

The Attractive Heresy of Kohelet

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Traditionally read during the fall festival of Sukkot, Kohelet is the most honest book of the Bible because it speaks to those Jews (and others) who have outgrown the idea of a supernatural God who writes books, chooses one people from among all others, and dabbles in real estate. It may be the Torah for our time because it offers a way to live well in the wild world we experience every day. At the heart of Kohelet's teaching is the notion of *havel*, a Hebrew word most English translators render as futility, vanity or meaninglessness. Read this way, Kohelet appears to be a nihilist. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

That life is a series of moments, each one flowing into the next, doesn't mean life is meaningless, only that life is fluid. Reality is like the tide flowing in and flowing out. The flowing tide isn't without purpose, but its purpose isn't other than its flowing. [Kohelet] provides an honest assessment of life and how best to live it without recourse to jealous and violent gods, corruptible clergy and kings, jingoistic tribalism, and xenophobic ethnicity. And because it does, it scared the crap out of those who put the Bible together.

Claiming that Kohelet was promoting fake news, they added alternative facts to the end of the book in the hopes of perverting the message of Kohelet and prevent it from being enacted by the people:

The sum of the matter, when all is said and done:

Revere God and observe His commandments!

For this applies to all mankind:

that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown,

be it good or bad. [Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14](#)

This desperate attempt by the powers that be to deny the wisdom of Kohelet only attests to its truth. Read the book for yourself and see if this is not so.

myjewishlearning.com/article/kohelet-torah-for-the-21st-century/

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b

The Sages sought to suppress the book of Ecclesiastes and declare it apocryphal because its statements contradict each other and it is liable to confuse its readers.

And why did they not suppress it? Because its beginning consists of matters of Torah and its end consists of matters of Torah. (The ostensibly contradictory details are secondary to the essence of the book, which is Torah.)

The Gemara elaborates: Its beginning consists of matters of Torah, as it is written: "What profit has man of all his labor which he labors under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3), and the Sages of the school of Rabbi Yannai said: By inference: Under the sun is where man has no profit from his labor; however, before the sun, i.e., when engaged in the study of Torah, which preceded the sun, he does have profit. Its ending consists of matters of Torah, as it is written: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: Fear God, and keep His mitzvot; for this is the whole man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13)...

And to the essence of the matter, the Gemara asks: What is the meaning of: Its statements that contradict each other? It is written: "Vexation is better than laughter" (Ecclesiastes 7:3), and it is written: "I said of laughter: It is praiseworthy" (Ecclesiastes 2:2), which is understood to mean that laughter is commendable.

Likewise in one verse it is written: "So I commended mirth" (Ecclesiastes 8:15), and in another verse it is written: "And of mirth: What does it accomplish?" (Ecclesiastes 2:2).

The Gemara answers: This is not difficult, as the contradiction can be resolved. Vexation is better than laughter means: The vexation of the Holy One, Blessed be He, toward the righteous in this world is preferable to the laughter which the Holy One, Blessed be He, laughs with the wicked in this world by showering them with goodness. I said of laughter: It is praiseworthy, that is the laughter which the Holy One, Blessed be He, laughs with the righteous in the World-to-Come.

Similarly, "So I commended mirth," that is the joy of a mitzvah. "And of mirth: What does it accomplish?" that is joy that is not the joy of a mitzvah. The praise of joy mentioned here is to teach you that the Divine Presence rests upon an individual neither from an atmosphere of sadness, nor from an atmosphere of laziness, nor from an atmosphere of laughter, nor from an atmosphere of frivolity, nor from an atmosphere of idle conversation, nor from an atmosphere of idle chatter, but rather from an atmosphere imbued with the joy of a mitzvah.

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon

What is the work doing in the canon? When compared to the deeply traditional reading of Ben Sira (authored around the same era), a work which failed the test of canonisation, Koheleth's apparent blasphemy seems even more remarkable. Admittedly rabbinic sources, and indeed Christian ones as well, attest to debate about the admissibility and thereby holiness of Koheleth's peculiar brand of heresy, but in the end the work is deemed acceptable. Perhaps the Rabbis didn't have the courage to strike this work out, or maybe they had more courage than even Koheleth, enough courage to accept both orthodoxy and heresy.

[There is] a tale of Rabbi Bunam of Pshya which seems opposite. One day Rabbi Bunam found his beloved disciple Enoch in tears. The Rabbi asked him, 'Why are you weeping?' and Enoch answered, 'Am I not a creature of the world, and am I not made with eyes and heart and all limbs, yet I do not know what good I am in the world.' 'Fool' said Rabbi Bunam, 'I also go around like this.' Maybe, at a certain point we all face the darkness Koheleth articulates so clearly, and then what?

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