

Out of Chaos: Let Our Ordered Lives Confess the Beauty of Peace

An Introduction to the Wisdom Books

Session 4

Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes): The inadequacy of human wisdom is the focus, with a resignation. The underlying teaching is that reality is ordered, but it is hidden and beyond comprehension, and consequently, the best humans can do is settle for conventional conduct.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-4: Vanity of vanities...¹

Ecclesiastes 1:9-10: Nothing new under the sun...

Ecclesiastes 1:18: What cannot be changed

Ecclesiastes 7:29: Men have recourse

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 For everything there is a season

Ecclesiastes 9:1-3: Seize the day

There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens.

A time to be born, and a time to die;

A time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant.

A time to kill, and a time to heal;

A time to tear down, and a time to build.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather them;

A time to embrace, and a time to be far from embraces.

A time to seek, and a time to lose;

A time to keep, and a time to cast away.

A time to rend, and a time to sew;

A time to be silent, and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate;

¹ Robert Alter: The words of Quoheleth ...nearest translation is 'breath,' all is 'mere breath'... (May 10, 2009) Translated as mere breath because I think that is how Quoheleth conducted his philosophic thinking; I think he is a true philosopher. KJB translates it as 'vanity of vanities' based on the Latin Vulgate. Some modern translations render it as futility or 'absurdity of absurdity.' They are not wrong, but each is too restricted. I propose in keeping with a kind of inner logic of the ancient Hebrew language and thought the author Quoheleth used concrete images where we would use abstractions. What is the ...Hebrew means breath or vapor that comes out of your mouth, which is invisible except on a cold windy day and then it immediately dissipates. This is a concrete metaphor that embraces truest concreteness in a range of abstract concepts. Vanity, in the old Latin is an emptiness, suggests futility, suggests transience, insubstantiality and elusiveness. To select one abstraction and nail it down that way is to diminish the means so I try to follow the logic of the Hebrew.

A time of war, and a time of peace (3:1-8)

. . . .

He has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without men's ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work which God has done.

I recognized that there is nothing better than to be glad and do well during life. For every man, moreover, to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of all his labor is a gift of God.

I recognized that whatever God does will endure forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. Thus has God done that he may be revered. What now is has already been; what is to be, already is; and God restores what would otherwise be displaced. (3:11-15)

Job: The book of Job is a protest against the hardened, dogmatic conviction that requires experience to conform to preconceived patterns of morality. It is a literature of protest against conclusions like those seen in Proverbs which have closed off the chance to learn from new experience. Job's preoccupation with his own case led him to narrow his focus and to concentrate on the human race and himself, an anthropocentric perspective which is rebutted by God. Creation in Job ends with the monsters unvanquished, with God admiring them in splendid poetry! They are nevertheless on God's leash although they terrify human beings and there is no guarantee that evil will not befall people. The God of Job celebrates each act and product of His creation for itself, as an independent value which reflects God's power and grace.

Job is challenged by his so-called friends, to think that the problems that have befallen him were because he had somehow sinned. But this is not payback from a vicious, tyrannical God. The world is theocentric (centered in God), not anthropocentric (centered in man).

Job answers:

I know you can do everything, nothing you propose is beyond you.
[You said] "Who is this that obscures my design without knowledge?"
Indeed, I spoke without understanding, of things beyond me which I did not know.

[You said] "Hear now and I will speak, I will do the questioning and you will respond."

I have heard of you by the hearing of the ears, but now my eye sees you.
Therefore I retract [recant, relent, to change one's mind about] and give up my dust and ashes [Translation by Clifford, page 95] (Job 42:2-6).

"Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes" [Job 42:6 NAB]

Contrast Clifford's translation of verse 6 with NRSV translation: "Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. Clifford says that "dust and ashes" was the traditional costume of a lamenter or complainant, which Job gives up, because his "eye" now sees God.

God is angry at the three friends (42:7) not Job even though Job protested, complained, and accused God, and speaking the truth. When Job withdraws his suit, Yahweh spoke admiringly of him and blessed him above others.

God tells the three friends they should offer a holocaust "and let my servant Job pray for you, for his prayer I will accept, not to punish you severely. For you have not spoken rightly concerning me, as has my servant Job...And the Lord accepted the intercession of Job....the Lord restored the prosperity of Job, after he had prayed for his friends....(Job 42:8-10)

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): We know exactly who wrote this book and the time in which it was written, a rare experience in biblical literature. It was written between 200-175 BC and it was translated from Hebrew into Greek about 132 BC by the author's grandson. In the last century, several manuscripts have been discovered that contain about two thirds of the Hebrew text which agrees substantially with the Greek version we previously had. It was not in the Hebrew Bible after the first century CE, nor was it accepted by Protestants, but has always been considered inspired and canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. It is used in our church liturgy. The wisdom of Israel is spreading into other cultures and worlds and each generation has to comprehend wisdom anew, for itself.

Come to me, all you that yearn for me, and be filled with my fruits; you will remember me as sweeter than honey, better to have than the honeycomb. He who eats of me will hunger still, he who drinks of me will thirst for more; He who obeys me will not be put to shame, he who serves me will never fail.

All this is true of the book of the Most High's covenant, the law which Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the community of Jacob.

It overflows, like the Pishon, with wisdom, like the Tigris in the days of the new fruits.

It runs over, like the Euphrates, with understanding, like the Jordan at harvest time.

It sparkles like the Nile with knowledge, like the Gihon at vintage time.

The first man never finished comprehending wisdom, nor will the last succeed in fathoming her.

For deeper than the sea are her thoughts; her counsels, than the great abyss.

Now I, like a rivulet from her stream, channeling the waters into a garden,

Said to myself, "I will water my plants, my flower bed I will drench"

And suddenly this rivulet of mine became a river, then this stream of mine, a sea. Thus do I send my teachings forth shining like the dawn, to become known afar off.

Thus do I pour out instruction like prophecy and bestow it on generations to come.
(Sirach 24:18-31)

Come to me, all you that yearn for me, and be filled with my fruits. (Sirach 24:18)

Compare Sirach with: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...you will find rest for yourself. For my yoke is easy and my burden light (Matthew 11:28). “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst...I will not reject anyone who comes to me.... (John 6:35, 37b).

This Week's Meditation and Prayers

He has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without men's ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work which God has done (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

O Lord, even though I cannot begin to discover all that you have done, may my heart remember to seek your timeless perspective. May all that I do today be done in your timing, synchronized with your universe. Amen.

I have heard of you by the hearing of the ears, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I retract [recant, relent, to change one's mind about] and give up my dust and ashes (Job 42:6).

O Beloved, may I have ears to hear and eyes to see you today. May I give up my shorten-sighted perspective of world and come into your Loving Reality. Help me to give up feeling sorry for myself when I don't understand and when the world doesn't work the way I think it should. Amen.

The first man never finished comprehending wisdom, nor will the last succeed in fathoming her (Sirach 24:26).

O Beloved, I seek your wisdom as those in the caravan of believers from whom I learn your truths did before me. May I be a light to those who will come behind me looking for your light. The fulfillment of your Covenant overflows like the rivers, running over, bringing understanding, sparkling in knowledge, quenching our thirst. May I drink deeply and become a stream shared with the world around me. Amen.

Home Study

Wisdom of Solomon: This book was written about a 100 years before the coming of Christ, by an unknown author who was a member of the Alexandrian Jewish community in Egypt, writing in Greek but in a style patterned after Hebrew verse. He places his words in the mouth of King Solomon to emphasize their importance.

7:25-26: A five-fold metaphor of Wisdom:

For she is a *breath* of the power of God,
And a pure *emanation* of the glory of the Almighty;
Therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her,
For she is a *reflection* of eternal light,
A spotless *mirror* of the working of God,
And an *image* of his goodness.

Thoughts to consider: In this metaphor for Wisdom, does she seem familiar to you? Are we coming into awareness of the Holy Spirit as she shared with God the creation of our world?

7:26-27: Wisdom's governance of the world:

Although she is but one, she can do all things,
And while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
In every generation she passes into holy souls
And makes them friends of God, and prophets;
For God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with Wisdom.

Thoughts to consider: Is this the same Holy Spirit that descended upon the disciples in the New Testament era?

9:16-18 Wisdom transcends our own knowledge:

And scarce do we guess the things on earth,
And what is within our grasp we find with difficulty
But when things are in heaven, who can search them out?
Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given Wisdom
And sent your holy spirit from on high?
And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight,
And men learned what was your pleasure,
And were saved by Wisdom.

O Lord, we are grateful to know that you, your Holy Spirit, was in the world from the beginning. You have given us your counsel through the ages, making the paths of the journey straight. May we live and learn in your good pleasure; may we be renewed and saved from ourselves. Amen.