

TO MOTHER

THE BOOK OF KOHELETH IN RABBINIC INTERPRETATION

SUBMITTED

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PREFACE

PREFACE

The general subject of this thesis is "The Book of Ecclesiastes in Rabbinic Interpretation, limited to the Midrash Rabba, Midrash Yalkut, and a few passages in the Talmud and Mishna bearing on the authorship and cannonization of Koheleth. The full exposition of the subject would mean a complete survey and study of all rabbinic literature dealing with the subject of Ecclesiastes. But, due to limited time, it was impossible for the writer to attempt a complete survey of the field. My work consisted in gathering materials from the above-mentioned sources, classifying, sifting and arranging them according to ideas rather than to any other method, for the sake of a clear and interesting presentation of the subject-matter. My work also consisted in ascertaining clearly and stating in simple, direct language the sayings of the rabbis. Where there was a difference of opinion, the varying views were noted and presented. I have let the rabbis have their own say about the book of Koheleth, in their own words, and even their own phraseology, so far as the English idiom would permit.

I relied on G. A. Barton's critical and exegetical commentary for the translation and interpretation of the text; as well as for the historical background of Koheleth. From David Christian Ginsburg, I was aided in obtaining all the rabbinic references to the explanation of the title, meaning and canonicity of the book, checking each reference and ascertaining the translation.

A separate chapter showing how the rabbis did away with

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the Epicureanism of Koheleth was not included in the thesis; but the opinion of the rabbis will be seen in almost every step of their interpretation of the text. However, it might be well to give here one isolated example of the general method with which the rabbis operated, which will show at once their attitude toward Koheleth's doctrine.

The recurring theme of Koheleth is his continuous search for the most durable satisfactions of life. Each inquiry into the nature of life's possibilities for happiness leads him into a dark pessimism. Each quest for permanent joy leads him to the conclusion that the only true satisfaction that man can get out of experience is a physical one. Man's existence is monotonous, wisdom is futile, even sensual pleasures are vanity. Yet the most satisfying of all experience lies in the fleshy ease and joy which man plucks from the tree of life.

The rabbis fought against this Epicureanism advocated by the Oriental author. Using their usual methods of interpretation and guided by the belief that no canonical book could be heretical, the rabbis explained away completely any doctrine of hedonism which one might obtain from a study of the book. This will be seen fully in the body of ^{the} thesis. But here let us see how the rabbis reacted to the verse "Rejoice O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy prime, and walk in the ways of thy heart and the sight of thy eyes (11:9)." The Midrash says, in commenting on this verse "the wise men wanted to put away the book of Koheleth because it contained words tending toward heresy. They said

*This paragraph
properly belongs
to discussion
page 13.*

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this (heresy) is seen from the wisdom of Solomon, who said 'rejoice, O young man, in thy youth', though Moses warned 'that ye go about after your own heart'; but if restraint is removed there will be neither justice nor judge. Just as Solomon said 'but know that for all these things God will bring thee into Judgment'. Thus did Solomon speak beautifully. The Midrash, in quoting another comment on this verse, says "Rabbi Chiyya said 'this reminds me of one (a criminal) who fled from the executioner, who ran after him (the criminal). The people said to the fugitive 'run but a little so that you will not have to go back so far'. This is the meaning of 'but know for all these things God will bring thee into judgment'". The Midrash also gives us another comment on this verse. "Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said ' it is like one who swims in a river and those that come after him say 'do not go out too far; so that you will not be too tired to come in ', and this is the meaning of the above."

(1) Midrash Rabba, 11,9

(2) " " , 11,9

(3) " " , 11,9

The Historical Background

The Historical Background of Koheleth

The results of modern scientific historical study have shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that Solomon is not the author of Ecclesiastes. That Solomon is introduced in a literary figure has already become an axiom. The language of the book shows that it belongs to the latest stage of linguistic development of the Bible. The older Hebrew forms and constructions are changed and confused. Further, late developments similar to those of the Mishna are found: as well as Aramaic words and constructions. There are at least two Persian words used and in one case the influence of Greek usage can be seen.

The problem which has confronted the modern interpreters of the Bible is whether the book was written in the Persian or the Greek period; though most recent scholars hold that it was written during the Greek period. There are no signs of a Greek influence present in the book and the almost unanimous opinion is that the author was a Palestinian.

Ecclesiastes was written about the last of the third and the beginning of the second century. It fits well into this period. The century following the death of Alexander was a trying one for the whole East and particularly for Palestine, the possession of which formed a bone of contention between the Ptolemies and the Seleucidae. During part of the struggle between these two powerful entities, Palestine had to pay taxes to both. It suffered intensely from the ravages of war and the oppressions by Antiochus III who conquered Palestine about 198 B.C. ⁽¹⁾

It was during these difficult and trying years that the

(1) Barton, Ecclesiastes, Section 13, pages 58-65.

of Ecclesiastes
book/was written by one, who, by assuming the literary character of Solomon, held high hopes that the book would gain wide currency. His wish was gratified. We can only guess that because of its extreme popularity the book was ultimately canonized; accepted as a holy work, in spite of its obvious heresies.

However, the rabbis did not reason historically or logically in considering the authorship and canonization of Koheleth, as we shall now see.

Authorship and Canonicity

Authorship of Koheleth

Why was the book called Koheleth, ask the rabbis. Because Koheleth means preacher, and Solomon got this name by virtue of the fact that his discourses were given before the congregation (baKahal).⁽¹⁾ Rashi says that Koheleth means gatherer or acquirer of wisdom, and Solomon is called by this name because he gathered or acquired wisdom; just as he is called elsewhere "gatherer son of Jakeh" (Proverbs 30:1), because he gathered or acquired all the wisdom, and gave it out again.⁽²⁾ Ibn Ezra says that Koheleth means accumulated wisdom, and this name was given to Solomon because wisdom was accumulated in him.⁽³⁾

Canonicity of Koheleth

In Mishna Yadayim (Perek 3, Mishna 5), the following discussion takes place. Upon the declaration in the Mishna "that all the books of the Bible pollute the hands (that is, are inspired, or canonical) including the Song of Songs and Koheleth, Rabbi Judah said 'the Song of Songs does not pollute the hands, but about Koheleth there is a difference of opinion'; Rabbi Jose said Koheleth does not pollute the hands, and the difference of opinion is about the Song of Songs. Rabbi Simeon said that Koheleth is one of those points upon which the decision of Beth-Shammai is more lenient and Beth-Hilell more rigid. Then Rabbi Shimeon ben Azzai said, I have received it from the mouth of the seventy-two elders, at the time when Rabbi Eliezer ben Azzai was appointed elder, that the Songs of Songs and Koheleth pollute the hands."

(1) Midrash Rabba 1,1

(2) Rashi Koheleth 1,1 (3) Ibn Ezra Koheleth 1,1.

In In the Talmud, where the same discussion is given, we are told (Megillah 7a): "Rabbi Mayer said that Koheleth does not pollute the hands, but there is a difference of opinion about the Song of Songs; Rabbi Jose said that the Song of Songs does pollute the hands, and the difference of opinion is about Koheleth; whereas Rabbi Simeon said Koheleth is one of those points upon which the decision of Beth-Shammai is more lenient and Beth-Hillel is more rigid. This is according to what Rabbi Joshua had said, Rabbi simeon ben Menasia submitted that Koheleth does not pollute the hands, because it contains Solomon's own wisdom. Whereupon they said unto him, 'and has he (Solomon) only indited this (Koheleth), and has it not long been said that he also apoke three thousand proverbs (I Kings 5:12), and said, too, do not add to his words? (Proverbs 30:6). What does this (וְאַתָּה), 'and he said', mean? If thou (Rabbi Simeon) wilt say he (Solomon) said it appropriately, having written down what he wished and kept back what he wished, then come and hear, do not add to His words (that is, to God's words.)".

In Sabbas 30b, it is recorded: "Rabbi Jehuda, son of Rabbi Samuel, son of Shilath, said in the name of Rab, the sages wanted to declare Koheleth apocryphal, because its statements contradict one another. And why have they not declared it apocryphal? Because it begins with words of the Torah, for it opens with the words, 'what advantage has man in all his labour wherewith he labours under the sun?(1:3)', and it is said in the school of Rabbi Jannai that 'under the sun' means that which is unprofitable for him; just as 'above the sun' denotes that which is profitable for him; it ends with the words of the Torah. for it

concludes with the words, ' In conclusion, all is heard; fear the Lord, and keep his commandments, etc (12:13)'.

In Vayikra Rabba, 161b, we read "the rabbis wanted to declare Koheleth apocryphal, because they found sentiments in it tending to infidelity".

In Talmud Shabbas 30b and Vayikra Rabba 161b we read: "And also the book of Proverbs, they (the wise men) wanted to declare apocryphal, because there are statements in it contradicting each other. And why did they not declare it apocryphal? They said, the book of Koheleth was not (declared apocryphal) because we have examined it and found its meaning; let us therefore here (the book of Proverbs) also examine more closely".

Why Did Solomon Write Koheleth ?

(1)

According to the Midrash, Solomon wrote the book of Koheleth to expose the emptiness and the vanity of all worldly pursuits and carnal gratifications; and to show that the real happiness of man consists in fearing God and obeying his commandments.

When young and joyful, Solomon was inspired to compose songs; when middle-aged and sober, he wrote wise sayings and proverbs; and when old and weary of life, he said that every earthly pleasure was vain and empty.

The Midrash also tells us how Solomon, who in his old age was seduced by his foreign wives to idolatry, became a preacher of righteousness. In Chapter 1, verse 12, Koheleth says, " I was king over Israel", that is, "and I am no more". On the basis of

(1) Midrash Yalkut, Koheleth, 1,1.

this, it was concluded that there was a time when Solomon was dethroned. Hence, the legend is told that when Solomon, elated with riches and wisdom, departed from the paths of the Lord, he was dethroned by Ashmodai, the king of the demons. He was expelled from his capital as an example of the effects of sin. Solomon then went about the provinces and towns of the land of Israel mourning over his guilt and saying, "I am Koheleth, whose name was formerly Solomon, who was king over Israel in Jerusalem, but through my sins have been driven from my throne and residence". Having confessed his sins, and having denounced the folly of attempting to find satisfaction in earthly pleasures, penitent Solomon was reinstated in the possession of his kingdom, where he died, at peace with God and man. (1)

In another version of the legend, we are told that King Solomon, as fugitive, came before the Sanhedrin, and declared that it was he who had been king over Israel. The Sanhedrin tested the truthfulness of his claim and they found it to be true. (2) Thereupon, he was returned to his throne in Jerusalem.

(1) Midrash Yalkut on Koheleth 1,12

(2) Talmud Gittin 68b

Koheleth's View of
Knowledge

Koheleth's View of Knowledge

Koheleth, representing himself in the character of Solomon, sets out to probe all experience that he might understand the nature of life and the universe completely. He seeks wisdom more than anything else but he finds in it no permanent satisfaction. Through his test of wisdom, he comes to the conclusion that it is futile, while ignorance is blessed. The more wisdom a man accumulates the more suffering and pain he invites (1:12-18). Yet "wisdom has an advantage over folly like the advantage of light over darkness" (2:13). Life is hard, the outlook is dark, the end is the grave; but it is well to face the reality with intelligence. The wise and the foolish will be reduced ultimately to the common level of dust and the memory of both of them will be obliterated by the same grim reaper. Hence it would be foolish for one to be overwise, to concentrate all energy to the search for wisdom. Life itself does not justify such a goal. For the ignorant and the foolish are more than often the inheritors and benefactors of the riches gotten through the efforts of the wise (2:13-21). Hence, the wise man has no advantage over the fool (6:8). Man can never grasp full understanding. His mind is limited in its powers to probe the universe. His heart is cursed with ignorance so that he can never learn or discover God's work from beginning to end (3:11; 7:23-24; 8:16-9:1). However, in practical life, wisdom does have its value. It is good when accompanied by an inheritance; it protects man even as money and it often saves life, and also leads to success. These are its common values (7:11,12,19; 9:15-18; 10:10). But even this is not always true. All is a matter of

chance. The wise do not always have bread; nor the intelligent, money; nor are those with knowledge always favored. Time and circumstance control the fortunes of man, even his physical necessities of life (9:11).

In short, life's problems are insoluble. Nothing can ever be fully known. It is foolish and futile for man to set up as his goal the complete understanding of life and the universe. His mind is limited, his heart full of ignorance. The only advantage of wisdom for man is that it leads him to face reality with a little understanding. Knowledge of his limitations will teach man that the only joys of life are those of sensation. Fate and circumstance are twin-forces which control puny man. He is powerless to rise above them. Hence, let him enjoy the sunshine while it lasts. Let him fill his short span of life on earth with joy, such as he can find. There is nothing beyond this universe. All of man's hopes should center on this world. If he is wise, he will pluck the best from the tree of life to brighten his days. This is the only shining light in God's creation.

Koheleth looks upon knowledge very pessimistically. Nowhere does he advocate the intense study of the Torah and the traditional laws. It is only natural to expect the rabbis to answer both the mood and the negations of Koheleth. And we will find that the rabbis explained away completely the harsh and chilling views of the pessimistic Preacher. As we shall see, when the Midrash has explained the "true" meaning of Koheleth, we shall find its harshness smoothed, its coldness warmed and its darkness converted into light.

The Rabbinic View of
Knowledge

The Rabbinic View of Knowledge

Koheleth's attack on knowledge was synonymous with an attack against the study of the Torah. And it is to the defense of the Torah, as well as wisdom, in general, that the rabbis rise.

Man does not know all; neither can he ever be filled completely with knowledge. "All the streams flow to the sea, but the sea is not full; unto the place where the streams flow, there they flow again."⁽¹⁾ The rabbis say " 'All the streams flow to the sea' (means that) all the wisdom of man is only in his heart; 'but the sea is not full' (means that) the heart is never filled (with wisdom)."⁽²⁾ The rabbis also give the following interpretation. " 'All the streams etc.' (means that) all the TORAH which a man learns is only in the heart, and just as the sea is not full, so the soul is never filled (with Torah)."⁽³⁾

It is not that man never rises above the knowledge of the past, as Koheleth firmly believes; rather, mean the rabbis, God's ways are never completely known. Each new discovery opens new paths of knowledge and the further discovery and understanding of these opens still newer ones. It is not a rediscovery of the old knowledge by a new and younger generation. It is the discoveries⁽⁴⁾ of the new on the basis of the old.

(1) Koheleth 1:7

(2) Midrash Rabba 1,7

(3) " " 1,7

(4) See Barton's commentary on verse under comment (1:7).

Koheleth says "There is a thing of which we may say: see (1) this is new ! Already was it in the ages which were before us". From this verse the rabbis deduce the idea that all the Torah and Laws were given to Moses at Sinai. To quote the Midrash "Said Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, this is to teach you that the Bible, Mishna, Halachoth, Tosefoth, Hagadoth, and all that a good scholar is destined to teach, already it was and it was given as the law unto Moses from Sinai". (2) According to this interpretation, everything was revealed to Moses in the Law, but it merely awaits discovery on the part of man. In this sense, we cannot say "see this is new".

Koheleth finds no permanent satisfaction in the pursuit of learning and the accumulation of knowledge. For him it is quite a futile task. But for the rabbis, learning formed the core and center of their lives. Its satisfaction was unquestionable and its value undeniable. The Torah and man's understanding of it is the greatest blessing that one can achieve. Its riches are inestimable and are worth more than all the material riches of life.

Commenting on the verse "All things are wearied,--no one is able to utter it,--the eye is not satisfied to see, nor the ear (3) filled with hearing", the rabbis say " words of heresy weary man." (4) A gain they say, "all things weary man. Even Torah wearies man when he first begins to study. A man comes in to study Torah

(1) Koheleth 1:10

(2) Midrash Rabba 1, 10

(3) Koheleth 1:8

(4) Midrash Rabba 1, 8

and they (his teachers) declare that which is impure, pure; and that which is pure, impure (thus confusing him and taxing his strength). But he (the student) does not know that the more they (his teachers) tax his strength, the sooner he will acquire the methods of Kal Vachomer, and Gezera Shava; and (the sooner he will learn) that which is impure and that which is pure, that which is prohibited and that which is permitted.⁽¹⁾ Thus, it is certain types of learning that really weary man without gain; but the pains that the study of the Torah and the laws bring are extremely worth while because such suffering brings learning as its reward. Even the forgetting of Torah is a blessing. In explaining the verse "And I gave my heart to search and explore with wisdom concerning all that is done under the heavens-- it is a bad business God has given the children of men in which to toil",⁽²⁾ the rabbis say "it is for the good of man that he learns Torah and then forgets it. For if man learned Torah and did not forget it, he would busy himself with Torah for two or three years and then turn to busy himself with his (secular) work and never return to the Torah again. But because man learns Torah and forgets it, he neither budes nor moves himself from the words of the Torah."⁽³⁾ The value of the study of the Law is also seen from the following remark: "Rabbi Hezekiah said in the name of Rabbi Simon bar Zavdi: he said, 'all the Torah that you learn in this world is nothing compared to the Torah (which you will learn) in the world to come. Because in this world a man

(1)Midrash Rabba 1,8

(2)Koheleth 1:13

(3)Midrash Rabba 1,13

learns Torah and forgets it but with regard to the world to come,⁽¹⁾
 what is written? 'I will put my Law in their inward parts'."

Torah thus is held out as a great reward which God dispenses to those who have finished their earthly course. Torah also has a value in that it saves one from Gehinnom. In this connection we have the following comment of the rabbis. "As it is said in Zechariah (10:9b) 'and they shall live with their children and will return'. They saved them from going to Gehinnom and they were saved by the merit of their children. Therefore, every man⁽²⁾ is bound to teach his son Torah to save him from Gehinnom."

But just as genuine knowledge of the Torah may save one, so pretense at knowledge of the Torah brings upon man the Divine wrath. "Rabbi Benjamin said this verse (Koheleth 4:1) refers to those who pretend to know Torah; though they know nothing. All the people call them expert in Scriptures and they are not. They wear the Talith like a scholar and Tefillin on their heads. God says 'I will punish them for pretense'. "⁽³⁾

Learning of the Torah is good, but greater is he who understands what Torah he has learned. The rabbis say "sweet is the light of the Torah and good to the eyes. Happy is he whose learning is as clear to him as the sun."⁽⁴⁾

From the above remarks of the rabbis we see that the attitude of the rabbis is quite the opposite from that of Koheleth. They do not always contradict Koheleth, however. There are times when they rabbis accept the cold reality of life and the effect of

(1) Midrash Rabba 2,1

(2) " " 4,1

(3) " " 4,1

(4) " " 11,7

knowledge on the individual . Commenting on the verse "For the much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases pain"⁽¹⁾, the rabbis say "all the time a man increases his wisdom, he increases in vexation; and all the time a man increases in knowledge, he increases pain. Solomon said :
'Because I increased in wisdom, I increased in pain'. "⁽²⁾

One of the rabbis looked upon Torah as an escape from life. In commenting on the verse "for who knows what is good for man in life, the number of the days of his vain life, for he spends them like a shadow; for who shall tell man what shall be after him under the sun"⁽³⁾, "Rabbi Pinchas said: 'since the days of man are vanity and their number is like a shadow, what pleasure has man from life except insofar as he busies himself with the words of the Torah, which alone are life'. "⁽⁴⁾

It is interesting to note also that the rabbis, in explaining away the doctrine of Epicureanism in Koheleth, substitute the joyous study of the words of the Torah for the materialistic joys, expression and implications of the text of Koheleth. The rabbis explain "I searched out in my heart how to stimulate my flesh with wine, while my heart was acting with wisdom, and to lay hold on folly until I should see what good there is for the children of men to practice under the heavens the few days of their life"⁽⁵⁾, as follows: "Solomon said ' I searched out in my heart how to stimulate my flesh with wine', that is, to stimulate my flesh with the wine of the TORAH; 'while my heart was

(1) Koheleth 1:18

(2) Midrash Rabba 1,18

(3) Koheleth 6:12

(4) Midrash Rabba 6,12

(5) Koheleth 2:3

(6) Koheleth 1,3

acting with wisdom', that is, with the wisdom of the Torah.

'And to lay hold on folly'-- Rabbi Yudan came before Rabbi Achah (and said) 'what is the meaning of that which written 'And to lay hold on folly'?'. He (Achah) said to him (it means) 'to lay hold on wisdom'.⁽¹⁾ Again, we see this method of interpretation in their comment on Koheleth 2:4-9. The verses read as follows: "I undertook great works; I built me houses, I planted in them every kind of fruit tree. I made me pools of water in order to water a plantation springing up with trees. I bought bondmen and bondmaids and had slaves born in my house; also I had many possessions of cattle and sheep--more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I collected for myself silver and gold, the treasure of kings and provinces; I provided me male and female musicians and the luxuries of the sons of men--all sorts of concubines(?)". "Said Rabbi Chiyya bar Nechemiah: 'And does this verse teach us only the wealth of Solomon? It does not speak of anything but the words of Torah. 'I undertook great works', (it says in Exodus 32:16) 'and the tables were the work of God'; 'I built me houses'-these are rows of students who sit in rows in the garden; according to the rabbis, this means the Midrash.' ' Rabbi Elie zer ben Azariah interpreted before the wise men in a garden in Yavneh (as follows) 'and was it a garden? But these are the students who sit in rows in the garden.' 'I made me gardens and parks'-these refer to the Great Mishnayoth like that of Chiyya Rabba and that of Rabbi Hoslayya Rabba and that of Bar Kappara. 'And planted in them every kind of fruit tree', this means the Talmud which includes them (Mishnayoth) all. 'I made me pools of water'-Rabbi Chiyya Rabba

(1) Midrash Rabba 2,3

said these are the sermons. 'In order to water a plantation springing up with trees'-these are the students who are studying. 'I bought bondmen'- this is the Holy Spirit. 'Also cattle and sheep'-these are the burnt offerings (Karbonoth). 'I collected for myself gold and silver'-these are words of Torah. 'And provinces'-these are the students who make judgment in Halacha. 'I provided me male and female musicians'-these are the Tosefoth. 'And luxuries'-these are the Aggadeth, which are the delightful parts of Scripture. 'All sorts of concubines(?)@these are the male and female judges."⁽¹⁾

Commenting on the verse "For there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and enjoy himself in his toil", the rabbis say "Every expression of eating and drinking which occurs in the scroll of Koheleth refers to Torah and good deeds."⁽²⁾ In its explanation of "A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor and he lacks nothing for himself of all that he desires, but God has not empowered him to eat of it, but a stranger eats of it-this is vanity and an evil disease", the Midrash quotes the incident of "Rabbi Abba bar Cahana who happened to come up to a gathering and heard Levi explaining this verse as follows: 'Wealth'-is he who is master of Mishna; 'honor'-is he who is master of the Toseftoth; 'And he who lacks nothing for himself of all that he desires'-they (the desires) are the Great Mishnayoth; 'but God has not empowered him to eat of it'-(means that) he is forbidden to teach from them; 'but a stranger eats of it'-(means that) a master of Talmud who declares the impure and pure; that which is forbidden and that which is permitted."⁽³⁾

(1) Midrash Rabba 2,4-9
(3) " " 6,2

(2) Midrash Rabba 2,24.

To take but one more example of this method of interpretation, the Midrash in commenting on "Cast thy bread upon the waters etc."⁽¹⁾ quotes the following: "Rabbi Bibi said, 'if you wish to do Zedakah do it with the words of the Torah—for water is not meant here, but words of Torah; as it says in Isaiah 55:1 'He who is thirsty, let him come for water'.⁽²⁾" Thus by the substitution of things that have to do with Torah or the Torah itself, the Rabbis succeed in explaining away the unorthodoxies of the text.

To sum up what has already been stated or implied in the quotations from the Midrash, we see that the rabbis find a permanent satisfaction in the study and accumulation of knowledge; that its acquisition is not futile. Though they see the reward and comfort of wisdom and search for understanding of the Torah, they are not unaware of the great pains which it entails. They do not say that man will some day know all that there is to be known, but they believe that man does build upon the past and progresses beyond it. God's ways are infinite, His manifestations are infinite, and yet man, as he develops, comes to know more and more of them. Wisdom and learning also have other practical values. They save man from Gehinnom; they are his reward in the world to come; they represent a great blessing to man. One rabbi considers the study of the Torah as a blessing in that it offers man an escape from life. Study and knowledge are even greater than words of Mitzvot. To quote the saying of

(1) Koheleth 11;1

(2) Midrash Rabba 11,1

Rabbi Meir commenting on Koheleth 2:13 "Just as the light has an advantage over darkness so the words of Torah have an advantage over the words of mitzvot⁽¹⁾".

From this study of the attitude of the rabbis towards knowledge and the manner in which they explained away Koheleth's negative attitude toward Torah, let us now turn to the study of another problem which faced the rabbis; namely, that problem created by Koheleth's denial of immortality.

(1) Midrash Yalqut 2,13

Koheleth's Questioning
of
Immortality

Koheleth's Questioning OfImmortality

Koheleth's search for truth concerning man and the universe also leads him to the problem of immortality. Again and again, his probings into life and reality lead him to the conclusion that man's hopes end with the grave. Just as the wise and the foolish have but one, end, so they suffer the same oblivion at death. "For the wise, like the fool, has no remembrance forever, inasmuch as in days to come both will have already been forgotten (2:16)." The destiny of man and beast is alike as far as man can actually see (3:19). There is no difference between the spirit of man and that of the beast. Both man and the beast are of the dust and both will return to the dust (3:20). Who knows whether man's spirit ascends upward to another world (3:21)? Who can know with certainty about a life after death? According to (1) Koheleth spirit and body seem to be the same thing. The whole of life is the phenomenal life. The greatest evil of life is that both the good and the wicked, the clean and the unclean, the righteous and the sinner have but one fate (9:2). Yet the living are better off than the dead. The living are sure of one thing, namely, death; while those who have returned to the sepulchre of the earth know absolutely nothing (9:5); their reward perishes with the passing of their memory into oblivion (9:5). There is no future world where rewards and punishments are meted out.

Koheleth is, of course, inconsistent. In chapter 12, verse 7,

(1) See Barton, page 109, comment on Koheleth 3:20.

he says "The dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it". Yet, this inconsistency is quite natural. As Barton says "one may have his pessimistic moods in which he questions whether anybody knows whether a man's spirit differs from a beasts's; he may hold that man's only good comes from enjoying the sunshine of his physical existence, brief though it be, and still, holding Koheleth's view of God (see e.g., on 9:1), write 'the spirit shall return to God who gave it'.⁽¹⁾" Just as his inquiries into all the other problems led him to the conclusion that the greatest good for man is to enjoy himself in life while still in his prime, so here too, Koheleth is led to the conclusion that since the grave is shrouded in darkness and no human mind can penetrate the veil of mystery which hangs between life and death it is best that man achieve what happiness he can out of the passing days. To quote Koheleth "And I saw that there is nothing better than that man should rejoice in his work, for that is his portion, for who can bring him to see what shall be after him?"⁽²⁾

(1) See Barton, page 192, bottom.

(2) Koheleth 3;22.

Rabbinic View
of
Immortality

Rabbinic View

of

Immortality

For the rabbis, Koheleth's questioning of immortality was the equivalent of its denial. Hence they brought to bear an array of facts and incidents based on life, which, to them, were valid enough to offset the skepticism of Koheleth. Not only did they bring proof to contradict Koheleth's views but they also interpreted the text so that no orthodox Jew could find fault with it.

First of all, the rabbis make clear their attitude as to the dual nature of man. The human being consists of two parts, the body and the soul. The soul comes from God and the body is made of the earth. Koheleth says "For the fate of the sons of man and the fate of the beasts-one fate is theirs. As is the death of one, so is the death of the other, and all have one spirit. Man has no advantage over beasts, for both are vanity. Both are going to the same place; both were from the dust, and both are going to return to the dust".⁽¹⁾ Here is the complete denial of the soul. The rabbis in commenting on chapter five, verse 10, say: "It is taught that at the time when the child is in the process of formation in the womb, three factors work in the process--God, the father and mother together. The father supplies the white parts of the body-the color, the brains, the nails, the white of the eyes, the bones and the sinews. The mother supplies the red parts of the body, of which is made the blood,

(1) Koheleth 3:19,20

the flesh and skin, and the black part of the eyes. But God gives ten things. 1) Spirit 2) Soul 3) a Glittering Face 4) Sight 5) Hearing 6) Speech 7) Swinging Hands 8) Walking 9) Wisdom, Understanding, counsel and knowledge 10) Strength. When the time of death comes, God takes his part and leaves the parts of the father and mother; whereupon the father and mother cry. God says to them 'Why are you crying? Have I taken anything of yours? I have only taken of my own'. They (the father and mother) say before God 'Master of the Universe, all the time your part was mixed with ours, our parts were protected from worms and maggots; and now that you have taken your part ours is cast to worms and maggots'.⁽¹⁾"

The Midrash also quotes the following parable to show the nature of man. "Judah the Prince said that his is analagous to a king who had a vineyard. He rented it to a tenant. The king said to his servants 'Go, cut my grapes and take my portion and place the portion of the tenant on his place". At once they went and did the word of the king. And the tenant began to wail and cry. The king said to him 'have I anything of yours? Have I not taken my own portion?' The tenant answered 'My Master, the King, all the while your part was with mine, my portion was protected against spoil ^{when} and robbery. Now that you have removed your portion, mine is open to theft and robbery!'. The King is God; the tenant, the father and mother of man. All the while that the soul is in man he is guarded. When he dies he becomes (the prey) of worms and maggots."⁽²⁾

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,10

(2) " " 5,10

In commenting on "And if he live a thousand years twice over and good he does not see-are not both (man and the foetus) going unto the same place?"⁽¹⁾, the rabbis say "the soul scorns worldly pleasures because it springs from a higher source than the material world."⁽²⁾ Again, commenting on "And the dust shall return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it",⁽³⁾ the Midrash say "similarly does God speak to man. 'See that my Dwelling, servants and the soul which I gave unto you are pure. If you return it (soul) unto Me as I gave it to you, it is well; if not, I will burn it in your presence.' All this (which God says) is in the days of his (man's) old age. But, if in the days of his youth. he sins then He punishes his body through flow of blood (Ziva) and disease."⁽⁴⁾

We see from these few selected quotations from the many saying of the rabbis that they state in no uncertain terms their belief in the dual nature of man. Man is not merely a product of matter. He also contains the finer stuff of God, the divinely-given spirit or soul.

Koheleth says that man and beast are alike. Both come from the dust and both will return to the dust.⁽⁵⁾ But the rabbis show that man and beast are different; they may have similarities but they are not the same. Commenting on the verse "For the

(1) Koheleth 6:6

(2) Midrash Rabba 6,6

(3) Koheleth 12:7

(4) Midrash Rabba 12,7

(5) Koheleth 3,20

fate of the sons of men and the fate of the beasts-one fate is theirs", the rabbis say "God said 'No', for concerning man I have decreed 'on the seventh day you shall circumcise the flesh of the foreskin; I have not decreed this concerning the beast. (Concerning the beast I have decreed) 'when a bullock, or a sheep, or a goat, is brought forth, then it shall be seven days under the dam; but from the eighth day and thenceforth it may be accepted for an offering made by fire unto the Lord (Leviticus 22: 27)'." ⁽¹⁾ Commenting on the verse "man has no advantage over beasts, for both are vanity", the rabbis ask the meaning of $\frac{1}{x}$, and they show that man and beast are different. They have a different physical appearance, different feet and skin. Man is buried in a grave; he has a coffin, is dressed in shrouds; none ⁽²⁾ of which things the beast receives. In this manner the rabbis proved to their satisfaction that man is constructed differently from the beast. They are not alike in their nature; nor is their fate the same.

Another problem which Koheleth offered to the rabbis is that of the remembrance of man; a problem which is to be slightly differentiated from that of the continued life of the soul in another realm, and hence is treated separately. In explaining the verse "for a living dog is better than a dead lion etc." ⁽³⁾, the Midrash quotes the following incident. "Hadrian asked Joshua bar Chananya 'Is it not true that I am better than Moses who is dead?' "Why?", asked Chananya. "Because", replied Hadrian, "I am alive and Moses is dead and it says in Koheleth 'a living dog is better than a dead lion'." Chananya answered 'can you, indeed,

(1) Midrash Rabba 3, 19

(3) Koheleth 9; 4

(2) " " 3, 19

command that during three days no man may kindle a fire?' Hadrian answered 'Yes'. Towards evening they mounted the roof of the palace. From there they saw smoke rising up in the distance. "What is that?", asked Chananya. Hadrian answered 'an officer lies sick and the attending doctor said that he cannot recover until he had drunk something warm'. Chananya feelingly replied 'you are still alive and your decree is broken and from the time that Moses, our Master, decreed 'thou shalt not pass fire throughout your habitations on the Sabbath' until now, no Jew has kindled a fire on the Sabbath. His (Moses') decree has not been broken these many years until now and yet you say you are better than he?'.⁽¹⁾

This argument for immortality is one which is based on the continuous memory of the dead. As long as the living remember the dead or the dead remain as an influence in the lives of the living they may be considered immortal. However, the rabbis give further proof of immortality in their discussion of death and the future world, which discussion will be discussed later.

The rabbis find particular difficulty in explaining away the denial of immortality found in the verse "for the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything; they have no longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten"⁽²⁾. The Midrash by way of explanation tells us the following happening. "Rabbi Chiyya the Great and Rabbi Jonathan went before the bier of Rabbi Simeon ben Jose ben Lakurya, and the talith of Rabbi Jonathan drooped down upon the coffin. Rabbi Chiyya said to him 'lift up your Talith, my son, so that the dead may not come before us and reproach us'. Rabbi Jonathan answered 'but Rabbi Chiyya does it

(1) Midrash Rabba 9,4

(2) Koheleth 9:5

not say 'the dead know nothing'.' Rabbi Chiyya answered 'my son, you know Scripture but you do not know its interpretation. The living refers to the righteous; for even in death they are called living. 'And the dead know nothing' refers to the wicked for even in life they are called dead.' "⁽¹⁾ This incident which the rabbis draw from actual experience forms for them the satisfying answer to the heresy of the text. The literal meaning of the verse in question is explained away and the immortality of man is strongly voiced, for the righteous are alive even in death.

Turning to the rabbis' views on man's relations to death and the idea of life after death, we will gain even more insight as to the ideas of the rabbis on this problem of the immortality of man and the soul.

(1) Midrash Rabba 9:5

Man's Relation To Death

It is the view of Kohelth that death is inevitable; that man is powerless to control the ultimate end of all life (8:8). The opinions of the rabbis differ on this point. Some say that the hand of death can be stayed, though not indefinitely; others believe to the contrary. Commenting on the verse "everything has a fixed season, and there is a time for every business under the sun. A time to be born; and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted"⁽¹⁾, the rabbis say "At the hour when a man is born it is decreed how many years he shall live. If he is worthy, he will live out the full number of years allotted to him; if he is unworthy his years will be shortened."⁽²⁾ Another rabbi commenting on this verse says that "when one is born, the Holy One, praised be He, waits for twenty years, (which is) his time to marry. If at twenty years, he has not married God says to him 'it was your time to bring forth children and you did not do this; therefore it is time for you to die'...."⁽³⁾ The views expressed here is that man's death is inevitable; and yet the length of life allotted to man by God can be achieved only by the worthiness of the man. Kohelth, chapter eight, verse eight, reads "no man has mastery over the wind, to restrain the wind, nor is he ruler in the day of death, nor is there a furlough in war, nor will wickedness effect an escape for its owners." The rabbis in commenting on this verse accepted the view of Kohelth. They believed too that "man has not the power to keep the angel of death from him. How do we know that the angels are spirits (ruchoth)? From Psalm 104:4 where it says 'who makest Thy winds messengers'.

(1) Kohelth 3:2

(2) Midrash Rabba 3,2

(3) 3,2

No man can say to the Angel of Death 'wait until I make my reckonings and then I will come'. Neither can man say ' I will substitute my son, servant of household'.⁽¹⁾ Here too it is obviously stated that man is subject to death and is unable to stay its inevitableness.

In the comment made by a rabbi on the verse "Cast thy bread upon the face of the waters, for kn many days thou shalt find it",⁽²⁾ we have an entirely different view expressed from the above one. The following incident is related by the Midrash. "It happened that one, Benjamin the Righteous, had charge of the communal fund for dispensing sustenance for the poor every Friday and a certain widow came to him and said: "Rabbi, sustain me". He said to her 'I swear, there is no charity money in the community chest'. She said to him 'my master, if you do not feed me, you will be guilty of destroying a widow and her seven sons'. He arose and fed her from that of his own so that she could sustain herself. Some days later, Benjamin The Righteous became sick and he was, in pain of death upon the bed. the Ministering Angels said to the Holy One, praised be He, 'Thou hast said that he who sustains one soul of Israel, it is as if he saved a world full. Benjamin The Righteous who kept alive a widow and her seven sons is about to die with but few years.' At that time the Ministering Angels sought mercy for him. They broke for him the decree of judgment and added twenty-two years to his life.⁽³⁾ Thus, according to this view the decree of death is broken and life is prolonged by

(1) Midrash Rabba 8,8

(2) Koheleth 11;1

(3) Midrash Rabba 11,1

acts of charity.

Another interesting story is told about King David, illustrating the same argument. King David asked God when he would die. God refused to tell him at first, but after much pleading David succeeded and was told that he would die on the Sabbath. The Sabbath on which he was to die came and David was studying the Torah. The Angel of Death came to David but could not touch his soul for his lips were uttering the words of the Torah. Thereupon, the Angel sought to distract David from his study of the Law by going into a tree close by. Hearing a peculiar, rustling noise, David's curiosity was aroused and seeking to satisfy it he started to climb the tree. Just then his lips were closed to the words of the Torah and the Angel of Death took his soul. ⁽¹⁾

Having accepted the view that death is inevitable, the rabbis found difficulty with the attitude of Koheleth toward life and death. Koheleth's pessimism led him to congratulate the dead more than the living. Death to him was release from the weary struggles and disappointments that filled man's days from the beginning to the end of his earthly stay. The righteous, more than often, came to unhappy ends; the poor were oppressed and persecuted. Hence he says "and I congratulated the dead, who have already died, more than the living who are yet alive. And (I regarded) as happier than both of them him who had never been born, who has not seen the evil work which is done under the sun" ⁽²⁾. This fact coupled with the knowledge that those who deserve long life are removed into oblivion all too soon, while the worthless

(1) Midrash Rabba 5, 10

(2) Koheleth 4:2, 3

are seemingly blessed with ripe old age, induced Koheleth to come to the conclusion which he did. The rabbis in answer to this problem posit another world where the balances are weighed and each man is judged according to his merits. In answering the question as to what constitutes the difference between the death of the young and the old, the Midrash tells us the following.

"Rabbi Nechemiah said: when the fig is plucked in time, it is good for the fig and good for the tree. But if it isn't plucked at the right time, then it is bad for both the fig and for the tree."⁽¹⁾ Thus it is that God trims human beings from the tree of life when in His judgment, the time is right. Illustrating the same point of view the following story is told. "Akiba and his pupils sat down under a fig tree. The owner came in the early morning and plucked the figs. They (Akiba and the students) said 'we will seek another place, for he suspects us (of wanting the fruit).' After this (incident), they chose another spot. The next morning the owner came again to pluck the figs and did not find the teacher and the pupils. He searched for them and found them in another place. He asked them why they had moved. They answered that they felt that he suspected them. He replied that he merely came to pluck the fruit before the sun rose for it was better thus. Akiba answered 'just as he knows when to pluck the fruit so God knows when to take the righteous from the world'."⁽²⁾

Another interesting answer to this problem is made in the following story. "When Rabbi Bun, the son of Chiyya, died, Rabbi eulogized him with the words 'sweet is the sleep of the toiler'. With whom is Rabbi Bun to be compared? To a king who had a vine-

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,11

(2) Midrash Rabba 5,11

yard and employed many workers to work in it. Among them was one worker more skilled than any other. What did the king do? He took this worker and went walking through the garden with him. When evening came the workmen came to receive their pay and the skilled laborer came with them; and the king gave him the full pay. The other workers were displeased and complained. They said 'we worked all day and he worked but two hours and the king gave him full pay'. The king answered 'why do you complain? This skilled worker accomplished more in two hours than you did a whole day'. So Bun, the son of Chiyya, learned more Torah in twenty-eight years than any distinguished student learned in a hundred years."⁽¹⁾ Here the argument takes a slightly different turn. It is not the length of days that count in a man's life; rather it is the intensity and the fullness with which his days are spent that must be the guiding attitude towards the shortness and the length of a man's life.

The rabbis, however, are not always at odds with Koheleth. There are times when they agree with him in substance if not in spirit. Commenting on the verse "a good name is better than good ointment, and the death-day, than the birth-day",⁽²⁾ the Midrash quotes the following explanation. "When one is born, man counts him as dead; when one dies, man counts him as living. When man is born, all rejoice; when he has died, all weep for him. But this is not right. Rather when he is born one should not rejoice, for we do not know whether or not or how he will stand up against the

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,11

(2) Koheleth 7:1

trials of life; whether he will be a righteous man or a wicked man; good, or bad. But when he has died men should rejoice that he has left the world with a good name and in peace. This is comparable to two ships sailing out on the broad sea. One sails out of the harbor and the other sails into the harbor. Over the one that sails out into the broad ocean, everyone rejoices. Over the one coming into port no one rejoices! There was a clever man present in the gathering who heard this and said: 'I see just the opposite of this this. Over the ship sailing out into the sea, no one should rejoice; for man does not know what its fate will be, or what obstacles it will encounter; but over the one coming into port everyone should rejoice because it has successfully withstood the dangers (of the sea). In like manner, we should rejoice over the dead who departed from the world with a good name and in peace.' This is the meaning of Solomon's words 'the day of death is better than the day of birth'.⁽¹⁾"

The rabbis also found difficulty in explaining the verse "he has made everything appropriate in its time; also he has put ignorance in man's heart, so that he cannot find out the work that God does from beginning to end".⁽²⁾ They comment on this verse as follows: "if it had not been that God had concealed from man the day of his death, he would not build a house or a vineyard for he would say 'tomorrow I must die, why should I stand and weary myself for others.' Therefore God hid from him the day of his death

(1) Midrash Rabba 7,1

(2) Koheleth 3:11

that he might build and plant. If he does not merit it for himself then he does it for others (who merit it). Thus it says (Leviticus 19:23) 'and when ye shall come into the land and shall have planted all manner of trees for food', God said to Israel 'although you will find it all filled with good, be careful in ⁽¹⁾ (your) planting that your sons after you may find it too'."

The following comment of the rabbis on the verse "as he came naked from the womb of his mother, he shall go again as he came; and nothing shall he receive through his labor, which he can carry in his hand" ⁽²⁾, is extremely interesting. The rabbis do not only accept the literalness of the text but go a step beyond. They say "just as a man comes into the world, so he leaves. Man comes into the world with a loud voice (crying) and he leaves it crying. He comes in with love and he leaves with love (caresses). He comes in wailing and leaves it wailing. He comes in without knowledge and leaves without knowledge." ⁽³⁾ According to this view, man leaves life neither with material substance nor with spiritual riches. All that he received from the world must go back into the earth. Another comment made on this verse also recognizes the plain text. "It is taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: 'when a man comes into the world his hands are doubled as if he would say 'the whole world is mine and I inherit it'. When he leaves it, his hands are spread out flat, as if he would say, 'I have inherited nothing from the world'." ⁽⁴⁾ For thus did Solomon say." The rabbis also

(1) Yalkut Shimoni 3,11

(2) Koheleth 5,14

(3) Midrash Rabba 5,14

(4) Midrash Rabba 5,14

found difficulty with the verse "and I congratulated the dead, who have already died, more than the living who are yet alive"⁽¹⁾. The Midrash offers the following comment. "Mar said 'when Israel sinned in the wilderness, Moses stood before God with how many prayers and he was not answered; but when he said, 'remember thy servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he was answered at once. And did not Solomon speak beautifully when he said 'and I congratulated the dead etc.'⁽²⁾" Another comment is as follows. "It is the custom of the world that when a king of flesh and blood issues a decree, at times it is kept and at times it is not; and if it is observed in his lifetime; in his death, it is not kept. But Moses, our Master, issued (decreed) how many decrees and established how many institutions and they have always been kept and will be forever and ever. Therefore did Solomon not speak beautifully when he said 'I congratulated the dead etc.'⁽³⁾" Thus, by taking the verse completely out of its context, the rabbis easily did away with its true meaning and gave it a pure orthodox significance.

We have seen what the rabbis thought of man's relation to death. Turning now to their concept of life after death, we will find them just as certain of man's existence in the world beyond as they were of man's life in this world.

(1) Koheleth 4:2

(2) Midrash Rabba 4,2

(3) Midrash Rabba 4,2

RESURRECTION

We have already stated that Koheleth believed that man's life ended with the grave. There in the earth time and nature would unite to destroy the body, which, broken into fragments, would soon melt away into the earth. This view challenged one of the main "dogmas" of rabbinic Judaism and the rabbis had to interpret the text with skill to make it mean the opposite of what it really said. Koheleth's view is clearly stated in the verse "for the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything; they have no longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten".⁽¹⁾ Though the rabbis do not make any statement appertaining to resurrection at this point, they do find occasion to express their views in their comments on the verse "when goods increase, eaters of them increase, and what profit has their owner except the sight of his eyes".⁽²⁾ The Midrash quotes the following incident. "A Cuthite asked Rabbi Meir 'do the dead live again?' Rabbi Meir answered 'Yes'. The Cuthite asked (further) '(are they) hidden or (are they) revealed (seen)?' Rabbi Meir answered '(they are) seen'. The Cuthite (then) said 'how can you prove it to me?'. Rabbi Meir replied ' (I will prove it to you) neither from Scripture nor from Mishna, but from life will I bring my proof. In our city there lives an Upright man to whom all entrusted their valuables, in secret, and he returned it to them openly. One man came to him and openly entrusted him with his valuables. How did this righteous man return it? Secretly or openly?' The Cuthite answered 'openly) Rabbi Meir (then) said 'may your ears

(1) Koheleth 9:5

(2) Kohelth 5,10

hear what your mouth utters. Men give their wives one white drop and God returns the white drop openly in the form of a beautiful, perfect creature. Is it not all the more so with those who die openly, that they should return seen (and) with a loud voice?' The Cuthite asked further ' do the dead resurrect naked or clothed?' Rabbi Meir answered 'clothed'. The Cuthite then asked 'how can you prove that to me?'. Rabbi Meir answered 'neither from Scripture nor from Mishnah but from life itself (will I bring proof to you). 'Did you ever plant beans?', asked Rabbi Meir . The Cuthite answered 'yes'. Rabbi Meir then asked ' did they have shells?'. The Cuthite answered 'no'. Then Rabbi Meir asked 'how do they appear after grown?' The Cuthite answered 'covered with a shell'. Rabbi Meir then said 'may your ears hear what your mouth has said. If beans which are sowed without shells appear with shells how much the more must the dead who are buried clothed, resurrect clothed.' (1)

The Midrash gives us a similar incident which occurred with Rabbi Ibbo and a Cuthite. "The Cuthite asked 'if the dead, once alive and clothed are destined to come back, who gives them food (while they lie in the grave)?' Rabbi Ibbo answered ' they take their food with them, just as Solomon said above 'with increase of goods comes an increase of desire (eaters)' ". (2)

"On another occasion a Cuthite asked 'if the dead, (once) alive, clothed and nourished are destined to return again, why do you cry for them?' Rabbi Meir, with great impatience, answered 'do not men, when they have lost something precious, break out in tears? Only with this difference, that the man who came into

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,10

(2) Midrash Rabba 5,10

the world with a loud voice, departs from the world with a loud voice."⁽¹⁾

Commenting on the verse "Also he is afraid of a height, and terror is on the road, and the almond-tree blooms, and the grasshopper is burdensome, and the caperberry is made ineffectual; for the man goes to his eternal house, and the mourners go around the street," the rabbis give us an incident similar to the above ones. "Hadrian asked Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya 'From where is man destined to sprout forth?' Rabbi Chananya answered 'From the bones of the spine.'⁽²⁾ And when Hadrian asked for the proof, Chananya gave him the proof.

There is a marked contrast between the views of Koheleth and that of the Rabbis. Where Koheleth sees that man's life ends with the grave, the rabbis see, what may be called, the beginning of a new life; where Koheleth's mind refused to reason beyond the seen realities of the universe, the rabbis projected another world where the unfairness of this life is squared and the wronged are righted. This view of the rabbis leads them, then, to a discussion of the righteous and the wicked in this world and their fate in the world to come.

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,10

(2) Midrash Rabba 12,5.

Kohelleth's View

of

The Righteous

and

The Wicked

The Righteous and The WickedKoheleth's View

Koheleth also raises the eternal question of why the righteous and the wicked are not rewarded according to their merits (9:11). There are righteous men who die because of their righteousness, and wicked men who prolong their life through their wickedness (7:15). Life is not according to Scripture which believes that the
 (1)
 righteous have a long life, while the wicked do not live out
 (2)
 half their days. Hence it is foolish for man to be over-righteous (7:16); rather let him be simple to a moderate degree (7:17). For in reality, there is not a man in all the world, righteous though he be, that does not sin (7:20-22). In his arraignment of Life, Koheleth cries out against the honor done to the wicked, who, having spent their days in the Temple, where ~~their~~ feet should never have been allowed to step, are buried with honor and their praises sung in the streets (8:10). Yes, the vanity of Life is that the righteous suffer in place of the wicked and the wicked prosper in place of the righteous (8:14). Yet the end of ~~both~~ the righteous and the wicked is the grave. Both will suffer the same fate ultimately (9:2). Since this life we must not ~~d~~espair (8:15). All seems to be disjointed; the rewards of the wicked and the righteous are reversed. The future is dark and no ray of light and no hope rests on the days yet to be. Hence, if man is

(1) Ex.20:12; Deut.4:40; Psalms91:16; Prov.3:2,16; 4:10.

(2) Ps.37:10; 55:23; 58:3-9; 73:18;

wise he will make the best of youth, eating and drinking while he can; for this pleasure which he gets no one can rob him of.

Rabbinic View

of

The Righteous

and

The Wicked

Rabbinic View

The rabbis attacked this negative attitude of Koheleth toward righteous living by positing another world. The rabbis saw that life was just as Koheleth pictured it to be. They could not deny that the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. They themselves were, no doubt, often victims of the same unjust state of affairs. However, they did not accept the conclusions and advice of Koheleth. Rather did they seek to satisfy the hunger for the just compensation of the righteous life by positing this other world. In the life beyond this, the disharmonies of this world are absent. Justice and righteousness form the pinnacles of heaven. Men must not judge life on the basis of this world alone, for this world is merely one act in the drama of life. In the world to come there is no suffering of the righteous; all who were just, true, noble and faithful receive the just award from the very hand of God Himself. This world is merely the test of the man. In the next world, those that passed the test will enjoy the happiness and bliss for which they yearned and labored here on the earth. In trying to answer the question of why the wicked prosper the rabbis made the following comments. Explaining the verse "and I said in my heart the righteous and the wicked God will judge, for a time (1) for every matter and for every work has He appointed", the rabbis say "God judges both the wicked and the righteous alike". (2) Again they say "every desire has its time and every time has its desire. In this world, man can do as he wishes, but in the next world (3) justice and righteousness rules." In commenting on the verse

(1) Koheleth 3:17

(2) Midrash Rabba 3,17

(3) " " 3,17

"for every matter has a time and judgment. For the misery of man is great upon him", the Midrash says "what man wishes to do in this world he may do, but in the world to come there is justice and reckoning." Thus man has the choice of acting according to his heart's desire. He may fulfill his every whim here on earth; the wicked may prosper, but they will pay the penalty in God's realm above. The rabbis say in commenting on the verse "and I said in my heart (it is) an account of the sons of men, for God to prove them and show that they are beasts" That God lets the wicked have peace in this world in spite of their vileness and reproach, in order that He might test them and select the judgment for them and to show that they are beasts at all times. Just as death befalls the beast and has no life in the world to come, so the wicked die and have no life in the world to come. For the acts which the righteous perform through affliction, fasting and suffering, I considered (why all this suffering?). In order that God might give practical proof of their piety, and to show to the nations their attachment to God. Concerning this, man may accept the following axiom 'he who comes to death through executing a good deed is not lacking in piety; he who comes to death through sin is not lacking in wickedness. Both leave the world perfect; one in his wickedness, the other in his righteousness. Thus the suffering of the righteous is but a demonstration of their loyalty to God and an example to the Gentiles of the right life.

The rabbis also explain that there is a difference between

(1)Midrash Rabba 8,66

(3)Koheleth 3;18

(2) Midrash Rabba 8,6

(4)Midrash Rabba 3,18

the souls of the righteous and those of the wicked. In commenting on the verse "who knows the spirit of the sons of men, whether it ascends upward, and the spirit of beasts, whether it descends downward to the earth", the rabbis say "are the souls of the righteous and the wicked the same? Both go on high. But the souls of the righteous ~~are~~ placed in a treasure-house, whereas the souls of the wicked are cast about on earth. As Abigail said to David through the Holy Spirit 'and the soul of my Lord is bound up in the bundle of life'. Is it possible that the souls of the wicked are too? ~~No~~, for) there is a teaching to tell us ' and the souls of thine enemies, them shall he sling out, as from the hollow of a sling (I Samuel 25:29)'." Again in commenting on this verse, the Midrash relates the following. "A woman asked Rabbi Jose bar Halafta a question..... 'What is the Din of the verse 'who knoweth that the spirit of t he beast goeth downward to the earth?' He (Halafta) said to her 'these are the souls of the wicked for they go down to Gehinnom--downward'." The rabbis say "if the righteous would not stand and heap up Mitzwoth and good deeds, would it not have been vain for Him to have created the world?"

The Midrash in commenting on the verse "if thou seest oppression of a poor man and the wresting of justice and right in a province, do not look in astonishment at the matter, for one high officer ~~is~~ watching above another, and there are higher ones above them," warns man not to envy the prosperity of the wicked.

(1) Koheleth 3:21

(4) Midrash Rabba 4,8

(2) Midrash Rabba 3,21

(5) Koheleth 5:7

(3) Midrash Rabba 3,21

For "if you see one who has power oppressing the poor, the weak and the righteous, the Everliving One is letting him experience abundance and peace, see in it the judgment of Gehinnom. For above these (wicked) are the (watching) angels and above the angels is God." ⁽¹⁾ God also judges Israel as a group. His method of judging all Israel is described to us in this beautiful Midrash, commenting on the verse "Sweet is the sleep of the laborer, whether he eat little or much, but the satiety of the rich does not permit him to sleep." ⁽²⁾ "A king had a fruit garden which he gave over to his son. As long as the son fulfilled the will of the father, the father would look about for a beautiful plant and when he found it, he would place it in the garden of his son. If the son, however, did not act properly, he would take the most beautiful plant of the garden which he sowed in his son's garden and tear it out. The king is God; the garden the world. And others say (the garden is) Israel. As long as Israel performs the will of God, God looks about for the most righteous men among the heathen, takes them and joins them to Israel -- for example, people like Jethro, Rechab, Ruth and Antoninus. But if Israel does not perform God's will, He separates a righteous man from Israel when such is to be found." ⁽³⁾

The rabbis warn Israel against the choosing of the easier path of wickedness and its apparent earthly advantages. In explaining "better is the end of a thing than its beginning", ⁽⁴⁾ they say " (this is so) because it say 'life and death have I

(1) Midrash Rabba 5,7

(2) Koheleth 5:11

(3) Midrash Rabba 5,11

(4) Koheleth 7:8a

placed before thee (Deuteronomy 30:19)'. Perhaps Israel will say 'since God placed before us two paths, we can go on which ever one we choose'. But there is a teaching that tells us 'and thou shalt choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19)'. It is comparable to one who sits at a crossroad and there are before him two paths. The beginning of one being level and its end thorny; the other, its beginning thorny and its end level. And he (who sits at the crossroads) says to the travellers: 'you see that the beginning of this road is thorny two or three strides and its end is level. And you see that the beginning of this other road is level for a few paces and its end is thorny.' Thus did Moses say to Israel 'you see that the wicked do prosper two or three days in this world and their end will be to be punished afterwards.' But ye shall not seek after evil'.⁽¹⁾ Thus far, we have seen a sort of vengeance in the words of the rabbis. But there is a spirit far more sublime and tender which emanate from their words. Thus in commenting on the versy "in the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; even this God has made to correspond to that in order that man should not find anything (that is to be) after him"⁽²⁾, the rabbis say "God created both the righteous and the wicked that they might atone, one for the other. God created both the poor and the rich so that one would care for the other. God created the Garden of Eden and Gehinnom so that they should deliver one from the other."⁽³⁾ In commenting on the verse "dead flies corrupt the perfumer's ointment; more valued is a little wisdom than the great glory of folly",⁽⁴⁾ the

(1) Midrash Yalkut 7,8

(4) Koheleth 10:1

(2) Koheleth 7:14

(3) Midrash Yalkut 7,14

Midrash gives us this interesting comment. "Since Isaiah, chapter give, verse fourteen, has not the plural עוֹנֵי but the singular עוֹן, Akiba concludes that it means that he who has not done one good deed more (than one evil deed), which might balance the scale in his favor, is carried to Gehinnom.⁽¹⁾ The Dorshe Reshumoth say that man is judged according to the majority (of his good or evil deeds). Ever should man consider himself as having as many merits as faults, or as many good actions as bad ones to his credit. If he has a majority of one good deed, happy is he, for he has balanced the scale in his favor.⁽²⁾ But if he has a majority of one evil deed, woe unto him." The rabbis in commenting on "all his striving is in order to be called a person of property",⁽³⁾ recognize the hardness of this life. The Midrash quotes "Jacob ben Kurschai (who) said: 'better is a handful of soul-rest in the world to come than hands full of soul-trouble and evil in this world'.⁽⁴⁾ It was the firm belief of the rabbais that goodness is destined to gain its just reward. They said "it is revealed and known before Him who said 'and the world shall be', that the righteous are destined to come into the hands of good deeds."⁽⁵⁾ Finally, their whole attitude may be summed up in the saying "happy are the righteous men to whom it happens according to the works of the wicked in this world; and woe to the wicked to whom it happens according to the righteous (in this world)."⁽⁶⁾

(1) They were ancient Jewish allegorists. See article by J.Z.

Lauterbach "The Ancient Jewish Allegorists in Talmud and

Midrash". J.Q.R. N.S. Vol.1 Number 3 (1911).

(2) Midrash Rabba 10,1

(6) Midrash Rabba 8,14

(3) Koheleth 4:6

(4) Midrash Rabba 4,6

(5) Midrash Rabba 7,15

Repentance
Kohелеth's and Rabbinic
View

Repentance

Although the rabbis believed that God condemned the wicked, they also believed that God would give them the opportunity to return to the right path of life. By repenting and coming back to the righteous life, the wicked could gain the grace of the Divine. While Koheleth sees no necessity for the wicked to repent, because of their apparent good fortune and the doubtful existence of another world, the rabbis warn the wicked to give up their evil ways in order that they might be saved from the wrath of God in the life after death.

Commenting on the verse "the crooked cannot be straightened,
(1)
and the wanting cannot be numbered", the rabbis say "in this world whoever is perverted in his ways can correct them; and whoever is wanting (in his ways) can change them. But in the world to come whoever is perverted in his ways will not be able to correct them and whoever is wanting in his ways cannot change (them). There are many of the wicked who were companions in this world. One of them hastened and repented during his life, before his death; and one did not repent before his death. The one who repented in his life merited to stand on the side of the group of the righteous; and the other stood on the side of the group of the wicked; and he saw his companion and said 'perhpas there is favoritism in this world (future world),' woe to that man (who makes this statement). ' He and I were (companions) in the world together. For we were as one and we stold as one, plundered as one; and together we did all the wicked deeds which are in the world. Why

(1)Koheleth 1:15

is this one on the side of the group of the righteous and the other on the side of the group of the wicked?' He says to him 'fool (of the world), you were disgraced after your death three days and they did not place you in a coffin, but with ropes did they drag you to the grave. 'The maggot is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee (Isaiah 14:11)', and thy companion saw thy disgrace and swore to turn from his evil path and he repented as a righteous man. And his repentance enables him to ~~make~~ here life, honor, and a share with the righteous. Why all this? You had the power in your hand (to ~~repent~~) and if you had repented it would have been well with three.' And he (who failed to repent) says to them ' permit me and I will go and repent.' Then they (that repented) say to him 'O fool (of the world) do you not know that this world is like the Sabbath and the world from which you come is like the eve of Sabbath? If man does not prepare on the eve of Sabbath, what will he eat on the Sabbath? And do you not know that the world from which you come is like dry land and that this world (future world) is like a sea? And if one does not prepare (for) himself on dry land what will he eat on the sea? And do you not know that this world is like a wilderness and that the world from which you come is like (settled) inhabited land and if one does not prepare himself in the inhabited land what will he eat in the wilderness?' At once he (who failed to repent) says 'permit me to see the ~~honor~~ (glory) of my companion.' And they (who repented) say to him ' fool (of the world) we are commanded (from the mouth of God) by the Mighty One that the righteous shall not stand in the

midst of the wicked and the wicked shall not stand in the midst of the righteous; nor the pure by the side of the impure, and the impure on the side of the pure; and regarding that which we were commanded concerning this gate, as it is said 'this is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter into it (Psalm 112:10)'. At once he (who failed to repent) rent his garments and plucked his hair; as it is said 'the wicked shall see and be vexed; He shall gnash with his teeth, and melt away; the desire of the wicked shall perish.'." ⁽¹⁾

The rabbis believed that "all the while a man lives, God keeps open for him Repentance-- that is, God hopes that man will repent." ⁽²⁾ On the other hand "if the wicked has died (without repenting), then his hope is according to the verse in Proverbs 11:7, 'when a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish'." ⁽³⁾ The rabbis give a parable to illustrate this. There were three men who were imprisoned. A breach was made in the wall of the prison, through which two of the prisoners escaped. The third prisoner refused to escape and was punished by the guard. Similarly repentance is the breach in the wall ~~of~~ ⁽⁴⁾ sin), through which the wicked man may escape from destruction. The Midrash says "God has patience with the wicked in this world for three reasons. Perhaps they will repent; perhaps they will perform mitzvot; for which God will pay them in this world; perhaps good children may spring forth from them as happened with Ahaz who had a good son in Hezekiah; and Ammon who had a good son in

(1) Midrash Rabba 1,15

(2) Midrash Rabba 7,15

(3) Midrash Rabba 7,15

(4) " " 7,15

Josiah; and Shimei who had a good son in Mordecai." ⁽¹⁾

In commenting on the verse "at all times let thy garment be white, and let not oil be lacking for thy head", ⁽²⁾ the rabbis say "it is taught, 'repent one day before your death'. Thereupon the students asked Rabbi Eliezer 'does man know then when he will die, that man might repent?' "No! all the more," answered Rabbi Eliezer, 'should man work for his betterment every day; for perhaps, the following day he might die; and all his days should bind him in repentance; therefore it says 'at all times let thy garments be white'." ⁽³⁾ The Midrash also quotes this beautiful statement of the rabbis, commenting on the verse "better is a palm of the hand full of rest and the hollow of two hands full of toil and the desire of wind", ⁽⁴⁾ it is told that "God said 'better is repentance and good deeds in this world than all life in the world to come; for the future world can only come through the strength of this world.'" ⁽⁵⁾ In explaining the verse "for whoever is joined to all the living, there is hope (for him), for verily a living dog is better than a dead lion" ⁽⁶⁾, the rabbis say "for as long as man lives there is in him hope and trust to repent; but when he is dead, his hope is destroyed." ⁽⁷⁾ The rabbis

(1) Midrash Rabba 7,15

(2) Koheleth 9:8

(3) Midrash Rabba 9,8

(4) Koheleth 4:6

(5) Midrash Rabba 4,6

(6) Koheleth 9:4

(7) Midrash Yalkut 9,4

also believed that man deludes himself as to the nearness of repentance and death as well as their distance. In commenting on the verse "when I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the t^{ail} that is done upon the earth-for both day and night he sees no sleep with his eyes", they say "two things which are good for man are near to him and far from him; far from him and near to him. Repentance is near to man and he holds it far; and it is far (from him) and he holds it near. Death is near to him and he holds it far, and it is far from him and he holds it near."⁽²⁾

1) Koheleth 8:16

2) Midrash Rabba 8,16