

A Commentary on the MM° Ecclesiastes Passage

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[Eccles. 12:1-7]

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES (“Preacher”) is believed to have been written by a Jewish priest who calls himself Qoheleth. This may be his name, or it may simply mean “Teacher.” While some have identified him with King Solomon, there is little to support this idea. This passage is a dire warning of our mortality, admonishing us to seize the day while we can. In the days of Qoheleth many Jews believed in what would later be called the Epicurean philosophy, that one should live well now, because after this life there is nothing. The passage alludes to the failings that come with old age. Hebrew poetry frequently used metaphor and allegory, and this passage is rich in them.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;”

The meaning of the first verse is obvious: rejoice in God before the aches, pains, worries, and fears of old age get in the way of sound thinking. The Hebrew word which we translate “Creator” means more than just “maker.” It implies the source of all that we are and all that we have. The implication here is that we must use the talents that are given us while we can.

“. . . while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain.”

There follows a listing of the ravages of old age and a reminder of our mortality. The darkening of the sun, light, moon, and stars refers to the failure of eyesight. In the Near East, summer storms come and go quickly, leaving the sunlight glistening on the wet ground. One of the signs of winter is that storm clouds re-gather after the storm, often blocking from view the sun, moon, and stars for long periods. Here Qoheleth is comparing old age with winter, when troubles seem to drag on interminably.

“. . . in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low,”

These verses use symbolism that would have been well known to the ancient Jewish readers. The term “house” was a common metaphor for the body, and the “keepers of the house” were the arms and hands, which begin to tremble. The “strong men” are the legs, which begin to “bow.” Unfortunately, English does not indicate the pronunciation of this. The Hebrew word which is translated “bow” means “warp” (as in bow-legged), not “bend down” (as in bow down or stoop). (Thus when we recite this passage we should pronounce it as in “bow-and-arrow,” not as in “bough of a tree.”) The grinders are obviously the teeth, which cease grinding when they are few. The “windows” are the eyes, which become darkened; the “doors” are the ears, which are shut; sounds are dim, even those we make ourselves. In the deafness of old age, even the sounds of chewing (“the grinding”) fade.

“. . . and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low;”

Old men sleep poorly, waking at the first light, when the “voice of the bird” is heard. Some commentaries interpret this as an allusion to the fact the old men’s voices rise in pitch until they sound like squawking birds, although we tend more to the first interpretation. “All the daughters of music” alludes to all the pleasant sounds that we take so for granted when we are young, and are heard only dimly by the aged.

“. . . also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail:”

Climbing anything, especially stairs and hills, is a challenge to the aged, and simple things constantly become a severe challenge -- thus “they are afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way.” Also, as death approaches, those who do not believe in an afterlife may well fear God who is On High. When it is in its prime, a blooming almond tree becomes a profusion of white blossoms -- an allusion to the white hair of the aged. In Hebrew symbolism the grasshopper is a symbol of old age, and is often used metaphorically as a huge grasshopper on the back of the aged, weighing him down (like our metaphor of a “monkey on our back”); and finally, in old age sexual prowess fades away.

“. . . because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:”

In much of his writing Qoheleth indicates a strong Egyptian influence. A common Egyptian metaphor for the tomb is the “long home,” long referring to time rather than distance -- the eternal home. In ancient Israel it was the custom to hire professional mourners, who would tear their clothing and scream in grief during funeral processions to the grave. When someone was dying the mourners would gather in the streets outside the house and begin their wailing.

“. . . or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.”

In wealthy homes lamps were traditionally made of gold and suspended by silver chains. Just as those today who can’t afford diamonds will wear rhinestones, so in those days those who could not afford such luxuries would use lamps of base metal or pottery, paint them yellow, and suspend them from silver-colored cords. Light and water were Hebrew symbols of life. The loosened “silver” cord or the breaking and spilling of the “golden bowl” (the lamp) is a metaphor of death. Likewise, death is denoted by not being able to get water because the pitcher or the cistern-wheel is broken.

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

This harkens back to Genesis 3:19, “Dust thou art, and to dust shalt thou return.” The Book of Ecclesiastes was written before the Jews developed any theology of resurrection or everlasting life. They believed that on death the soul simply returned to God, no longer conscious of its own existence. Most Jews of Qoheleth’s time believed that death was the end of everything, and that all that really mattered was how we lived this life. They embraced what would later be called the Epicurean philosophy, to “seize the day” and live well now in a good relationship with God. To Qoheleth, then, it was critically important that we make full use of our facilities while we can, and use them for God, because it will quickly become too late.

