



SHABBAT SERMON

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Two Bible texts in particular address the relationship between God and the whole of humanity. Both use the term 'elohim' for God and 'adam' for human beings. One is the first chapter of *Bereshit*, Genesis; the other is the Book of Kohelet. I became interested in comparing them when I noticed how frequently God is cited in Kohelet as 'elohim'. We tend to be overwhelmed by the repetition of 'havel', variously translated as 'vapour', 'vanity', 'futility'. It is used throughout to express the nature of human life and experience, especially at the beginning and the end of the Book. I did a rough count of the number of appearances and came up with thirty-eight. But actually 'elohim', again based on a rough count, occurs thirty-nine times. One could say that Kohelet may be obsessed by human futility and transience, but perhaps in his own way he is even more obsessed by God.

What finally brings Kohelet and Genesis together is one of the closing statements of the book, whether it is the words of the author himself or an editor. '*uz'khor et-bor'ekha bimei b'hurotekha*', 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth' (12:1). The verb '*bara*', 'create' of course, is restricted to God's acts of creation, especially in Genesis One.

So what is the difference between these two texts, both of which try to describe, the relationship between God and humanity? I have a somewhat whimsical view of Genesis One and the creation of human beings as the final stage of the process. God has created this beautiful world, evaluating it at each stage and declaring it to be good. But from the divine perspective it must seem to be like a doll's house. So can God really enjoy it? The answer is to create human beings, modelled in some way on God's own image, who will roam this wonderful earth, so that God can see it and experience it and enjoy it through their eyes. I think it was Eli Wiesel who expressed a similar idea when he asked why God created human beings. His answer: because God likes stories. That makes it our task in life to provide interesting stories for God.

This is one way of interpreting the creation story, but however one understands it, it is probable that the text was known to Kohelet. So whether directly or indirectly I would like to assume that it influenced his thinking and writing. Perhaps he asked himself the question: That is how the world began, but what has happened since then and how does God view this marvellous creation now?

Of course there is one obvious difference between the two texts. Genesis purports to view creation from God's perspective. Instead, it is as if Kohelet set about evaluating this creation that was 'very good' from a human perspective. To find an answer to this question he set aside all the teachings to be found in his religious traditions, those which defined the special identity of Israel, so as to perform the task as an empirical scientist, a proto-anthropologist, who attempts to evaluate in detail whether the promise contained in Genesis One is true in reality.

His starting point is: What do human beings actually experience in life? He observes the environment in which the patterns of nature repeat themselves endlessly without change. Similarly generations come and go, and play out the same activities and dramas without change or significance. All the great aspirations that motivate human behaviour and ambition: power, wealth, pleasure, love, wisdom, are all shown to be illusory or limited if not actually destructive. Corruption, injustice, abuse and suffering are part of the human norm. Even the good qualities that people display are not guaranteed the success or happiness that the traditions of wisdom and religion teach or promise.

Against this background there is one factor alone that is conventionally used to explain why this is so and somehow to offer hope of something better. And that is *'elohim'*, 'God'. So time and time again when Kohelet reaches a dead end in his exploration of human activities, he looks to God as the only possible solution. And yet God, in Kohelet's experience, is simply not available. The God of the formal religious cult is detached, demanding and dangerous if the worshipper fails to fulfil his duty. When human beings seem poised to enjoy the pleasurable things of life, whether or not this actually happens seems to depend on the arbitrary act of God. 'There is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means, and even that ... comes from the hand of God. To the man who pleases Him He has given the wisdom and shrewdness to enjoy himself. (2:24,26). Perhaps even this is not really true and God simply does not care: 'For God is in heaven and you are on earth!' (5:1). Nor can one change what God has done: 'Consider God's doing. Who can straighten what God has twisted?!' In fact Kohelet comes very close to blaming the victim for his misfortune. 'God made men straight, but they have engaged in great calculations!' (7:29).

Nevertheless even Kohelet can see some kind of meaning in the heart of our relationship with God. 'God made everything appropriate for its time. God also put eternity in their heart, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass.' (3:11). It may even be that it is precisely to understand this *'olam'*, 'eternity' that represents Kohelet's ultimate quest – to understand precisely what it is that God intends 'from first to last'. It is his inability to do so that is his ultimate frustration. For the riddle of human existence alone, challenging and fascinating though it may be, is ultimately *'havel'*, 'meaningless', compared with discovering the ultimate truth that lies with God alone.

Does Kohelet find an answer? For human beings he does: Accept your lot, enjoy it as best you can, but remember that you live under divine judgement, for that is the best advice that wisdom and religion together can offer. But perhaps there is also a point at which Kohelet does break through the mystery, the riddle of why the experience of God in his time is so different from the picture in Genesis. Inevitably it is expressed within a riddle of its own.

Just as human beings are trapped in endless cycles of nature and of time, so, it seems, is God. 'I realised that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it... What is occurring occurred long since, and what is to occur occurred long since. (3:14,15). So what remains for God of that great experiment of creation if all is simply endless repetition. What is God looking for? Kohelet himself tells us: *'v'haelohim y'vakesh et-nirdaph'*. 'God seeks the pursued.' (3:15). What does it mean? Coming as it does in the midst of this description of endless repetition of time, perhaps the phrase also has to do with time: that fleeting moment that exists between past and future, the moment that can only be pursued and grasped but not held. But that is the moment for which God is searching, the instant when there is a break between those endless cycles, when something truly new can happen. The moment when God is searching for us, if we are also searching for God.