



INTRODUCTION TO KOHELET

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The Book of Kohelet is paradoxical in a number of ways. At the level of detailed study it is complex and often hard to grasp, yet its general tone is surprisingly familiar and modern so that it seems particularly accessible. The vocabulary suggests that the author belongs to a mercantile society where success is measured in material terms. He speaks of *yitron*, 'advantage' or 'profit'; *amal*, 'labour' or the 'reward for labour'; *inyan*, 'business'; *kesef*, 'money'; *kisharon*, 'success', *osher*, 'riches'; *chesron*, 'lack', 'deficit'. This is the language of our own society. Yet precisely this commercial view of life raises questions for Kohelet, as for ourselves, about the meaning and purpose of life and hence the question: 'What profit does a man gain for all his labour under the sun?'

Kohelet sets about examining the things that people value as of ultimate worth or significance: wealth, wisdom, love, but notes in each case their limitations. Even religion comes under examination, but Kohelet's relationship with God is pragmatic and formal: do your duty and do not risk getting God upset, for example by making vows that you do not keep. He even paraphrases the law in Deuteronomy 23:22: 'When you vow a vow to the Lord your God, do not delay to pay it, for the Lord your God will surely seek it from you.' Kohelet quotes the verse but inserts after the warning: 'do not delay to pay it' the words very foreign to Deuteronomy: 'God does not take pleasure in fools!' (5:3). Kohelet uses the term '*elohim*' for God throughout and not the tetragrammaton, and indeed there is no reference to Israel's spiritual destiny. For him religion is about manners rather than morals. Nevertheless morals are to be found – Kohelet observes the suffering of the poor, but his is no prophetic voice ringing out condemnation of those who oppress them. Rather their sufferings become part of his intellectual exploration of the different and painful experiences of life.

In some places one can detect a systematic approach to his thinking. He begins with observation: '*ra'iti*', 'I saw'. He may then draw on knowledge from conventional wisdom or his own understanding '*yadati*' 'I know'. He may add further observations, and then come to some sort of interim conclusion: '*amarti ani b'libi*', 'I said in my heart ...'. Yet even with such signposts it is not at all clear what his final thought might be on the particular subject. Perhaps this is the result of poor editing or gaps in the materials available, and yet one is always left with the tantalising feeling that some satisfactory conclusion could be found if only one could break open his system.

Perhaps some help can be obtained from the end of the book where the editor has allowed himself to make a judgment on Kohelet's life and career. In 12:9-10, we are told that more than Kohelet was a sage (*hacham*), in addition he taught knowledge (*da'at*) to the people, and *izzen* (either listened intensely himself or caused others to hear), *v'hikker* (researched), and *tikken* gathered, perhaps arranged in order, many proverbs. Kohelet sought to find *divrei hefetz*, 'desirable, ac-

ceptable, perhaps consoling words' but also to write directly *divrei emet*, 'words of truth'. Each of these categories would benefit from further clarification and may offer clues to the text of the book itself.

These closing words are attributed to an 'editor' by conventional scholarly and indeed traditional opinion. But personally I wonder if this is actually the case. Kohelet began the book speaking of himself in the first person, 'I Kohelet was king over Israel' (1:12), but he probably adopted this persona, as King Solomon, for the sake of the Book itself, and he drops it after the first few chapters. He ends the book with the way our bodies fail us towards the end of life until finally 'the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it' (12:7). Then comes this editorial voice speaking about his life and achievement in the third person. I would not put it past Kohelet to have himself adopted this editorial role as well in order to write his own obituary and conclude his book himself. By so doing he could actually assert at least once in his lifetime his own limited control over reality.

Certainly the ending feels like an attempt to pre-empt any doubts or questions about the validity or significance of Kohelet's teachings, an ambivalence that was to be matched by the rabbis of a much later generation.

I would like to end on a slightly less serious note. One of the great mysteries of the book is in the title given to the author. Clearly *kahal* has something to do with assemblies, large gatherings of people. This leads to questions and assumptions about which circle Kohelet might have been addressing. Martin Luther translated his title as 'the preacher', presumably envisaging some sort of religious assembly. In my library I have a book entitled 'The Musings of the old Professor' which would locate Kohelet in some kind of academic context, addressing classrooms of students. I have my own proposal, based on his sense of weariness at the unchanging nature of the world. There is nothing new under the sun. 'What was is what will be, and what was done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. There may be something about which one says – see, this is new, but it has already been in ages before ours. There is simply no memory of former things, and even of things that come afterwards, there will be no memory of them for those who come after.' (1:9-11) Such sentiments can only come from one source, someone whose lifetime has been spent in endless committee meetings regurgitating the same arguments, reaching the same conclusions and then repeating the exercise some time later when the previous decisions have been forgotten. On this basis I would suggest that in his lifetime he was a minor civil servant in some royal administration, and propose translating the name Kohelet as 'The Chairman'!