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Series III: The Temple Tifereth-Israel, 1946-1993, undated.

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Ecclesiastes - The Book of Great Doubts, 1960.



## ECCLESIASTES -- THE BOOK OF GREAT DOUBTS

The Temple  
February 28, 1960

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Some of the grimmest wars of history have been fought over religious issues. Not only has Christian fought against Moslem and Moslem against Hindu, but very often factions and denominations within a single religious tradition have been at one another's throats. We have only to remember that in the first thousand years of the Common Era the Near East was almost continuously convulsed as Christian sect fought with Christian sect over whether or not Jesus was born man or god. The first five centuries of Moslem history are characterized by the fights between the Sheites and the Sunites, a bloody battle over the correct precise interpretation of the Koran. And Europe still to our day retains the scars of the battles between the Protestants and the Catholics. An historian friend once asked me, "How is it, therefore, that the Jews have avoided bludgeoning one another over religious issues. I know that you are not pacifists," he said. "I know that you have had bitter and sometimes acrimonious religious quarrels. How was it that these quarrels have stopped short of actual pitched battle?" And the answer, of course, has many parts. Part of the answer is that we have had no strong religious hierarchy, with a set of vested interests. When a man wanted to worship God in the Jewish tradition in a slightly different vein he simply went out and took some of his friends and formed a new congregation. This was not difficult, as it was within the religious organizations which were ecclesiastic, strongly hierarchical in origin. Part of the answer lies in the fact that we were never numerically so strong as to be able to allow ourselves the luxury of battling with one another. We had always too many foes on the outside.



And part of the answer, I think, can be seen as we study the Book of Ecclesiastes which is our subject this morning. For there are two paramount facts about this book. The first is that it is unconventional, that it expresses opinions which are heterodox, almost heretical in nature. And the second, that it is part of our Holy Scripture, part of the Bible canon.

Let me illustrate. The Bible is generally optimistic about the future. Judaism is optimistic about the future. "And it shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills", concluding, "and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not wage war against nation, neither shall they make war any more." But what of the Book of Ecclesiastes? "The crooked", the Book of Ecclesiastes says, "can not be made straight. The wanting can not be made complete. That which has been is that which shall be. That which has been done is that which shall be done. There is nothing new under the sun."

The Bible generally is affirmative as regards life. It exhorts man to be up and to be doing and to be working in the service of God. "See, I have set before you this day the good and the evil, the blessing and the curse. Choose life. Choose life, that ye may live." Listen to the voice of Ecclesiastes: "What profit hath man of all the labors wherein he labors under the sun? It is striving after the wind. It is vain." And above and beyond all else, Judaism affirms the purposefulness, the meaningfulness of life. We all know that magnificent opening phrase from Ecclesiastes:

"Vanity of vanities; all is vanity, saith the preacher."

Only a broad-minded religious tradition could have included such a book as Ecclesiastes in its holy Scripture. The Bible is for us more a guide to right conduct than it is a guide to precise and right thinking. Credo, doctrine has never been so crucial with us as to cause us to battle over it. Oh, we've



had our battles. Our battles are mostly over ritual matters. Shall we wear a head covering at our services? Shall we drive to the synagogue on the Sabbath? Shall we observe one-day or two-day holidays? Shall men and women sit together at worship? Over such issues Jews have battled over the long centuries, they battle today, and, if I do not mistake the nature of my people, they will be battling till the millenium.

But as regards essential things, Judaism has never been at war within itself. For what is the essence of Judaism? God's oneness, God's goodness, man's potentiality and man's purpose. And between Reform and Orthodox, Caraites and , Pharisee and Sadducee, priest and prophet, these basic fundamental issues have never been points of debate or quarrel. All have accepted them.

The placement of the Book of Ecclesiastes in our Bible tells us a great deal about the place of our Bible in our own tradition. We look on the Bible as spiritually suggestive, rather than as doctrinely determinative. The Bible does not reveal to us any single unified statement of faith. Rather it is the single-minded search for faith on the part of the Jewish people. The Bible is not folk literature. It is not the sum and substance, the total of all the literature which the Jews produced from, say, the year 1000 B.C. to the beginning of the Common Era, but it is the sum and substance of a search for faith on the part of our Jewish people. It is the sum and substance of the works of all who sought to find the purpose of man in God's world, who sought to understand the nature of God and the nature of life, and who put down their observations, their feelings, their sensations, their prides, their loyalties, their dedications and their devotions. And that is our Bible.

Now, of all the voices with which the Bible speaks, none is more unexpected and none is more human than the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Book of Ecclesiastes is the work of a dispirited man, a man who is tired of life, a man who finds life somewhat too much for him. If I may be allowed to be somewhat non-rabbinic for



a moment and to use the language of our television advertisers, Ecclesiastes is a man who suffers from tired blood. He has loved. He has lost. He has had great overwhelming ambitions and these have evaporated into the thin air. He has had great hopes and expectancies and these have somehow not materialized. He wanted happiness, he wanted beauty, he wanted color, he wanted to feel part of the throb, the beat, the heart-beat of life and somehow this has escaped him, and all he has come to feel is the impermanence of life, the transiency of life, the burdens, the obligations which life imposes. And all who have loved and lost, all of us who have at times become dismayed by the impermanence of all that we build and plan, all of us have echoed in one way or another the magnificent thoughts and epigrams which fill the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Would you know the spirit of Ecclesiastes? "So I hated life, because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me! "For all is vanity, all is a striving after wind." "And I hated all my labor wherein I labored under the sun, seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me, and who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or a fool, yet will he have rule over all my labor wherein I have labored and wherein I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labor wherein I have labored under the sun, for there is a man whose labor is with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill, yet to a man that hath not labored therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath a man of all his labors and of all the strivings of his heart wherein he laboreth under the sun, for all his days are pains, and his occupations vexatious, yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity."

What is Ecclesiastes? It is a short book, a book of twelve chapters. It is not a consistent, unified, logically developing whole, rather it is a book of aphorisms or of epigrams of proverbs. It reminds me always of the notebooks



which are kept by public speakers and by writers into which they jot from time to time apt phrases which they have read or heard from another's pen, and well-conceived ideas which have popped into their minds, which they hope to be able to use at some later moment. It is a journal, a diary, rather than a well thought out and well conceived philosophy. Stylistically, it is brilliant. The language is clear, clear as a bell. Its images are imaginative. And it is surprising even in our own day how many of the current idioms of our language were first minted in the text of the Book of Ecclesiastes. "Eat, drink, and be merry." "Be not righteous overmuch." "Of the making of books there is no end." "It is a striving after the wind." "Better a live dog than a dead lion." "Two are better than one." "Cast thy bread upon the water." Indeed, whenever I reread the Book of Ecclesiastes I am reminded of the experience of that grand old lady who was finally, late in her life, taken to see a production of "Hamlet", and when the performance was over she was asked what she <sup>had</sup> thought of the acting, and she replied, "It was beautiful, I was moved. But, you know, I never realized that that man Shakespeare quoted so much."

As literature, quite apart from its philosophy, Ecclesiastes can stand on its own feet with the best that the world has ever produced. Who was Ecclesiastes? The answer is that we do not know. The word ecclesiastes is a Greek word, and it means simply "the man of books". In the text itself a certain Koheleth is referred to, but besides his name, we know nothing of his nation, of his station, or of his generation. According to a superscription to the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is obviously the work of a later hand, Koheleth was the son of David, King in Jerusalem, and a pious tradition has equated Koheleth with Solomon. But there is no reason to accept this tradition. It was common in the ancient world to write anonymously and to ascribe your work to some ancient, venerated sage in the hope that his reputed wisdom would add substance and impact to your work, and the hope that his popularity would, of course, add to your sales. And from inner textual criticism we know that the language, the



imagery, the philosophy which is represented in the book represents a period in Jewish history at least five to six hundred years posterior to the age of Solomon. But all that we know of Koheleth, of this reputed author of this work, is that he was obviously a cultivated, sophisticated and scholarly man, a man who had read much, and seen much, and done much, and who sometime past the prime of his life had sat down to work out the meaning of all that he had done, to give some order to all that he had seen. One thought preoccupies this man. One thought overrides all his other reactions to life. And that is his realization of the transiency and the impermanence of our existence. We are born; we must die. We laugh; we must cry. We love; we must lose. We build great fortunes; we have prodigals as our sons who waste them. We work our lives to enjoy some of the pleasures and the luxuries of existence, and when we come to that situation in life when we can possess them, we find either that we are too feeble to enjoy them or that the mere possession does not bring us the happiness which we supposed. This cyclical nature of life, that birth must be followed by death, that youth must be followed by age, that health must be followed by debility, that laughter must be followed by sorrow -- this is the over-arching philosophy, the overarching impact of Ecclesiastes' thought. And so, time and again, he asks the basic question which we have all asked, all of us as we have seen the wheel of life turn and turn again. "What profit hath man of all the labors wherein he labors under the sun?" Why are we born? How must we live? What is the purpose of our life? And Ecclesiastes tells us that in his youth he set out to find this purpose in a way which most young people begin. He set out to study. He set out to find truth and certainty in books, in books which represented the quintessence, the essence of all that men had learned up to that day of science, of history, of philosophy, of ethics, all the studies of man. But he had been disappointed, as has every young man who has ever set out to find the purpose of life simply in books. He had not found certainty. He had not found truth. He had found something of the facts which relate which relate to man -- man's



relation to nature -- but he had found nothing of the ultimate mystery of life. And so he is moved to observe, "In much wisdom there is much vexation. He that increases knowledge increases sorrow." The more he had discovered about life the more questions had been raised and the fewer answers he had been satisfied with. And though he recognized that in purely practical affairs the wise man is better than the fool, he also recognized that man's wisdom did not prevent man from dying, that man's wisdom did not prevent man from suffering illness, unexpected mischance, that it did not stop the wheel of fortune from moving on, and so it did not answer for him the basic question, what is the purpose of life. And, as so many before and since, his first reaction to this frustration was to throw over any philosophic concern. If we cannot know the purpose of our life, why bother ourselves? "Let us," he says, "eat, drink and be merry." Let us enjoy our few days. Let us drive the troubles, drive the worries, drive the questions from our mind, immerse ourself in pleasure, drown out the insistent doubts. And as he tells us, he built great pleasure mansions, he hired musicians and hand-maidens, and he had what our young people would call a fling. But this, too, did not satisfy Koheleth. For soon his tastes became jaded. Soon the friends of pleasure began to bother him; he saw their essential emptiness and worthlessness; soon time began to weigh heavily on his hands. And where philosophy had not given him an answer to the purpose of life, he found that pleasure did not afford the answer to him/a satisfaction, a life-long satisfaction in living. Then, quite naturally, in a completely human way, he turned to work, to the hustle and bustle of the market-place. He turned to work as a kind of therapy. His body was lethargic, he thought that competition would enervate it. His mind was oppressed, he thought that in the competition with skillful men his mind would be exercised and alive and he would find an anodyne to his worries. But this, too, failed him. This, too, failed him, for he found that his mind grew tense with worry. His body became racked with frustration. He felt all the thousand and once conflicts and challenges which every business man must feel, and this gave him



neither peace of mind nor happiness. And, as he himself says, he came to hate life. "Better", he says, "is a single handful and quiet therewith, than two handfuls with toil and the striving after the winds." Having tried all the obvious ways to find the purpose of life, to find pleasure in life, and having failed in each, Ecclesiastes begins to despair. Death becomes more precious to him than life. So he says, "I praise the dead more than the living, and he who has not been born, more than both, for he who has not been born has not seen all the evil which exists under the sun."

Now, most commentators who try to analyse the Book of Ecclesiastes stop here. They think of Ecclesiastes primarily as the poet of despair and dismay. They say that he reverts time and again to these basic themes, ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> he plays with them, but/he does not go beyond them. I must disagree. Ecclesiastes is not only the poet of life's ironies, but, as I shall try to show you, he is a teacher of a definite faith, that I call the faith in prudent living.

About the middle of the book, Ecclesiastes ceases to be a complete cynic. It is as if he had looked at himself in a mirror and said, "Now, young man, everything that you have said so far is true. There is death as the complement to life. There is illness as the complement of health. But you must live -- you are, after all, born. You have grown up. You have certain talents. You have certain abilities. What are you going to do about them? How are you going to live? It has not been satisfactory for you simply to throw up your hands, to raise the questions. You must, somehow, live. How are you going to live? What is the purpose of your life?" And you get a new strand of thought coming out of the text of Ecclesiastes. Now no longer does he despair entirely of life, but now he tells us that "a living dog is better than a dead lion", that he who has still a toehold in life still has hope. Now he tells us that, though wisdom is vexatious, it is far better than folly. And now he tells us that, though some of the best laid plans of men often fall short of the mark, "a precious name is better than fine perfume." In short, he now tells us that we must learn to



expect the unexpected. We must learn not to be hasty and to be rash and to be overconfident. But we must live, and he who lives prudently, he who lives wisely and understandingly can find a certain measure of happiness in life.

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes. But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove vexation from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh, for childhood and youth are vanity. Remember then thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, before the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say: 'I have no pleasure in them' . . . "

A third-century of our people, Abba , pictured Ecclesiastes as an old man sitting by the side of a highway at the point where the roads come together, and the road bifurcate. Next to the old man is a broad, straight highway as far as the eye can see. To his left, a gutted, narrow, overgrown road, which seems almost to be impassible. What is the purpose of the old man, sitting beside the highway? To warn the traveller that beyond the limits of his vision the broad highway becomes the impassible highway, and the gutted, overgrown road becomes smooth and wide and easily travelled. He, in short, is the man who sits and warns us to expect mischance, to plan for the unexpected, to remember in our youth that there will be middle age and old age, to remember that we must accept the responsibilities for our decisions, to remember that we can not always count on tomorrow, to remember that first impressions are not always the best impressions. In short, he epitomizes much of what psychology has been telling us in our own generation, that the healthiest man is the man who lives with a minimum of illusions about his own strength and his own capacities and his own abilities and that mental health comes to the man who will not be plunged into abject, utter, character-destroying disillusionment when some of his plans fail of the mark.



This is the spirit of Ecclesiastes, and every man who has not planned for his retirement, and every woman who does not know what to do with herself when her children have left the home, and <sup>every</sup> young man and young woman who does not see beyond the ten years of eager expectancy at the close of their schooling, all these could read the philosophy of prudence of Ecclesiastes with great benefit.

But Ecclesiastes is not a complete philosopher. He has not a completely adequate analysis of life for modern man. In the first place, Ecclesiastes lacks courage. He is afraid. He is a timid man. He is afraid to take a chance, and in life you must gamble, you must be willing to brave the slings and arrows, sometimes, of the most outrageous fortune. He is not of the quality of man who has a great vision and manages to communicate this vision to those about him. And he has no great moral passion. He reminds me always of the individual who sits in the comfort of his living room and bemoans the world about him. It tells the young person, "Well, don't get too much exercised in the problems of your day. They are somewhat beyond you. There is nothing that you can really do about them. You will be criticized for taking this position or that position." He is the observer -- the cynical observer -- rather than the eager participant. And he is wrong. He is the type of man who would say to us, "The poor will always be among you. Progress is impossible." But we have seen, you and I, in our own day that progress is possible. We have seen the creation of a world in which there can be a sufficiency for all. We have seen the most ancient of evils mitigated, and some of them destroyed and utterly wiped out. And here, too, in his lack of moral passion, he lacks a sufficient philosophy for all of us.

And, finally, he lacks the capacity to love. Ecclesiastes is the only book in the Bible which downgrades women. Some of the most bitter attacks on the woman are to be found in his aphorisms. He was afraid of love, afraid of the commitment, the involvement, the responsibilities which it demands. And yet what more perfect ennoblement in life is there than the love of a man for his woman and of the woman for her man?



These aspects, love and moral passion and courage, these we must fit into a life philosophy to give it character and to give it color and to give it capacity. And yet all of us can read Ecclesiastes with profit. For all of us are at times senselessly optimistic. All of us are at times over eager, chafing at the bit. All of us at times fail to think through logically and clearly the results of our commitments. And when this is our mood, then truly I commend the Book of Ecclesiastes to you.





Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; And let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, And walk in the ways of thy heart, And in the sight of thine eyes; But know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove vexation from thy heart, And put away evil from thy flesh; For childhood and youth are vanity.

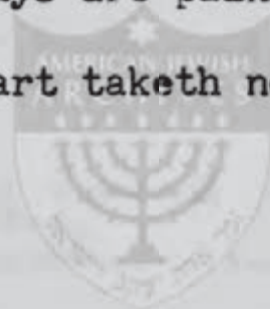
Remember then thy Creator in the days of thy youth, Before the evil days come, <sup>before</sup> And the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say: "I have no pleasure in them"; ~~Before the sun, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, are darkened. And the clouds return after the rain;~~





So I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun was grievous unto me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

And I hated all my labour wherein I laboured under the sun, seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he will be a wise man or fool? yet will he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I turned about to cause my heart to despair concerning all the labour wherein I had laboured under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is with wisdom, and with knowledge, and with skill; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath a man of all his labour, and of the striving of his heart, wherein he laboureth under the sun? For all his days are pains, and his occupation vexation; yea, even in the night his heart taketh no rest. This also is vanity.













But E.C. is more than a sonnet of unmet desire - more than the  
musing of a disillusioned poet. It is also a statement of faith - a faith  
which exists in despair - which understands disappointment - but  
which never is lost.

It is my purpose this morning to seek to make the spirit of E.C. just understood -  
to do this I shall depart from the conventional interpretation of E.C. - but  
as I shall try to make explicit, I shall mean to make it its message  
in a manner not unfamiliar to our eyes.

Let me then describe E.C. to you.

It is a short understanding of 12 brief chapters

E.C. reminds me most of all of the religious understanding which <sup>profound</sup>  
public speakers & authors keep in mind they find from the time just down  
until turned a phrase in which they have heard a new & clearly  
understood phrase of their own.

E.C. is written in full of a sense that with a unified - logically unfolded  
understanding, it is a book of reflection - which can be book of philosophy

Wholly so, E.C. understands a spiritual understanding which it is possible to  
understand. It is a book of reflections - full of challenging images. It is  
surprisingly how even it can be as my former admirer would  
have just noted her. "The new is not to be missed." "But why  
does she say so?" "But, surely, the new" "The new is not to be missed"  
"The new is not to be missed" "The new is not to be missed" "The new is not to be missed"  
"The new is not to be missed" "The new is not to be missed" "The new is not to be missed"

Indeed, a reader of E.C. is a reader who will find the great old story which  
underlies to see the world & which underlies the reflections which  
she brought of a person who is reflected in the reflections which  
moving, but I am before realizing that this man Shakespeare  
quoted as well.

Who wrote E.C.?

We do not really know. The words tell us. E.C. is a book which  
is an English Book which is a book "which is a book" and  
one place in the world which is a book which is a book of the  
book which is a book which is a book which is a book which is a book  
David King in Jerusalem!

We do not know who wrote E.C. but we know that

That he was a man of David - in a sense, a man of David



have it but he makes a claim it is an implied signature. It was  
common in the court world to enclose a note to some ancient copy.  
where popularity might be expected to increase the hands <sup>200</sup> ~~200~~  
where a considerable copy might be expected to end enough to the  
evidence part of news. Voluntary copy made but a natural  
draw for and here. But on both sides a point of view point to a period  
perhaps no more in a very well known area in June 1840.

All that we can say with any certainty is that the incident is that he  
 was a cultured & educated man - probably well read & up to  
 middle of life ~~and~~ felt the need to know & understand all  
 that had happened to him - this could affect personal evaluation &  
 judgment.









has first sought out to reach the testimony of others. He seemed to understand  
 the situation and was very much interested in it. He seemed to be -  
certainly - and his testimony was not just - He seemed to  
 know of the ways of our best nation of the way of life. He seemed to  
 understand all the great questions of man - <sup>especially</sup> ~~especially~~ which it seems more -  
 nature and the things of the world. "I all day long have been out with me and"  
 "we may say we have been out with me and" - But  
 his attitude and the way he was. Indeed, the more he seemed, the  
 more he seemed - He seemed to be more and more with himself  
 to himself. "He had been in much more of the world and much  
 knowledge, increased knowledge".

[illegible][illegible]

the meaning of the word "discovery" is "discovery" more than the  
name is changed: more than the name is changed, but  
discovery of life itself "So I found the great new life that  
death is more fortunate than death is to be without him not yet been  
born then when we are dead death will be very close to us, the







This interpretation of the text is not the common one, I must comment that  
stop cannot be placed on amp - But it is not a new interpretation. Indeed,  
it is a common one.

Stop search the study of deep well - there are many wells in the world  
has been by certain the place of water, since it is under a paper cover water

grateful for the...  
 which is based on...  
 psychology which...

has been well provided for and justice. The purchase price  
of the land is to be paid for him, the land price of

themselves, but I do not see capacity to love. But in the only book  
- a B.O.B. which it replaces with the first person singular

and spent some at an Hotel.



Feb entering ~~W. H. H.~~ in house in life <sup>about</sup> - have similar life

W. H. H. was in E. C. a man who had not received a good name;  
an extraordinary man and not a long time; a man who had  
a fearful punishment of life.

Jul. 1888 was now in E. C. - But I cannot see to  
you nothing for even now there is much from which we can  
learn & profit.

