

“Who was Kohelet and who was he addressing?”

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Why the book of Kohelet was prescribed for Succot has mystified commentators down the ages, given that there is no obvious thematic connection between the book and any of the festival's rituals, or to the wandering of our ancestors in the desert and their accommodation in succah booths. Indeed, the choice of Kohelet as key reading for this festival seems to be singularly inappropriate. Succot connotes thanksgiving, harvest ingathering and its attendant celebration as *zeman simchateinu*, 'season of our joyfulness,' whereas Kohelet is a chronicle of pessimism, frustration, and disillusionment. If anything, the only way of understanding its choice is to view Kohelet as a foil or antidote to Succot.

To elaborate: Succot, for the ancient Israelite farmer, was a season of great pride as *chag ha' asif*, 'the festival of the ingathering,' the prevailing mood of which was captured by the Psalmist when he wrote, "When you enjoy the fruit of your labours, you shall be happy and you shall prosper'(Ps. 128:2). So, just on that festival of Succot, as he surveyed his bursting granaries – and was basking in the confidence that he had no business worries for the lean autumn and winter months ahead – at that very moment he is told to listen to the words of Kohelet, to ideas calculated to bring him down to earth

with a bump, to deflate his ego, to remind him in the clearest terms that wealth, success; achievement, and progress, are not, in fact, the keys to lasting human fulfilment and inner satisfaction, that, with age, he wouldn't retain the strength to 'enjoy the fruits of any labours,' and that his estates and whatever else he has accumulated would be administered by a younger generation whose ideas, decisions, and plans, might well be at variance with his own. Perhaps, as the harvest was ingathered each year, for the older generation the pride and joy ebbed somewhat as his advice was no longer sought. Many of the older generation must have fully sympathised with Kohelet's perspectives on life.

The book opens with an author attribution to Solomon, though, curiously, it refers to him and his work merely as '[the words of] Kohelet, the son of David, King in Jerusalem' (see 1:1, 12). And this is the traditional view of the book's authorship. Scholarly opinion, on the other hand, basing itself on its character as a book of practical wisdom and reflections on matters of everyday life, place it within the genre of Wisdom Literature written centuries later than the period of Solomon. Taking account also of its analytical approach and sceptical attitude to life, as well as the inclusion of Persian loan words, scholars assume that the writer, living sometime between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, adopted the persona of Solomon (in the manner of many authors of that period whose works were accordingly dubbed 'pseudepigraphic')<sup>1</sup> to gain respect for the philosophy of life he was promoting.

For traditionalists, it is not impossible, however, to synthesize the two views. After all, the Talmud refers to three scrolls that were found in the Temple precincts and which differed in their reading of three particular words.<sup>2</sup> If this could occur with holy scrolls, prescribed to be written with great precision, it could assuredly have occurred with works bordering on the secular, like Kohelet, which were presumably handed down the centuries orally and imperfectly, which would account for the Persian loan words and other accretions inserted by the later editors.

Now, if we accept the scholarly view that our version of Kohelet achieved its final form in the Persian period, we may conjecture that its popularity came to the fore at the time of the early clashes between the Judean plebeians and the patricians which paved the way for the later divisions between Pharisees and Sadducees, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Kohelet, we suggest, was a most potent weapon in the hands of the former, and the lowly poor they represented, with which to bring home to the rich Sadducean landowning classes of the day that wealth, power, and rank, are illusory, and that all mortals ultimately share a common destiny.

The book of Kohelet sent the message to the Sadducees that success is always relative. Just as a commoner will always find another commoner whose success will rival or excel his own, so will a king inevitably find his superior in wealth, wisdom, or statecraft. 'A generation comes and a

generation goes' (1:4) – and each one will inevitably be matched, and outclassed, by the one that succeeds it.

So, who was Kohelet, and who was he addressing? The pseudonym he employs, instead of His name Solomon, suggests that he had reason to conceal his identity, though the content of his work, as well as the references to himself as 'the son of David, king of Israel in Jerusalem,' leaves his identity in no doubt (see below)! When he refers to himself as 'the wisest king who ever ruled Jerusalem' (1:16), it was not an idle boast, but a statement of fact, perhaps intended to lend credence to the philosophy he wished to promote and the advice he wishes to impart once he had returned from his travels, crystalised his thoughts, and written down his conclusions (Its purpose was certainly not to increase its sales, as Solomon was the wealthiest man of his age!).

Solomon's fame would have been widespread, so there was no way he could have avoided recognition while he travelled around to conduct his life surveys and interviews. We may conjecture, therefore, that such travels were conducted incognito, possibly masked, and with a few trusted and similarly camouflaged guards. At the beginning of ch.4, for example, he records that he '*sat down (v'shavti)* to share the tears of the oppressed...who had none to comfort them' (v.1). In such a situation he would hardly have lorded it over them by appearing in royal apparel.

Kohelet was probably the pseudonym he employed when introducing himself in such situations. The name was chosen, perhaps, on account of its connotation as '[an ordinary] member of the community,' from the root *k-h-l*, with its noun *kehillah*. By the time his quest was over, and he had returned home to disseminate his thoughts for the wider benefit, such a cloak-and-dagger representation was no longer required, and he was able to reveal himself as *Melech biYrushalayim* (see 1:1, 12, *et al.*), the king in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> An essential part of his quest was to steep his body with wine, (2:3), amass great estates, build houses, plant vineyards, gardens and orchards, and plant them with every type of fruit trees (vv.4-5), amass vast wealth and the treasures of kings and foreign lands (v.8)...and withhold nothing that his eyes had seen (v. 20).

He certainly returned home chastened by his experiences, and was enabled thereby to place his own royal rank into perspective: "I have seen slaves riding on horseback and princes walking like slaves on the ground" (9:7).

In his final sentence he betrays his belief that, while he had gained much personal experience of life, and had worked well on his priorities, he was convinced that he had not offered the world anything unique:

The final word: it has all been said.

Fear God and keep His commandments. For that is all man has.

To opt for faith, and the discipline and joy of the mitzvot, and to affirm life and hope in a world wherein there is so much despair, is the greatest challenge to man. And amid the process of responding to that challenge lies the promise of spiritual reward and the key to fulfilment and inner happiness.

There is perhaps one subsidiary message implied by Kohelet, though not spelt out. It was the value of the small contribution, the still small voice, the small step forward. Kohelet largely undertook large-scale operations during his grand quest, pursuing "ends," but largely overlooking "means." His canvas was painted in bold, broad, swathes of colour, with few subtle flourishes of the small brush.

Thus, we have little description of the types of characters that he encountered along the way, no fine detail. Had he named but one king or prince, we would have been able to determine for sure that Solomon was indeed the author of the book. The places he visited would also have augmented our historical and geographical knowledge of the period. From our modern perspective, we would perhaps have reminded him that it was not the great cannons that broke Napoleon on the road to Moscow, but the might of the small snowflakes.

## NOTES

1. The term Pseudepigraphic refers to a work which, to gain popularity, is falsely attributed to a famous earlier writer, or biblical or historical character.
2. See Mas. *Soferim* 6:4.
3. For the background to the rise of the Pharisaic and Sadducean movements, see Louis Finkelstein, *The Pharisees* (Philad., The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), vol I, pp.186-194.
4. Curiously, Google AI authoritatively states, ‘Jerusalem is not mentioned in the book of Ecclesiastes,’ whereas in fact it appears no less than three times in ch.1 and twice in ch.2!

*Shabbat shalom umoadim lesimchah,*

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