

The Bible's most improbable book, Ecclesiastes, gets Jewish commentary

By Richard Ostling
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What is the Book of Ecclesiastes doing in the Bible? This astonishing little masterpiece from ancient Israel struggles with concepts found elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Ecclesiastes is greatly perplexed that evil people often prosper while good ones suffer, and says that life sometimes seems to lack meaning or makes no sense. It asks, how do things fit together?

The issues are sifted, if not exactly answered, in "Ecclesiastes," the latest of the Jewish Publication Society's commentaries on biblical books. The series is excellent in quality, but pricey (this 87-page book costs \$34.95).

"Ecclesiastes" provides the Hebrew text, the JPS English translation, and an introduction and verse-by-verse comments from Michael V. Fox, professor of Hebrew at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison.

The famous opening about human existence is translated here, "Utter futility! ... All is futile!" Other understandings include "senselessness," "absurdity" and the King James Version's "vanity of vanities"—referring not to pride or ego but worthlessness.

The literal Hebrew means breath or vapor, Fox explains, and all these translations use metaphors to say that life

often defies reason and is incomprehensible and fleeting. That's the central motif the book struggles to comprehend.

The book's speaker, known as Koheleth or "the Preacher," struggles with the shortness of life, the futility of effort, the triviality of material goods, the vulnerability of wisdom and the apparent violations of justice. But "the irrationality of the world is the fundamental grievance," Fox writes.

As in Fox's "A Time To Tear Down and a Time To Build Up" (Eerdmans, 1999), this commentary disputes scholars from the past century who've seen Koheleth as a modern-style skeptic, pessimist or fatalist who embraces pleasure and scorns the rest of Scripture.

By that theory, the traditional beliefs in Ecclesiastes were tacked on by later rabbis to offset the bleak original, for example the book's summation: "Revere God and observe his commandments! For this applies to all mankind."

But in Fox's view, Koheleth is no nihilist. The speaker says that many things are worthwhile in life: moderate work and pleasure, love and friendship, gaining and using our limited human wisdom, seeking to be righteous, and fearing God and hoping for divine justice.

This complex biblical book

says that such things are often fleeting, limited and uncertain, but they "are enough to make life worth living," Fox says.

Fox acknowledges that the God of Ecclesiastes is quite different from other biblical portrayals. In line with Jewish tradition, the book sees God as absolute, transcendent, powerful, "unpredictable and rather dangerous." But unlike earlier biblical writings, Ecclesiastes expects no warm fellowship from its rather distant deity.

The God of Ecclesiastes may be "rather steely and remote," Fox says, but he is "not hostile." Koheleth is committed to obedience to God's will, but counts on little divine help or reward in return.

Fox vigorously disputes some of the JPS translations. He finds it "highly misleading" to imply that Koheleth was a modern-style doubter who looked with disdain upon conventional religious beliefs, which the JPS does by attributing such statements to others, sometimes by addition of quotation marks.

Fox insists that Koheleth never says conventional beliefs are in error, nor does he seek to eliminate or modify them.

The speaker "believes in divine justice but sees it contradicted, and - rather than working out a smooth solu-

tion as a theologian might, or rejecting the principle as a skeptic might - Koheleth throws up his hands in frustration."

Fox thinks the book's pious summation may well come from the book's original writer, who looked upon Koheleth's musings from the standpoint of conventional belief. He thinks that even for Koheleth, revering God and following his will "are bedrock truths that experience can collide with but not dislodge."

Note: JPS has also issued commentaries on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Esther, Jonah and the Haftarat (liturgical readings from prophets).

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