CHAPTER FOUR

SCEPTICISM AND APOCALYPTIC

"The words of Qoheleth son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, Qoheleth says. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity! For all his toil, his toil under the sun, what does man gain by it?"

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3.

"For in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes Judah and Jerusalem, I am going to gather all the nations and take them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; there I intend to put them on trial for all they have done to Israel, my people and my heritage."


As post-exilic Israel continued to languish in subject obscurity, impotent as either a political or economic force, the tensions posed by the contrast of this reality with what was popularly supposed to be the status of the chosen people of God gave rise to some reactions bordering on despair. Certain of the reactions which came to the brink of despair, but refused to plunge over it, constitute landmarks in the history of ideas. One of these landmarks is established by the urbane reflections of "the preacher" (Qoheleth). These reflections (The Book of Ecclesiastes) include an emphatic rejection of the belief in the existence of any general solution to the economic problem. A second landmark, the prophecies of Joel, signals the entry of a new perception in Jewish thought. Faith, Wisdom, the Law, or Mediation cannot singly or together prove decisive in the restoration of Israel. According to the new perception, only a decisive (apocalyptic) intervention by God himself will give Israel mastery in its contest with scarcity and the depredations imposed by surrounding peoples. Qoheleth and Joel, in their radically different ways, are both manifestations of a people near the end of its tether.

QOHELETH

Viewed from the perspectives of earlier biblical writing and of a deal that was come, Qoheleth is essentially a "ground clearing" exercise. In particular, the author endeavours to purge Jewish thinking of some of the alien elements it had acquired during the centuries in the Land. He does not hesitate to give the lie to the deuteronomistic Solution by Observance of the Law or to the old Solution by Wisdom. There are strong affinities
with the *Book of Job*. As Scott remarks: "...the authors of Job and Qoheleth are wise men in revolt against the unexamined assumptions of their colleagues."¹

The empirical invalidity of the blessings and curses associated with *Deuteronomy* are observed with a marked irony: "The sinner who does wrong a hundred times survives even so. I know very well that happiness is reserved for those who fear God, because they fear him; that there will be no happiness for the wicked man and that he will only eke out his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. But there is a vanity found on earth; the good, I mean, receive the treatment the wicked deserve; and the wicked the treatment the good deserve. This, too, I say, is vanity." (Qo.8:12-14). Elsewhere, he writes: "In this fleeting life of mine I have seen so much: the virtuous man perishing for all his virtue, for all his godlessness the godless living on." (Qo.7:15-16). The Solution by Wisdom is given similar shrift: "I see this too under the sun, the race does not go to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; there is no bread for the wise, wealth for the intelligent, nor favour for the learned; all are subject to time and mischance." (Qo.9:11).

Qoheleth also dismisses certain of the traditional ends or goals of Jewish life as vacuous. He advises his readers to avoid concern with matters of posterity and geneaological succession (Qo.2:18-23; 4:14-16; 6:1-3). Again, he discounts the notion that survival to an old age is a blessing (Qo.12:1-8). The accumulation of capital in either real or monetary form is another vanity. Even Solomon (with whom the author identifies, as a literary fiction) found no ultimate satisfaction in his wealth (Qo.2:4-11). Far from being a source of enjoyment, possession of capital gives rise to personal cost (Qo.5:11). Beyond this, those who aim at accumulation find themselves in a perpetual state of unsatisfied desire: "He who loves money never has money enough, he who loves wealth never has enough profit." (Qo.5:9, see also, 4:8). This portrayal of the capitalist mentality by Qoheleth is the same as that of Aristotle, before him, and afterwards, of Karl Marx.²

Adoption of any one of the above goals involves the individual in attachment to future utilities. Against this, Qoheleth counsels that such utilities should be discounted heavily. He advises concentration on immediate experience which is necessarily ephemeral. Repeatedly, he returns to the theme that eating, drinking, and working are the ends to be sought by the rational man. These are the activities ordained by God