GOD IN THE BOOK OF QOHELET: A REAPPRAISAL OF QOHELET’S PLACE IN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

by

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1. Introduction

Is the God of Qohelet the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? W. Zimmerli’s response was affirmative and considered Qohelet to be a “Mensch des Alten Testamentes”, who accepted “die Aussagen, die ihm in der Gottesaussage Israels begegnet sind”. Concerning the same question, A. Lauha stated: “sein Gott ist nicht der Gott des israelitischen Glaubens”. These two contradictory opinions mark the extremes between which the discussion on Qohelet’s theology takes place. D. Michel’s recent survey of the investigation into the book of Qohelet gives the impression that views like that of Lauha now prevail in the discussion. These views record a split between Qohelet’s image of God and the God of the other books of the Old Testament. The God of Qohelet would be a “remote God”, an “Urheber”, who can no longer be understood as a “Thou”, who elected Israel and revealed himself to his people.

Is this vision correct? To me it is not convincing. In this article I shall present some new arguments in favour of the view that the theology of Qohelet is located within the mainstream of the Old Testament.

I shall start this investigation with a classification of Qohelet’s statements about God. This arrangement of Qohelet’s thoughts about God

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1 I should like to express my gratitude to Dr Janet Dyk, who gave me valuable suggestions for the English translation.
4 *Qohelet* (Darmstadt, 1988), pp. 97ff.

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might provoke the misleading suggestion that Qohelet offers a systematic theology. Therefore, as a second step, the principal statements about God are related to their context and to the contents of the whole book. Only then is it possible to take a final step: the determination of the position of the book of Qohelet within Old Testament theology.

2. A classification of Qohelet’s statements about God

The roughly forty statements about God in the book of Qohelet can be classified into six groups:

a. God is the Creator and Giver of all things

It is one of Qohelet’s principal convictions that all things are created and bestowed by God. Often, this idea constitutes an aspect of other statements about God which will be mentioned later on, but because of its importance, I distinguish it independently.7 God is the Creator (xii 1), the Giver of the רוח (ruah) to live (xii 7) and of lifetime (v 17, viii 13, 15, ix 9). He is the one who “makes” everything, i.e. directs history (iii 11, 14, vii 13, viii 17, xi 5). He has made the world and man “fair” and “upright” (iii 11, vii 29). He grants wealth and the possibility to enjoy (ii 24-6, iii 13, v 18, vi 2). However, God is not only responsible for the good things, but also for the evil, like bad days (vii 14), the impossible task of searching for insight (i 13, iii 10, 11)8 or the incapacity to enjoy (vi 2).

b. God has to be respected

It befits man as a created being to remember his Creator (xii 1). God does not permit man to change anything of his divine work, rather man is to adopt an attitude of “fear and trembling” (iii 14). Because God is in heaven and man on earth, one ought to be cautious, especially in speaking to God (iv 17, v 1, 3, 5, 6). To fear God implies not to fall into the extremes of being too just and wise or being too wicked and foolish (vii 18). The advice to obey the king is motivated by the oath sworn to God (viii 2).9 In viii 12b-13 the fear of God is contrasted with the רָֽשָׁה and clearly has a religious-ethical meaning.

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7 This idea was especially stressed by Müller (n. 6).
8 I understand the ‘תָּלָם in man’s heart as the conscience of past and future, which might be understood as the conscience of eternity; cf. H.W. Hertzberg, Der Prediger (Gütersloh, 1963), pp. 106-8; Zimmerli (n. 2), pp. 166-8; Michel, (n. 3), pp. 61-3.
9 I do not think Qohelet is referring to God’s oath to the king, as Hertzberg stated