



---

## **CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF KOHELET [ECCLESIASTES] THREE EXAMPLES FROM HISTORY AND THE PRESENT**

*Elisabeth Birnbaum*

Is Kohelet [Ecclesiastes] a God-fearing book, or is its speaker a Hedonist who has turned from God and who doubts God and God's creation? Does the book call for a fatalist addiction to pleasure and did it only get into the Canon through a misunderstanding, or is it on the contrary very profound spiritual wisdom coming to meet us?

Before I talk about three examples of Christian interpretation, I want to make a short digression on the question, "Anti-Judaism, Debasement of the Old Testament and its effects on the Book of Kohelet":

### **A Digression: Anti-Judaism, Debasement of the Old Testament, and the Interpretation of Kohelet**

At all times and in the whole of Christendom, there has been anti-Judaism. Also among exegetes. Unfortunately. And the debasement of the Old Testament has also been known ever since Marcion. Both can but do not have to go hand in hand. And they both have differing effects on the interpretation of the Book of Kohelet. I want to show this by means of two examples:

1) Among the Church Fathers there was in part unbearable anti-Judaism. But it never had to do with the Old Testament or with individual books as such, for the Old and the New Testament belonged together inseparably. Therefore, the Church Fathers never would have dreamed of debasing a book of the Old Testament. For in their opinion, both Testaments spoke of Christ. There was only hostility towards certain ways of understanding Scripture that rejected a Christo-centric way of reading it. And with the help of biblical interpretations, there was hostility towards the Jews who held on to the synagogue after Christ had come. In that, the patristic interpreters were very resourceful. In the numerous metaphors in Scripture, they "discovered" everywhere anti-Jewish meanings. For example in Eccl 9:4 it says: "... a living dog is better than a dead lion". Jerome immediately saw a reference to Judaism and Christianity: The lion was the lion of Judah, so Judaism, while the dog, in Antiquity an impure animal, personified paganism, which was originally impure but which had become pure through faith in Christ, while the Jews were rejected. Such procedure is not specific to a Christian interpretation of Kohelet; it can be found in Christian interpretations of all the books. And because of that, it does not have an effect on a positive or negative understanding of Kohelet.

2) There are no such interpretations in the 19th and 20th centuries, nor is there any Christo-centric appropriation of the Old Testament anymore; instead, in some places people queried

whether the Old Testament in general belonged to Christian Sacred Scripture. And even where that did not occur, one could hear in many interpretations that the Old Testament was only a forerunner, so not as perfect in its moral or theological points of view as the New Testament. The reasons for this were not always anti-Jewish. It was more a question of method: the Bible was seen to have developed historically as a kind of “evolution”. All biblical texts, so the Old Testament as well, were submitted to a strict “examination” from the perspective of “evolution’s final point”, which is to say, from the perspective of the New Testament. Every divergence from the image of God in the Gospels was not smoothed over as with the Church Fathers, but seen to be historically earlier, and only in a second step would these divergences be cited sometimes as a proof of the inadequacy of the Old Testament.

From such a point of view, the Finnish exegete Aarre Lauha for example judges the image of God in the Book of Kohelet as deficient. Thus he writes: “As a consequence of its strange fundamental view regarding faith in God, Kohelet’s writing in its overall intention hardly has a chance to awaken and strengthen a personal faith conviction in the biblical sense. From the point of view of the New Testament, it is thus possible to see only indirectly the suitability of the Preacher’s Book.” (23f.)

The criterion is the image of God in the New Testament. The “suitability” of the Old Testament is examined on that basis to see whether it does justice to the demands of the New Testament. And Kohelet fails the test. Aarre Lauha for example only credits the Book of Kohelet with serving as a negative backdrop for the Gospel when he writes: “Thus already the prologue of Kohelet shows by way of the negative path the necessity of the Gospel’s message if faith is to be pulled out of its dead end.” (37)

Not least through Christian-Jewish dialog, both anti-Judaism and the debasement of the Old Testament (for whatever reasons) have been uncovered and often also dropped. In today’s commentaries on the Bible, there is usually no difference between Christian and Jewish interpretation. But the question of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament as Christian Sacred Scripture is certainly complex and has not yet been answered definitively.

And with that I come to the main part of my talk.

## **The two Questions raised by the Book of Kohelet and their different Answers in the Christian Interpretation of Scripture**

### ***Introduction: The two Questions raised by the Book of Kohelet***

So as to be able to interpret the Book of Kohelet, two important questions in particular must be answered: The question, what kind of a person is Kohelet, and the question, how the first sentence of Kohelet is to be understood.

First of all the first question: Who is Kohelet? – On this, there is one single consensus: The Book of Kohelet *wants* to be considered as the work of Solomon, although the name “Solomon” is not mentioned in the entire book. This desire becomes apparent already in the title, which speaks of the words of Kohelet, “the son of David, king in Jerusalem”. No other son of David was king in Jerusalem. And in chapters 1 and 2 as well there are a few references to Solomon: his extremely great wisdom; his extremely great wealth; the great building activity; his incomparability; even the foolish successor is mentioned, whom according to 1 Kings 11, Solomon had in his son Rehabeam.

BUT: Did Solomon himself therefore write the book? If so, during which phase of his life? When he was wise and God-fearing or afterwards, when he had sacrificed to strange gods, or even later,

when he repented? And if not Solomon, who else and how pious was that author? Is this Kohelet a realist or after all a despairing pessimist or even a representative of a philosophy of the absurd? Can he be trusted; is he perhaps even someone more than Solomon? Or has he turned away from God and is he speaking blasphemous words? The answer to these questions decides whether one can read the book in a positive sense or not.

The second big question is how the first sentence of Kohelet is to be understood. For the Book of Kohelet begins with a shocking observation: Everything is *habel habalim*. The entire further interpretation depends on how this first sentence is understood. And a look at the popular translations into German shows in how varied a way it has been and still is understood.

“Everything is a breath of wind” (Einheits translation); “everything is void and fleeting” (Zürich Bible); “everything is entirely vain” (Luther’s translation of the Bible); “everything is entirely meaningless, nothing has any meaning” (Good News).

[Translator’s Note: Four translations into English were compared: the King James Bible, The New American Standard Version, The English Standard Version (ESV), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). They all have the identical translation: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity”].

With these various translations, very different dimensions are addressed: Is everything a breath of wind and therefore valuable, but unfortunately transient and thus not always and not in a lasting way available to us? Or is everything meaningless, so without value or absurd? And: What does this “everything” mean? Is there nothing and no one that can be excluded from it, or is there some level that is not subject to this verdict of nullity? What is the relationship between the nullity and the joy, to which Kohelet calls over and over again?

I want to introduce you to three very contrasting answers to these all decisive questions in the history of Christian interpretation.

## **1. Patristic Interpretation**

### **1.1. Understanding at the Outset**

The Book of Kohelet was a popular book among the patristic interpreters. One of the most effective interpretations was that of Jerome (388/389 CE).<sup>1</sup> His interpretation was part of a tradition that went back to Origen and that was authoritative until the late Middle Ages. As was usual in patristics, Jerome saw Christ himself speaking in the words of Kohelet. Christ is the *Logos*, the divine Word that had become flesh. The Bible is also the Word of God. Therefore, “to understand Scripture is to understand Christ” (Jerome). Thus according to patristic understanding, Christ was also present in the Old Testament.

The patristic interpreters of Scripture thus apply not only messianic texts to Christ, but rather hear Christ in the so-called “spiritual sense” in every text of the New and the Old Testament. Multiple meanings of Scripture thereby come into being: Next to a purely literal understanding, which does not always contain something necessary to salvation, there is a second, different understanding – an inner core that cannot always be seen on the surface and that is applied strictly to Christ for the spiritual development of human beings.

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Birnbaum, *Der Koheletkommentar des Hieronymus. Einleitung – Text – Übersetzung – Kommentierung* (CSEL extra seriem); Berlin / Boston 2014.

In early Christianity, the Bible was seen as a unity of the Old and the New Testament, as a Christo-centric whole. Everything, even the order of the books, was divinely inspired and thus also necessary for salvation. It contained, at least in the spiritual sense, teaching and instruction for attaining salvation.

## 1.2 Who is Kohelet?

Before the historico-critical method began, one very naturally read the Book of Kohelet as a book by King Solomon.

Thus, the Church Fathers also very naturally situated the words of “Kohelet” in the context of 1 Kings 1-11, where Solomon’s life is recounted. But they went a step further. For Kohelet was in Sacred Scripture – and as has already been mentioned, this was read with “Christo-centric” eyes.

Thus, in the foreground the author was Solomon, the wise king. But if his words were really meant to proclaim wisdom, they could not stem from Solomon, who had fallen away from God. True wisdom could only stem from the one who “was more than Solomon” (cf. Mt 12:42 par.) – from Christ.

This already shows that these could not be the words of a skeptic who had turned away from God. It might be possible to believe that the Solomon of 1 Kings could speak skeptical words, but from the true Solomon, personified Wisdom itself, this was impossible. Thus there was from the outset a positive understanding of the book.

## 1.3 *Contemptus mundi* as the Theme of the Book of Kohelet

The words of the “true Solomon” were in the Bible in two contexts: in the context of the Books of Wisdom and the Psalms, and in the context of the three books ascribed to Solomon: Proverbs, Kohelet, and the Song of Songs.

Jerome thought about the fact that Kohelet was in the middle between the other two books. And he also noted the educative, instructive nature of the first two books. Proverbs and Kohelet contained instruction. But differences in the choice of words also showed that Proverbs and Kohelet could not be addressing the same group of people. The Book of Proverbs speaks for example to a “son”, so to a child, while Kohelet speaks to the addressee as to a “young man” (Eccl 11:9). In the Song of Songs on the other hand, two persons speak on an equal basis, and there is no teaching whatsoever.

Jerome saw in this a spiritual teaching at various levels, from instructing the beginners, which requires a lot of authority like that of parents, to the teaching of those who are advanced, and finally to the embrace that is given to the perfect.

Thus the Book of Kohelet is at the second level on this three-step path to perfection. The addressee has learned what is good and what is bad, so ethics, from the simple proverbial wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. Now, in the Book of Kohelet, the addressee must learn what the world is in its being, so “physics”. And the addressee learns that it is to be understood as transient and void. However, this is not supposed to lead to despair, but rather to getting orientation from what is not transient, from God. For “under the sun”, so here on earth, everything is transient, but there in heaven everything is eternal. The Book of Kohelet is supposed to make one conscious of this in order to bring the soul not to divinize anything earthly and to free itself of worldly burdens. The person who succeeds perfectly in this is already ready for the highest level: for the *unio mystica*, for contemplating God, where Wisdom receives the person with marital embraces, where there is

no hierarchy, where there is no difference between God and the human person. The Song of Songs describes this loving unification.

Jerome and the majority of interpreters until the late Middle Ages thus understood “transient” only as compared to what is “eternal”, and “everything” as referring only to the world, not to God. The essential point is the *comparison*. Something can be good, but when something comes that is far better, the first seems like nothing.

For this, Jerome has an illustrative image: Creation is like an oil lamp: in the dark, “When I see the small flame of the oil lamp, [I would be] satisfied with its light”. However, “later, when the sun has risen, I would no longer see that it is shining”. It is a matter of perspective, a question of relativity. Nature’s astonishing variety, the power of the elements give rise to admiration. However, compared to the eternal God, who is always what he was, the world in its transience is “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Jerome has thereby shown on the one hand that there is a contradiction within Sacred Scripture between the creation account (everything is good) and the Book of Kohelet as seeming to contradict this; and on the other hand, Kohelet has expressed a central conviction of the ascetic movement: The world is only a temporary, conditional good, certainly not the last and only reality. The appropriate way to deal with it is to have a relatively low estimation of the world, *contemptus mundi*, or more precisely, to have a higher estimation of God.

So how does this Kohelet’s repeated call to joy fit with the stated vanity, nullity of the world: “Eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with enjoyment”? What kind of joy can and should this be?

Already at the time of Jerome there was a Hedonist interpretation: that this was a call to limitless enjoyment in the face of death, which would inevitably come. Jerome sharply criticizes such an interpretation right away at the beginning of his commentary. “We are therefore not being driven, as some people think, to superfluity and enjoyment and despair, like the animals; (so not) according to the word of Isaiah: Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (Isa 22:13).”

Rather, Kohelet is talking about real joy, but which on earth, like the world itself, can only be relative. For every earthly joy, whether it be physical or spiritual, is imperfect (2:1) already because it does not endure but only lasts a short time. One should deal with this earthly joy pragmatically: One should see the things one owns as a temporary good on the way to the true goods; one should do what one is able to do, but without superfluous ambition or hunger for power.

However, in the spiritual sense it is possible to go further: If life is transient but serves as a preparation for the Divine, then joy must also be something that is geared towards the Divine and that opens the human being for this dimension. Ordinary eating cannot do justice to this goal, so the call to “eat your bread with joy etc.” cannot mean ordinary eating. It must mean a nourishment that gives lasting food not only to the body but also to the soul; this requires true nourishment and true drink. Jerome belongs to a broad Christian and Jewish stream of tradition when he sees in this food for the soul the study of Sacred Scripture. From a Christian perspective there are in addition the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine. Thought to the end, therefore, the eating and drinking that are to give one joy can only be Scripture and the Eucharist: “Since according to anagogy, the body of the Lord is the true food and his blood the true drink (cf. John 6:55 = 6:56 Vg), we only have this good in the present world, so that we nourish ourselves with his body and drink of his blood not only in the Eucharistic mystery, but also in reading the Scriptures. For the true flesh and blood that one takes to oneself from the Word of God is the knowledge of the Scriptures.” (Jer., Comm. In Eccl. 3:12/13)

## **2. Kohelet in the 20th Century**

### **2.1 Understanding at the Outset**

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the understanding of the Bible changed. Scripture was understood as having grown historically. Human authors were at work, who over centuries brought into it many ideas about God. The unity of Scripture in the sense of an overall statement that is free of contradictions no longer existed. A strict separation was made between the Old and the New Testament, and the Old Testament was no longer read as referring to Christ. Contradictions within the Bible were no longer explained through the Bible itself, but rather through the fact that there were various authors. The biblical books were emphasized precisely in their difference.

### **2.2 Kohelet – an unknown Doubter of God**

From a purely historical point of view, Solomon cannot be the book's author, since all the linguistic indications point to the 3rd century BCE and not to the 10th century. Thus every relationship to Solomon was declared to be irrelevant. Solomon, and beyond him Christ, was no longer seen as the author, but an author who is unknown to us and who has his own theological things to say. Thus, what Kohelet says does not have to be seen together with Solomon's life or his wisdom. And the fear of God doesn't necessarily have to be attributed to the author, and certainly not a special piety or a certain image of God that fits. All that must first be examined – by the exegete.

To such exegetical and hermeneutical changes are added the challenges from the atheism that was setting in, based on the great ideologies of the 20th century and on the catastrophes of both world wars. Faith itself could be questioned in the face of so many catastrophes. Important philosophers (Camus) represented a philosophy of the absurd. Many people openly doubted God. That also had an effect on the understanding of the Book of Kohelet. A doubting Kohelet, a Kohelet who loses his way with God now seemed to be the image of the author.

### **2.3 Desolation and Meaninglessness as the Theme of the Book of Kohelet**

What does someone like that mean when he says "*havel habalim*"? The Protestant Finnish exegete Lauha is one of many in the 20th century who see in it pure despair: "The prologue to the Preacher's Book expresses a bleak view of life: life has no goal and is of no use". (36f.)<sup>2</sup> Briefness and transience turn into meaninglessness and absurdity. And "everything" really does mean everything: The comparison with the one who remains, with God, disappears, and thus the statement that "Everything under the sun is void and fleeting" becomes: Everything without exception is absurd and meaningless.

Such 20th century exegetes could therefore see in Kohelet's call to joy nothing but a despairing flight into unrestrained pleasure in the face of the meaninglessness of life. Again Lauha: "The modest bringers of joy help to carry and to forget the burden of great difficulties and of unanswered questions, but at the cost of serious wrestling with existential problems. Human beings should submit to the frame set by the incomprehensible God for the life of each person. Kohelet's bitterness is weakened by compromise. Joy serves as a drug." (158)

---

<sup>2</sup> A. Lauha, *Kohelet* (BK XIX), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1978.

### **3. Today's Tendencies**

Nowadays, sometimes a synthesis of the two such different ways of seeing the book succeeds. The unity of the Old and the New Testament is again seen more, the many connections between the texts within the Testaments and of the two Testaments to one another are being examined and discovered anew, independently of their historical development.

But today it is also possible to see these connections without giving the Old Testament a Christocentric overload. Contradictions in the image of God are no longer experienced as an annoyance or a deficiency: The Bible is a place for discussion; central themes of faith are talked about and answered from various perspectives.

And Kohelet's questions are mostly seen as critical and provocative questions, while no longer being experienced as shocking.

#### **3.1 Kohelet – an Author in the Context of the Bible**

Present-day exegesis knows that the Book of Kohelet was not written by Solomon. But at its outset, it nevertheless says that Solomon is therefore not irrelevant. The book consciously wants to call upon the connection with Solomon. And this context is taken seriously, and therefore the speaker in the book is seen to be compatible on principle with the rest of Sacred Scripture.

#### **3.2 The Book of Kohelet as Philosophical Teaching about Happiness**

Many people today are familiar with the doubts and questions that move Kohelet; they do not have to be anything offensive. One interpretation that can be given today is therefore the following:<sup>3</sup> Kohelet asks himself in a radical way about happiness, about the success of human life. In his search, he goes a path that leads through mistakes and despair, but which ultimately holds ready a deepened insight. Illusions and the delusion that everything can be made are seen through, false ideas of happiness are tried out and rejected. Kohelet, who has grown wise, recognizes his former ideas of happiness as *habel habalim* because they are based on the false certainty that one can attain everything for oneself. Now however, he finally recognizes that happiness is nothing that one can make or create for oneself, but rather something that can only be given by God. There is a great deal of joy, also in face of the transitory world, also in face of the impossibility of exploring everything that occurs in the world. "Everything" is void and fleeting, but not worthless, for behind it is a God who can give joy, real, true joy that is more than fleeting pleasure. So by differentiating between false and true ideas of happiness, between the idol and God, Kohelet reaches a deepened relationship with God and a knowledge of "where happiness can be found".

*Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff*

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example E. Birnbaum / L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Buch Kohelet* (NSK.AT 14/2), Stuttgart 2012.