



THE THREEFOLD CORD OF ECCLESIASTES

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One of the fascinating little proverbs sprinkled throughout the book of Ecclesiastes is that found at chapter 4, verse 12: "A threefold cord is not quickly broken."

In the context in which the saying is placed, it appears to mean that a cohort of three comrades is more likely to find some success over against the slings and arrows of life than a set of two companions can achieve, and rather more likely to be successful than a single individual trying to get through life all alone could possibly be. A cord of just one strand is easily breakable; a cord of two strands is slightly less vulnerable; but a threefold cord is a more formidable and durable thing altogether.

Perhaps somewhat mischievously, it seems to me that the book of Ecclesiastes can be seen as a kind of "threefold cord". If it contained just one evidently consistent theme, interpreters would have solved its mysteries long ago and there would be no continuing dispute concerning its overall interpretation. And if it was a twofold piece, then we could interpret it as a relatively straightforward unresolved dialogue between two opposing views — as a number of interpreters have worthily done. But perhaps the book is itself a threefold cord, woven together by a writer whose teachings go round and round, something like the wind that he describes as "going round and round" and "returning on its circuits" [1:6]. This is a writer who circles around certain ideas and returns again and again to the same places where his thoughts had taken him before, and so it is possible to gather such reiterated utterances together and to plot out his essential ideas under three key strands of thought.

The first strand of Kohelet's cord is easily identified, since the thesis statement of Ecclesiastes is presented at the beginning [1:2] and at the end [12:8]: "vanity of vanities" or "utter vanity", vanity to the Nth degree, the most profound sense of purposelessness or futility imaginable.

The key Hebrew word here is of course *hevel*, literally "breath" or "vapour" and evidently in Ecclesiastes carrying a figurative meaning of transience and insubstantiality, or more particularly of emptiness and futility. It seems to be Kohelet's favourite word, since he frequently uses it to label whatever frustrates or irritates him, such as his supposedly grand achievements in life [2:11], the ultimate levelling of all life in death [3:19], the unhappy lot of various people [4:8], the insatiable desires of the human heart [5:10], the inequities of the divine scheme of things [6:2], the laughter of fools [7:6], the injustices to which people are subject [8:14], and so on. The word recurs and reverberates throughout the entire treatise. The "all is vanity" of the thesis statement [1:2; 12:8] is reflected in similar statements elsewhere [e.g. 1:14; 2:11; 3:19] and is underpinned by the com-

ment on various matters that “this also is vanity” [e.g. 2:19; 4:8; 5:10]. Sometimes the specific idea of transience seems particularly relevant to Kohelet’s usage of the word, notably in the sayings concerning a miscarried foetus [6:4] and the fleetingness of youth [11:10], and the expressions regarding “the few days of one’s life of vanity” [6:12] and “all the days of your life of vanity” [9:9], but in most cases it seems rather a catch-all term for whatever is deemed to be unsatisfactory about human life and experience.

On several occasions Kohelet links his keyword *hevel* with another expression to flesh out the idea. The most frequent collocation is “vanity and a chasing after wind”, the latter phrase — which can also be translated as “a feeding on wind” or “a desire for wind” — clearly denoting an aimless and futile striving after something transitory and unattainable, the empty pursuit of the insubstantial. It is applied to all human activity [1:14; 2:17], including all of the author’s own accomplishments [2:11], the accumulation of goods which are turned over to someone else [2:26], a person’s envy of what other people have [4:4; 6:9], and the succession of initially promising but inevitably disappointing rulers [4:16]. The expression “chasing after wind” also occurs without “vanity” in cases where it is applied to a fruitless quest for discernment between wisdom and foolishness [1:17] and where it goes hand in hand with a great expenditure of effort when in fact restfulness would have been the better option [4:6].

But restfulness is not much in evidence in Ecclesiastes. Another recurring word is “toil”, introduced immediately after “vanity” in the third verse of the book, where Kohelet sets up the rhetorical question that he will seek to answer in what follows, repeating the question in similar terms on three later occasions [2:22; 3:9; 5:16]. His contention is that there is no ultimate gain or advantage in any human toil, insofar as chance events can undermine a person’s accomplishments at any moment and in any case death will eventually and certainly undo everything one has achieved, yet it is the human predicament that we must expend effort to survive and perchance to flourish for a time. This verdict of uselessness is pronounced on his own toil [2:11, 20] and on everyone else’s as well [5:15-16], but he foresees no cessation of the sad treadmill in human society [4:8; 6:7], and indeed the suggestively oppressive repetition of noun and verb in the phrase “the toil at which one toils” reiterates the gloomy scene [e.g. 1:3; 2:18, 22].

“Under the sun” is another much-used phrase in the book [e.g. 1:3; 2:11; 4:1], occasionally expressed alternatively as “under heaven” [1:13; 2:3; 3:1]. It denotes of course the realm of human experience. Kohelet refers also to another realm, namely “heaven”, where God dwells [5:2], but that is a place beyond human experience and knowledge. It is taken for granted that God exists, but the gulf between the divine and the human is so large that people can know very little at all about what God is like or what he is up to in the things that he does — some people may claim to know about divine matters, but Kohelet knows that they know nothing [8:17]. All we really know about God is that he has set up the sub-solar system in which we are caught [1:13; 3:10] and that he has deliberately kept from us any real understanding of the meaning of that system [3:11; 7:14] and any ability to reshape it to meet our own desires or interests [3:14; 7:13]. He is simply to be feared [3:14; 5:7; 8:12-13].

One particular observation seems to lie at the heart of Kohelet’s thinking. He had apparently thought at one time in traditional terms of divinely-ordained justice for the righteous and the wicked [3:17], but his acute observations of the world had undermined that picture. He saw that wickedness flourished [3:16] and God did not intervene [4:1], that there was no correlation between what people did and what happened to them [9:11-12], and thus that there was no ultimate advantage in being righteous [9:2] — or, to put it another way, that there is no decisive use in attempting to live wisely [2:15; 6:8]. He had represented his own quest as a search for wisdom [1:17], and in the epilogue he is pictured as a teacher of wisdom [12:9, 11], so his admission that this quest had been fruitless [1:17; 2:15] and his assertion that such a quest can never be anything but fruitless [8:17] is a strike against traditional wisdom by one of its own practitioners. Here is a teacher steeped in the wisdom traditions of ancient Israel who appears to be saying that, far from

helping a person discover answers to the questions of life, wisdom only makes things worse [1:18], insofar as it is attainable at all [7:23-24].

Such, then, is the rather dark and distressing thesis of the book of Ecclesiastes, what we might call the “black thread” running throughout the book. Its hue is probably blackest of all at 9:3 — “the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead” — but in a sense everything that is written between 1:2 and 12:8 may be seen as variations on the theme that “all is vanity”.

But there is another string to Kohelet’s bow. Woven in among the gloomy pronouncements about toil and trouble comes a considerably brighter strand, all the more noticeable on account of that darker strand around which it is wrapped. And when we investigate this “white thread” in Ecclesiastes — the antithesis, if you will, to the “black thread” in the book — it emerges that wisdom and toil and life in general may be less ineffectual and futile than we would have thought from a study of the dark sayings alone.

Consider now some of more positive perspectives on wisdom to be found sprinkled throughout the book. Wisdom is said to be a far greater prize than foolishness [2:13], since it is a more certain guide in life [2:14], both for ordinary folk and for rulers [4:13]. It is worthwhile for admonishing those who might be tempted by folly [7:5], for facilitating economic prudence among those who might fritter away their possessions [7:11], and for granting an immeasurably richer life to those who have this one essential possession, namely wisdom itself [7:12]. If people have wisdom, then whatever situation they are in is appreciably improved [7:19; 9:15], since it is a quality far superior to any other supposed strength among humankind, such as having the loudest voice or the biggest gun [9:16-18]. The wise are successful in life [10:10, 12], because they have a decided advantage over foolish people [10:2], not least in their ability to know when they are in the right place and the right time for certain courses of action [8:5]. Wisdom is in fact so beneficial, and so enlightening, that it makes a person’s face glow with confidence and satisfaction [8:1].

It seems that life is not so bad after all. It can be very pleasant indeed [11:7], and there is at least always hope, no matter how humble one’s circumstances [9:4]. It turns out that we live in a world in which prudent or thoughtful actions do tend to bring rewards [11:1], and comfort can be taken from the traditional religious teaching that God blesses those who deserve to be blessed and curses those who deserve to be cursed [8:12-13]. There are solid grounds for banishing anxiety from one’s mind and embracing life in all its fullness [11:10].

The key statement of this antithesis in the book of Ecclesiastes is met with in several variations on the theme of “eat, drink, and enjoy yourself”. This theme is first introduced in chapter 2 [v. 24], at the end of Kohelet’s account of his life’s quest. It pops up twice in chapter 3 [vv. 12-13 and 22], first after a poem on the changing times, and then reiterated shortly afterwards in an abbreviated form (without mention of eating and drinking), following a discussion of human and animal similarities. It reappears in chapter 5 [v. 18], where Kohelet had been pointing to a situation in which people lost the wealth they had amassed; it is placed before the reader once more in chapter 8 [v. 15], where he had been considering matters of righteousness and wickedness; and it makes its final appearance at somewhat greater length in chapter 9 [vv. 7-9], in the context of the lack of guarantees about how life will treat various types of people. It bears the hallmarks of being a conclusion drawn after sundry considerations throughout the book, a matter affirmed and reaffirmed after each twist and turn of the thesis, a counter perspective to respond to the reiterated theme of “vanity”.

This repeated advice that one should take pleasure in eating, drinking, and enjoying oneself is constantly validated by Kohelet through an assurance to the reader that such pleasures come

“from the hand of God” [2:24] or that they are “God’s gift” to us [3:13], the “lot” or portion that the creator has given to his creatures [3:22; 5:18; 8:15], or that they represent a joyful attitude to life that the deity has approved [9:7]. God is occupied with placing joy in the human heart — and enough of it to last a lifetime [5:20]!

Thus the divinely-sanctioned imperative for human beings, the one real commandment that Kohelet places before the reader, is: “Enjoy life!” [9:9]. He counsels that life is likely to be most enjoyable if one has a companion with which to share it [9:9 again], since after all companionship and solidarity bring many advantages [4:9-12], and of course having good fortune of various kinds will not go amiss in life either [7:11; 10:19]. But worrying and waiting for conditions to be just right is not a sensible policy [11:4]. People should rather seize the present, for whatever opportunities come along are there to be grasped [9:10], and it would be foolish to hold back from making the most of them [4:5].

Such, then, is the rather bright and cheerful “white thread” in the book of Ecclesiastes. Its hue is probably whitest of all at 9:8 — “let your garments always be white, and do not let oil be lacking on your head” — but in a sense every subject that is talked about in the book seems to keep ending up in the advice to “eat, drink, and enjoy yourself”.

What are we to make of the book of Ecclesiastes after all these repeated twists and turns in Kohelet’s presentation? Some readers have made one thing, and others quite another, by focusing either on one strand, the “black thread”, or alternatively on the other, the “white thread”. Accordingly, there are interpretations of the book that see the dark side as completely dominant, thus representing Kohelet’s message as concerning the unremitting meaninglessness of life, and there are interpretations that regard the bright side as the essential element, thus summarising the message as having to do with an unbridled joyfulness in life.

Neither of those one-sided alternatives is entirely satisfactory in encapsulating the book’s teaching. Nor, for that matter, is the early attempt at a kind of summary of the book that is made by the epilogist, who, after expressing his admiration for — and feelings of unease about — this book [12:9-11] and books in general [12:12], has tried to suggest that it should all end in a rather more traditional and pious conclusion [12:13-14] than the one with which it had seemed to end. Kohelet’s sayings had culminated in a beautifully evocative but deeply disturbing description of breakdown and cessation in human life [12:1-7] and a restatement of the thesis that “all is vanity” in 12:8, making that key word “vanity” the last one to be heard from Kohelet himself, just as it had been his very first word in 1:2.

But taking “the words of Kohelet” [1:1] as a whole, a thoughtful reader need not think that a choice must be made between the supposedly pessimistic words and the apparently optimistic words, as many interpreters have done down the centuries, in some cases regarding one set of words as those which Kohelet affirms and the other set as the teachings of others with whom he disagrees. In fact the black thread and the white thread can readily be understood as being wound around each other, as each is related to the other in the development of an honest and enduring well-rounded approach to life: on the one hand Kohelet found no ultimate answers to the Big Questions of life, but on the other hand he did find that the simple pleasures of life can make those questions less relevant. This synthesis, as it were, or as I prefer to call it, this third strand of Kohelet’s cord, is perhaps most clearly expressed at 5:20, where it is said that enjoying the time that has been allotted to a person is the way one can avoid spending one’s time brooding over the brevity and inscrutability of life, and at 8:15, where a simple exclamation says it all: Kohelet shows that he has found the answer to that overwhelming “vanity” of which he is so aware, by exclaiming in regard to his commendation of enjoyment that “*this* will go with them!”, *this* is the thing that can sustain people through their life of toil under the sun.

This is the point at which Kohelet arrived after his long journey to discover wisdom. It was a journey with highs and lows, and he wanted his readers to see both of those aspects clearly. Life is complex, and it will not do either to pretend that there is no darkness [7:2] or to imagine that there is no light [10:19]. The wisest path is a middle way that recognises the manifold vanities of life on the one hand and the value of the simple pleasures of life on the other. But for the most forceful and potentially shocking presentation of Kohelet's general advocacy of a middle way through life, the reader must look to 7:15-18, where the advice is given that, just as people should not be too wicked or too foolish for their own good, so too they should not seek to be very righteous or very wise, since they may well receive nothing but ruination for all their efforts. For the best results in life (according to v. 18) — although of course Kohelet offers no guarantees — a person should hold fast to “the one” rule of behaviour (the avoidance of extreme righteousness and cleverness) just as surely as not abandoning “the other” rule of behaviour (the avoidance of extreme wickedness and foolishness).

It is a striking piece of advice, in the middle of a book of wisdom within the Bible, that one should no more strive to be highly righteous or wise than one should strive to be highly wicked or foolish. But the balancing of thoughts in this manner is typical of Kohelet, who also speaks of “the one” type of good thing that God does for people and “the other” type of bad thing that he does [7:14], and who describes his own enterprise as a consideration of “one thing” as well as “another” in order to see the complete picture [7:27]. And the fullest form of the picture is only seen once we have taken note of that central piece of thread, the “golden thread”, if you will, of advocacy for a golden mean in steering one's course through life.

Kohelet teaches us that life can be endlessly frustrating and is ultimately inscrutable, but nevertheless the simple joys of life, eating and drinking and companionship, are to be prized as the things which can make it enjoyable. This book sets before the reader the notion of how silly it is to spend your life rushing about restlessly and eagerly in efforts to heap up wealth or acquire honours, forever wanting more and more and never being satisfied, and by the same token, how silly it is to increase the troubles of life by denying yourself the enjoyment of harmless and indeed recommended pleasures that are a gift from the creator to his creatures. “Avoid both extremes” is the advice that Kohelet gives. Do not try to make life an unbridled feast or an unmitigated fast. It will have its good times and its bad times, and it is full of uncertainties, but one thing is certain: you will only make it worse for yourself if you do not cultivate an attitude of contentment with those simple joys of life.

This, it seems to me, is how the interwoven strands of the book of Ecclesiastes may be fruitfully teased apart, yet allowed to function as an essential unity. We do not need to read here two irreconcilable voices, say a pessimistic and heterodox sage on the one hand and an optimistic and orthodox opponent on the other, and we certainly do not need to postulate a number of diverse glossators and editors throwing in various asides and additions throughout the book. We can take a proverbial motto, as it were, from within the work itself, and say to any reader who puzzles over the enigma that is the book of Ecclesiastes, that indeed “a threefold cord is not quickly broken”.