walk therein the harvest of life's fruits and honor. Fear of God here means walking under a heaven that is mysteriously closed, walking without the assurance that lightning might not suddenly shoot out and strike you as you go. It means at every step relying upon the free gift of God, but with every step also summoned to suffer the riddle and oppression that time and eternity can through God throw up the way of humans.

Through godly fear one will accept the good times with thankfulness while in the bad times one will understand that this time was also planned by God, that it is only one's limitations which prevents one from comprehending eternity. *Qoheleth* cannot get enough of exhorting to enjoy the good and the beautiful in life. Continually present in his work is

the urge to be happy and to enjoy (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10). This is something quite different from a cheap hedonism coming out of the gloomy backdrop of doubts about existence. On the contrary, God shows himself as one who also provides prosperity to persons in their limited state. Such a circumstance of well-being is "from the hand of God" (2:24), is a "gift of God" (3:13; 5:18), is "one's portion or lot" (*חֵלֶק* 3:22; 5:17; 9:9). It is good to accept this gift for it has "God's approval" (*רָצָה* 9:7).

One could speak of the above as a doctrine of the presence of divine favour and justice which *Qoheleth* develops in numerous passages. In early wisdom, the state of well-being was the direct result of one's standing in a condition of "righteousness". Now this condition of righteousness which secures a state of wellbeing before now is replaced by the fear of God. For *Qoheleth* automatic cause and effect principle is no longer possible. For him well-being must be a direct gift of God to the individual.

God defines what happens to each person within time and he acts righteously (Richards, 1985). *Qoheleth* says that this world cannot be comprehended completely; therefore a person should not demand of himself the impossible and suffer sure defeat thereby adding to the already existing worldly confusion. This counsel of moderation which has a timeless quality, from Aristotle's "mean" to current psychotherapy, leads to the right fear of God.

At the beginning and end of *Qoheleth's* wisdom stand the words: vanity of vanities, all is vanity (*הַבָּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל הַבָּל*). These words are deceptive if one wants to read into them what is not there. They merely show the way to the right fear of God. With its stentorian, 'vanity, vanity', *Qoheleth* calls us to our spiritual sense (Oshitelu, 2002). Everything is vanity which means temporal. Temporal means temporality bound both at the beginning and the end, and any condition that ends is the same as it was before it began. This means that all things that are attendant to human mortality in time are limited by the same mortality. Only the development of spiritual character has abiding value.

It is not for us to understand the meaning of life or figure out the divine purpose behind events, especially success and failure, reward and punishment of moral behaviour, or finally death itself (Boadt, 1986). This underscores the transcendence of God, the need to recognize limits to human wisdom, to know that the world has no formulas, and the ability to accept life as it comes with the fear of God, bearing its pains and enjoying its pleasures in moderation. Everything has a proper time, but it is known only to God in its fullness.

Conclusion

Qoheleth like every rational being is trying to make sense of his world. It is a record of a search for life's key. It is an attempt to give meaning to life. Seeing life as a whole reveals that there is no key or formula for it under the sun. Life has lost the key to itself. Wright (1972) is of the opinion that anyone who wants the key should go to the locksmith who made the padlock and even at that the locksmith would not give it to anyone. Since no one can get the key, everyone must trust the locksmith to open the door. God holds the key to all known and unknown. God is sovereign over time in the

sense that he foreordains a time for everything. The world system is closed and has fixed, immutable order that man is unable to alter. Order and regularity in nature are God's blessing and the failure of man to fathom it is designed by God to bring man to a situation of fear of God.

As man's life is punctured with puzzles, the pieces of which he can never pull together, his only alternative is to achieve a posture of fear of God in living under the sun and to live it to its reasonable limit knowing that someday the puzzle will be assembled by the one who created it and who will judge every deed. Life has no formula; to deploy wisdom and intelligence or any other thing or means to master it is vanity. Pursue wisdom and wealth, cultivate pleasure, labour faithfully, deploy injustice and wickedness; the end remains the same. History is not haphazard events; both wonderful and terrible ones are part of the divine plan in time. Time and eternity have spiritual meanings. The message of time is that everything has a rational purpose even though we cannot understand it. Only the development of spiritual character anchored on fear of God has an abiding value.

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