

The Wisest of All Books: Interpreting Koheleth

Rabbi Ari Schwarzberg

Judaic Studies Faculty, Shalhevet High School, Los Angeles, CA

Rabbi Ronald Schwarzberg

Director, The Morris and Gertrude Bienenfeld Department of Jewish Career Development and Placement, Center for the Jewish Future, Yeshiva University

From the dawn of biblical interpretation, the Book of Koheleth has rightfully garnered the prestigious reputation as the most mysterious and elusive text in Tanakh. The confusing nature of Koheleth's poetry has earned itself a range of interpreters and interpretation exceeding all its biblical colleagues.

Chazal and contemporary biblical scholars alike have engaged in courageous attempts to salvage a meaningful and sensible explanation of the author's baffling words. The gamut of interpretation is crowded with an assortment of options; exegetes, allegorists, literalists and mystics leave no stone unturned. While it may be the case that many biblical passages generate a myriad of readings, with Koheleth, no matter how brilliant the commentary, somehow the riddle of the words remains unsolved. The bewildered reader is frustrated with antithetical conclusions: Does Koheleth counsel piety or joy, hedonism or asceticism? Is Koheleth the most moving Messianic prophecy or a Song of Skepticism? Is it a work of theology or philosophy?

True to its message, the very enterprise of interpreting Koheleth appears as futile as its opening remarks proclaim: "Vanity of vanities, says Koheleth, vanity of vanities! All is vanity!"

Koheleth and Tanakh

Connected with the book's esoteric confusion is Koheleth's exoteric inconsistency. Featured within the biblical canon, even a cursory tour of Tanakh reveals Koheleth's enigmatic status. Koheleth's canonization or biblical status has been the subject of controversy since the discussions of the early rabbis in Yavneh and continues to attract scholarly attention. As a branch of 20th-century philosophy Koheleth would be appropriately placed next to the critical works of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but contrasted with the enumeration of *mitzvot* in the Torah and the resolute faith expressed by our great prophets, Koheleth is noticeably anomalous. A common

sentiment of modern academic biblical interpretation is that the author of Koheleth is an outsider completely free of tradition, whose book is no more than a skeptical note on classical Jewish belief.

Despite Koheleth's apparent skepticism and agnosticism, many of its other proverbial musings are completely in consonance with the general thrust of Tanakh. The range of theological topics alluded to in the book, in which Koheleth shows himself to be entirely at one with traditional belief, is clearly discernible. Echoing classical, Jewish theological tenets, Koheleth assumes that there is one God who created the world (3:11) and has sovereign power over it (3:14; 6:10; 7:13; 9:1; 11:5), a God who is wholly transcendent (5:2), exalted above and different in nature from his creatures (6:10). The world that He created was a good world (3:11). Man was created from the dust (3:20) and animated by his Creator with breath (3:19); he is, however, a weak creature (6:10). It is through his own fault that his nature has become corrupted (7:29; 8:9), so the world is now beset with evil (4:3; 9:3), hardship, frustration and injustice (2:11; 3:16; 4:1). Man must die, and like the animals revert to the dust (3:19-20; 12:7). Human life, while it lasts, is a gift of God (3:13; 5:19), and should be lived to the fullest (9:10), and as far as possible with enjoyment, for that is God's intention (3:13; 5:19). That it is man's duty to worship this God is also taken for granted (5:1).

On all these matters Koheleth's teaching is clearly dependent on, and in accordance with, the normative biblical tradition. Taken as a whole this is good, plain Jewish doctrine; the biblical parallels are obvious and unmistakable.

To be certain, the sum of this collection does not dilute the ethos of humanism, pessimism and anthropocentrism that pervade Koheleth's message and isolate it from other biblical texts. Koheleth's resignation that one fate awaits all mankind (2:14-16; 6:1-6), his recommendations of pleasure and self-satisfaction (8:15; 11:9) question the established Israelite moral hierarchy of righteous and wicked, wisdom and folly, and ultimately champions life's futility. No matter the collection of biblical parallels in Koheleth, a reading of Koheleth as just another branch of Israelite wisdom, continuing the sapiential path of Proverbs, is equally as problematic as the scholarly dismissal of Koheleth

Here then lies the difficulty of assessing the Book of Koheleth. On the one hand, it utilizes the same jargon and draws from the identical lexicon as other biblical works of wisdom. But on the other hand, it both explicitly and implicitly deviates from its forerunners. In fact, it is this internal tension of the book and not its apparent heresies that motivate the rabbis to entertain suppressing Koheleth. The Talmud states:

Rab Judah, son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory...

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b¹

אמר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר
שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז
ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את
זה...
תלמוד בבלי, שבת ל:

¹ Translation: I. Epstein (ed.), *Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed IV* (London, 1938), p. 72.

Koheleth and Chazal

The puzzling identity of Koheleth is substantiated further through a perusal of its rabbinic interpretation. For good reason the prevailing assumption is that *Chazal* symbolically interpret Koheleth's words to better comport with the normative theological character of the Torah. Despite its canonical status, the rabbis never appear to be completely comfortable with their approval of Koheleth's text.² This becomes all the more evident in midrashic interpretations utilized to explicate Koheleth's ostensibly sacrilegious content.

A snapshot of this rabbinic attitude is evident in the following few examples:

R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Nahman, the son of R. Samuel b. Nahman, and R. Menahama said: All the references to eating and drinking in this Book signify Torah and good deeds. R. Jonah said: The most clear of them all is, A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labour—'amalo (Eccl. 8:15). The last word should be read as 'olamo (his world)—in this world; All the days of his life (ib.) alludes to the grave. Are there, then food and drink in the grave which accompany a man to the grave? It must then mean Torah and good deeds.

Koheleth Rabbah 2:24³

ר' תנחומא אמר ר' נחמן בריה דר' שמואל בר נחמן ור' מנחמא ואמרין לה ר' ירמיה ור' מיישא בש"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק כל אכילה ושתייה שנאמר במגילה הזאת בתורה ובמעשים טובים הכתוב מדבר, א"ר יונה בנית אב שבכולם שנאמר והוא ילונו בעמלו בעולמו בעולם הזה ימי חייו לקבר וכי יש מאכל ומשתה בקבר שמלווין את האדם לקברו אלא אלו תורה ומעשים טובים.
קהלת רבה ב:כד

Unwilling to accept Koheleth's hedonistic implications, the rabbis understand King Solomon's material references as allusions to Torah study.

Another symbolic interpretation is motivated by Koheleth's cynical attitude toward the monotony and repetition of life. Verse 1:4 reads:

One generation passes away, and another generation comes, but the earth endures forever.

דור הלך ודור בא, והארץ לעולם עמדת.

Commenting on this verse, the rabbis completely reject the meaning as referring to a repetitive universe:

As a generation passes away so it comes (at the Resurrection); i.e. if one dies lame or blind he comes lame or blind, so that people shall not say, 'Those He allowed to die are different than from those He restored to life.' For it is written: "I kill and I make alive" (Deut. 32:39).

Koheleth Rabbah 1:4

כדור הולך כן דור בא הולך חגור בא חגור, הולך סומא בא סומא, שלא יהו אומרים אחרים המית ואחרים החיה דכתיב אני אמית ואחיה.
קהלת רבה א:ד

² For example see M. *Yadaim* 3:5, B. *Talmud Megillah* 7a, *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus ch. 28.1, *Avot de Rabbi Natan* A, Chapter 1, and *Koheleth Rabbah* 1.3.

³ Translation: Freedman and Simon (ed.), *The Midrash 8: Ecclesiastes* (trans. A. Cohen) (London, 1939), pp. 71-72.

No matter the original intention of the text, the Midrash here utilizes the imagery of the passing generation and the coming generation as an opportunity to expound upon *tihyat ha'metim* (resurrection of the dead).

There are numerous other examples of this exegetical method,⁴ but for our purposes, evidence of a contrary exegetical approach is far more interesting. Similar to the internal contradiction of Koheleth's religious character, the same divergence exists in its rabbinic interpretation. While the discomfort with Koheleth is well documented in some rabbinic sources, surprisingly several other passages and commentaries indicate a considerable comfort with Koheleth's literal meaning.

Reflections on the futility and vanity of life ring throughout Koheleth's chapters, and one would expect traditional interpreters to debunk such an attitude toward God's precious gift to humanity. To our surprise, however, the Midrash concedes to Koheleth's observations:

... If another had declared, Vanity of vanities, said Koheleth (Eccl. 1:2), I might have said that this man who had never owned two farthings in his life makes light of the wealth of the world and declares, Vanity of vanities'; but for Solomon it was appropriate to declare 'Vanity of vanities' because of him it is written, And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones (I Kings 10:27) ... Why then did he say 'Vanity of vanities'? He saw the world [as it is] and what would finally be.

Koheleth Rabbah 3:11

אילו אחר אמר הבל הבלים אמר קהלת וגו'
הייתי אומר זה שלא קנה לו ב' פרוטות
מימיו הוא פירת בממונו של עולם ואומר
הבל הבלים אלא זה שלמה שכתוב בו ויתן
המלך את הכסף בירושלם כאבנים ולא היו
נגנבות שהיו אבני עשר אמות ואבני שמונה
אמות, ומשקלות שהיו בימי שלמה של זהב
היו שנאמר (שם /מלכים א' /י) אין כסף לא
נחשב בימי שלמה למאומה לזה נאה לומר
הבל הבלים, למה אמר הבל הבלים ראה
העולם והעמיד להיות בסופו.
קהלת רבה ג:יא

Similarly, another Midrash acknowledges the monotony of life that Koheleth incessantly laments. Verse 5:14 states:

Just as he came naked from his mother's womb, so must he depart. He can take none of his wealth he earned along with him.

כְּאִשֶׁר יָצָא מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ, עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לְלֶקֶת כְּשֹׁבָא;
וּמְאוּמָה לֹא-יִשָּׂא בְעַמְלוֹ, נְשִׁילָהּ בְּיָדוֹ.

The pessimism articulated in this verse is actually expanded in the Midrash to reflect the universal human experience of life and death:

This is like a fox that found a vineyard that was fenced in on all sides. There was one hole through which he tried to enter, but was not able. What did he do? He fasted for three days until he was thin and weak, and he went through the hole. He ate and grew fat. When he wanted to leave, he could not fit through the hole. Again he fasted three more days until he grew thin and weak as he had done before and then left. When he departed, he turned and looked and

לשועל שמצא כרם והיה מסוייג מכל
פנותיו והיה שם נקב אחד ובקש
להכנס בו ולא הוה יכיל מה עבד צם
תלת יומין עד דכחיש ותשש ועאל
בהדא נקובא, ואכל ושמן, בעא
למיפק ולא יכיל מעיבר כלום, חזר
וצאים תלת יומן אוחרנין עד דכחיש
ותשש וחזר היך מה דהוה ונפק, כד
נפק הוה אפיך אפוי ואיסתכל ביה

⁴ See comments on 1:3,1:7, 3:9, 5:10, 9:8 for example.

said: *Vineyard, vineyard! How good are you, and how good are the fruits inside! Everything inside you is wonderful and praiseworthy. But vineyard, what benefit comes from you? Just as one goes inside so does one depart! Thus also is this world.*

Koheleth Rabbah 5:14

Apparently, *Chazal* do not deny the verity of Koheleth's words.

To further our claim, one more example will suffice.⁵ The yielding of the rabbis to Koheleth's irrefutable claims is no more evident than in the following comments on verse 9:2:

The same fate happens to the righteous—*this refers to Noah ... They say that when he came out of the ark, a lion attacked him and injured him so that he limped. And to the wicked— this refers to Pharaoh. They say that when Pharaoh came to sit upon Solomon's throne ... he did not understand its mechanism, and a lion attacked and injured him so that he limped. This one died with a limp and this one died with a limp; hence the same fate happens to the righteous and wicked. To the good—this refers to Moses ... And to the pure—this refers to Aaron ... And to the unclean—this refers to the spies, who gave an evil report about the land of Israel and did not get to enter it. These (Moses and Aaron) spoke of the goodness and praiseworthiness of the land of Israel, yet they did not get to enter it.*

Koheleth Rabbah 9:1

The acceptance of the Midrash that in reality good and bad, righteous and wicked await similar fates is a poignant reminder that Koheleth's ruminations cannot be dismissed irrespective of one's theological slant. *Chazal* then cannot be relegated, as they are by many, as reinterpreting the literal meaning of Koheleth's text. On the contrary, the rabbis' dualistic interpretation beautifully preserves the polarity of Koheleth's ambiguous teachings. The legacy of Koheleth's honesty continues to have a voice even in the rabbinic era. The findings in the Midrash reveal that the rabbis, who at times interpret Koheleth's words symbolically, are the same ones who at other times revere his conclusions as eternal truths. Perhaps there are ideas that cross the proverbial line, but there are other welcomed concepts that help complete a healthy range of legitimate perspectives. In the rabbinical *weltanschauung* incongruous views can exist in harmony.⁶

אמר כרמא כרמא, מה טב את ומה
טבין אינון פירין דבגווד, וכל מה
דאית כך יאין ומשבחון, ברם מה הניה
ממד, כמה דבר נש עליל לגוויך כך
הוא נפיק, כך הוא דין עלמא.
קהלת רבה ה:יד

הכל כאשר לכל מקרה אחד לצדיק,
זה נח ... אמרו כשיצא מן התיבה
הכישו ארי ושברו והיה צולע,
ולרשע זה פרעה, אמרו כשבא
פרעה לישב על כסא שלמה ... לא
היה יודע מנגניקון שלו והכישו ארי
ושברו והיה צולע, זה מת צולע וזה
מת צולע הוי מקרה אחד לצדיק
ולרשע, לטוב זה משה ... ולטהור
זה אהרן ... ולטמא אלו המרגלים
שאמרו דבה רעה על הארץ ולא
נכנסו לארץ, ואלו אמרו טובתה
ושבחה של ארץ ישראל ולא נכנסו
בה.
קהלת רבה ט:א

⁵ Other examples of Koheleth's literal interpretation in *Koheleth Rabbah* can be found on the comments to vss. 1.18 and 2.19.

⁶ Because of the scope of the paper more examples of Koheleth's influence or congruence with rabbinic views would be excessive. See Talmud B. *Brakot* 57a, Yer. *Kiddushin* 4:12, and Mishna *Abot* 3:13,15 for rabbinic expressions in agreement with Koheleth's truisms.

Conclusion

Such a reading perhaps best explains the rabbis in the Talmudic passage referenced earlier. The rabbis (B. *Shabbat* 30b) discuss the possibility of suppressing Koheleth because of its many contradictions, but the Talmud replies:

Because its beginning is religious teaching (lit: words of Torah) and its end is religious.

ומפני מה לא גנזוהו - מפני שתחילתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה.

The Talmud, it would seem, echoes our perspective: because the skepticism and cynicism of Koheleth are sandwiched with religious teachings, its unorthodoxies are tolerated and even respected. The rabbis do not propose discarding the heterodoxies in favor of the orthodoxies;⁷ rather they acknowledge a very daring, yet authentic existence that simultaneously expresses deep faith and conviction in God, while also appreciating the profound existential queries that confront each individual.

Interestingly then, Koheleth, as one of the final books of Tanakh, occupies a very prominent role in our understanding and interpretation of the Torah. Writ large, Koheleth's significance lies in its very complex outlook, one that characterizes its singularity and takes a very bold stand about what it means to be a religious Jew. Both in its literal and rabbinic interpretations, Koheleth does not relegate wisdom to blind faith and obedience, it rather emits a culture of free expression and thought contained within particular guidelines. As a closing segment of our Torah, Koheleth is anything but the black sheep of Tanakh. Beneath the mystery of its words, Koheleth acts as a beautiful commentary on the layered persona of the religious experience. Replete with contradictory expressions and interpretations, coupled with its provocative insights into life, Koheleth's place in the biblical landscape serves to validate and value the volatility, inconsistencies and uneasiness of our own religious lives. According to the wisest of all books, the exemplary religious life is surely not one of stagnancy and routine, but one that achieves its vibrancy through serious thought, provocative questions, and honest inquiry. A life of Torah and *mitzvot*, according to Koheleth, must also be a life of learning.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Koheleth is read at the end of a very long season of holidays. The reading of Koheleth sets the tone for the arduous road ahead when the heightened spirituality of Elul/Tishrei has faded. Koheleth provides the courage to accept a world that is complex and at times absurd and full of contradiction, while at the same time adhering to those religious values and ideas that are the hallmarks of the Jewish people.

⁷ See B. Talmud *Hagiga* 3a-b, Tosefta *Sotah*, 7 where R. Eleazar b. Azariah's homily on Koh. 12:11 argues that the Torah is fruitful and multiparous-open to different interpretations.