CHAPTER XXVI

QOHELET'S VIEW OF DIVINE RETRIBUTION

The original sage called Qohelet (Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher) bases his teaching on personal experience—what he himself has seen and understood. And the thinking is renowned for what is regarded as its severe and sustained skepticism about a wide spectrum of biblical belief. Since retributive divine justice is one of the basic tenets of that belief, and indeed one of the central themes of the entire Bible, his cynicism when he comes to examine it is to be expected. He does not hesitate, in fact, to speak in certain places of the righteous and the wicked meeting an identical fate, while in other passages he even turns the principle of appropriate retribution upside down.

Any dealing with the issue of retribution in the book of Qohelet has to take into account interdependence of contrasting arguments of individual units in the light of their unifying thematic and stylistic features. Qohelet contains some implicit modes of expression, which extend beyond the book and can only be interpreted by taking the whole religious background into account. Given the state of the passages with which we are concerned and the diversity of opinions concerning them, we shall divide our analysis into two parts: 1. passages dealing with divine justice; and 2. a critical assessment of these passages and their interpretation.¹


1.1 All Human Beings Are Faced by the Same Fate: Death (1:12–2:26)

In this passage Qohelet presents himself as a king in Jerusalem, and as one who is eager “to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (cf. 1:12–13). He states his views on the meaning and purpose of human life in the first person singular. In summarizing (in 1:14) his teaching that there is no lasting happiness or reward for human beings, he uses his most characteristic word: hebel, ‘breath, vapour, vanity.’ He says: “I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.” From 2:12 onwards he touches directly upon the question of justice within the world order, and considers the relative worth of wisdom and folly (2:13–17). Qohelet recognizes “that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (2:13), but painfully acknowledges “that one fate comes to all of them” (2:14); “…How the wise man dies just like the fool!” he exclaims (2:16). He finds another painful instance of injustice in the fact that “sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it” (2:21).

In the concluding verse (2:26), however, Qohelet declares that God deals differently with the righteous and the wicked: “For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God.” Because this statement is reminiscent of the traditional retributive principle, some scholars conclude that it is a later gloss, but others affirm that it is not concerned with the principle of retribution but simply with divine activity uninfluenced by humans. Thus they see no reason not to attribute the passage to Qohelet.2

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2 A simple statistic demonstrates the centrality of this word for Qohelet. It occurs 73 times throughout the whole of the Hebrew Bible, and 38 of them are in the book of Ecclesiastes.

3 See G. A. Barton, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 84; O. Eissfeldt, Einleitung in das Alte Testament (3rd ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1964), 677; A. Lauha, Kohelet, 58. O. Eissfeldt suggests that 3:17; 7:18b, 26b; 8:5, 12b, 13a; 11:9b; and 12:7b are also later additions. A. Lauha, Kohelet, 7 (“Einleitung”), attributes to a later hand the following passages: 3:17a; 5:18; 7:26b; 8:12b, 13; and 11:9b. See also E. Podechard, L’Ecclesiaste, 160–162 (“Introduction”) and his commentary on the verses mentioned. On p. 162 he says: “... Si les versets qui affirment l’existence de la rétribution sont de Qôheleth, son oeuvre échappe difficilement au reproche de contradiction et l’incohérence.”

4 See K. Galling, “Kohelet-Studien,” ZAW. NF 9 (1932), 289; idem, Prediger Salomo, 57; H. W. Hertzberg, Der Prediger, 94.