

Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature

VIII. An Appeal to Youth

Ecclesiastes 12.

TOPIC FOR DECEMBER 15.

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MORE than any book of the Bible, not excepting Job, the Book of Ecclesiastes has always defied anything like a final authoritative interpretation. It would indeed be "a weariness of the flesh" to study any considerable number of the many books of interpretation of Ecclesiastes made by venturesome expositors, Jewish and Christian. Anyone interested in the conflicting interpretations of this remarkable book may find the whole matter treated in G. A. Barton's volume on Ecclesiastes in the International Critical Commentary. One thing, however, modern and ancient commentaries alike make plain—the book is a splendid piece of literature, full of gems both of thought

and of expression. Other things, also, modern investigations increasingly make plain; the book is not, as some have supposed, the utterance of a gross sensualist, preaching the crude doctrine, "Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die"; neither is it the product of some jaded voluptuary on whose worn-out spirit has settled down the burden of a crushing pessimism and to whom nothing now seems worth while; but the work rather of one who professes to have tested life's various programmes and while finding none—not even the narrowly religious—altogether satisfactory from the reflective viewpoint, or free from vanity and vexation of spirit, nevertheless is quite sure of a few things that have come to him in

the course of his investigations. He is quite sure that "wisdom excelleth folly as far as might excelleth darkness." He is sure, too, that it cannot be other than "well with the righteous and evil with the wicked." But most of all he is sure, (and perhaps this is his largest as well as his final thought), that " 'tis better to be good than to be wise," and that concerning youth

"God has said, forever blessed
Those who seek me in their youth;
They shall find the path of wisdom
And the narrow way of truth."

That is the significance of this closing chapter, or more properly of chapter xi. 7 to xii. 14, reading up as the section



"HAIL THE INCARNATE DEITY."

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does through the conception of life as a joy tempered by the anticipation of coming "days of darkness," and the decay of physical vigor in old age to the closing practical summation of the book's teaching, "Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." In spite of the efforts of some commentators to read a grossly epicurean or even sensual teaching into the passage, there can be no doubt that Koheleth is moralizing for youth's benefit. There is in fact an element of irony in the advice to youth to rejoice in itself and to follow its own desires, for while Koheleth does not stand by any means for the rigidly ascetic or barren, Puritanic view of what life ought to be—while indeed

he believes that there is nothing much better in life than a joyous activity and a sane use of the good gifts of God. Yet he is not in doubt for a moment about the wisdom of youth moderating its desires and banking the fires of its passions by remembering its Creator in the midst of its joys, and by carrying with it, if not a vision of a coming judgment day, at least a sober sense of sin's inevitable aftermath of sorrow.

The description in chapter 12 of the coming evil days,—the days of old age leading down to death, is not only hauntingly beautiful in some of its expressions, but probably Prof. Moulton is right in thinking that here the general prose form of the book gives place to a poetic sonnet. Even our English ears can detect a poetic rhythm in the passage, while its exuberance of metaphor is enough in itself to suggest poetry, and the passage has also in it considerable suggestion of Hebrew parallelism. From the viewpoints of minute interpretation, however, the section we are studying presents a more difficult task perhaps than any other part of the book. It seems quite clear to the present writer that in verses 1 to 5 (first part), we have a wonderfully metaphorical description of senile decay presaging death, and in the verses following, (5 to 7), an equally oriental description of death, while in the closing portion, (verses 8 to 14), we have an epilogue or perhaps a kind of postscript to the book summing up what the writer himself takes to be its message.

If we turn to the first of these three sections with its metaphorical descriptions of the characteristics of old age, we will find ourselves quite embarrassed by the exceeding variety of the interpretations offered. No less than seven different views have been taken as to what the key to the various metaphors is. We will confine ourselves to two of these views only.

1. The interpretation which suppresses the guiding thought of the description to be the conception of approaching death as an oncoming storm or sirocco.

Hence the metaphors of darkened sun, moon, and stars, the clouds not discharged by the preparatory rainfall, the fear of the door-keepers, the covering in terror of strong men (i.e., wealthy nobles), the maids leaving their work of grinding, while their wealthy mistresses who "look out of the window," close out the threatening sky by shutting the casement. Hence also the prudential closing of the doors, and the lowering sound of the grinding as the grinders pause in their work to listen to the rush of the wind, and the hushing of the "daughters of music" as the blackening sky gets on the singer's nerves.

2. The view according to which Koheleth is supposed to be giving a diagnosis of old age and its infirmities. It would occupy far too much space to interpret each verse in turn according to this view, especially since each commentator following it has his own views of what physical characteristics of old age Koheleth is referring to in his numerous metaphors. If we examine a few only of the metaphors it will bring out the variety of references supposed to lie in them as well as the general mode of interpretation used by these "anatomical" interpreters. Thus the first figure "While the sun or the light or the moon or the stars be not darkened" is, of course, on the anatomical view, a reference to the falling eyesight of old age, but by some it has been supposed that the terms "sun" and "light," etc., are symbols of happiness and the hereafter, Koheleth means by the "darkening" of this light the gradual falling of the joy of living that marks old age.

"In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble," has had a more