



## The Faith of Qoheleth

ROLAND E. MURPHY, O. CARM.

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

This essay may fittingly begin with a reminiscence about the great German Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad. The writer was attending the meeting in Bonn of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament in the summer of 1962. All such gatherings are an occasion of social as well as professional interest. Scholars meet each other, and the names of authors come to be associated with the persons themselves. The present writer was conversing in a corner with Rolf Rendtorff when von Rad entered the foyer of the building where the sessions took place. Because Rendtorff was his former student, von Rad joined our conversation. This was an opportunity to ply the veteran scholar with questions. So I asked him why he had introduced Qoheleth (better known as Ecclesiastes) under the rubric of Skepticism in the first volume of his *Old Testament Theology*.<sup>1</sup> I went on to say that Qoheleth was really a person of great faith. His eyes sparkled, and he said, "Of course!" The rest of the conversation was on the relationship between faith and disbelief, trust and skepticism, as von Rad easily defended (and developed) his point of view.

Unfortunately, I have no real memory of von Rad's words. But this is a small matter because he went on to write of Qoheleth in his *Wisdom in Israel*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the important point is the juxtaposition of faith and skepticism—the fact that skepticism and agnosticism (without the nuances that these words have acquired in modern thought) are not necessarily opposed to faith.

If we are to assess Qoheleth's faith we must begin with his world view and his understanding of God. Hence a review of some key ideas in his work is necessary. Secondly, is the concept of faith with which the reader operates broad enough to include that of Qoheleth? In other words, what is faith (the word itself does not occur in his book)?

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 Vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 1.453-59.

<sup>2</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 226-37.

### I. THE MIND OF QOHELETH

We can discover the thoughts of this man only from his book, for he is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Moreover, we propose to accept the book as reflecting *his* thought, without any glosses and additions by later persons who would have sought to soften his doctrine (the alleged additions were a singular failure if they were supposed to have the effect of toning down the skepticism and other "isms" which have been found in the work!). The only exception to this is the superscription giving the title of the work (1:1) and the epilogue in 12:9-14, which are to be attributed to editorial hand(s). The reason for this is fairly obvious. Most of the Old Testament books have received superscriptions indicating author, etc. In the case of Ecclesiastes

12:9-14, this passage is written in the third person about the author, in contrast to the style which the author uses in the rest of the work where he speaks in the first person.

The epilogue tells us that Qoheleth was a sage (*hakam*) who taught the people knowledge, using *mešalîm*, the proverbs or sentences which encode the wisdom experience, and which are described as “goads” that stimulate reflection (12:11). Unfortunately, we are ignorant of the circumstances in which he exercised his teaching function. How formal or informal was his school? At the beginning of the second century B.C. Ben Sira had a *bêt midraš*, or school, to which he could invite students (Sir 51:23). But we know nothing about Qoheleth’s academic style.

We may reasonably presume that the collections of sayings which are characteristic of chapters 7 and 10 figured in his teaching. But the teaching of Qoheleth is unlike that of any previous sage of which we have any record (see the references to the sayings of the wise in Prov 22:17 [emended text] and 24:23). He takes the traditional wisdom teachers to task. It is not easy to imagine one who debunks his own profession successfully and with integrity. Qoheleth did just that. He confessed that his striving after wisdom had been unsuccessful (it was “beyond” him, 7:23-24). And he remarked snidely that even if the sage claims to know the work of God, this is not so (8:17). It must be admitted that the teaching of the wise men in the Book of Proverbs exudes confidence. This was not because they were ignorant of the limitations of wisdom. They realized that no wisdom or understanding could count against the Lord (Prov 21:30), and that the Lord’s course could be contrary to human plans (Prov 16:9). But they chose to emphasize the positive. There is room for only so much wisdom in a saying. It carries a limited vision, the context of the saying in its original use. One has to provide other sayings to balance against a proverb. Sometimes the sages did this; they pointed to the ambiguity of silence: the one who is sparing of words is a wise person (17:27), but one should not be deceived by this: even a fool, if he keeps silent, is considered wise (17:28).

Qoheleth was not slow to state explicitly contradictions to the accepted wisdom views. His style is antithetical. He will quote a traditional saying and then oppose it. “The wise man has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (2:14). To this he replies: but one lot befalls them both, so where is the profit in being wise (2:15)? His “quarrel” with the sages continues throughout the work. It was traditional wisdom that the good name of the just

would be an incomparable blessing (Prov 10:7; 22:1). In like manner, Qoheleth serves up the saying, “A good name is better than good ointment” (7:1a), only to refute it. The saying itself is a marvelous example of playing with words: *tôb šem miššemen tôb*. Perhaps the comparison to oil, or precious ointment, was dictated by the sound of words, for a good name might be compared to many other valuables (Prov 22:1). But one can imagine that this saying gave comfort to a poor person who was not able to provide expensive things, and even perhaps ointment for burial, but he could rejoice in the integrity of his life. Not so, says Qoheleth. “The day of death is better than the day of birth” (7:1b). That is to say, don’t talk about a good name until the person is dead. Only at that point is a judgment possible; short of death anyone can turn out to be a fool. Hence, “it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, for that is the end of every man” (7:2).

However, despite Qoheleth’s dispute with the wisdom tradition, it is not to be thought

that he considered folly a viable option. He likened the laughter of the foolish to the “crackling of thorns under a pot” (7:6). An entire series of sayings in favor of wisdom appear in 10:2-3, 6, 12-15. Just a spice of folly, however, contaminates wisdom: “More weighty than wisdom or wealth is a little folly” (10:1).

The claims of the wisdom writers were too broad for Qoheleth. Life, which was the admitted goal of wisdom teaching—the good life of prosperity—was simply not an unmitigated good. Whatever it offered was not enough for Qoheleth, who recognized the ugly vicissitudes of concrete experience. But in another sense he recognized that there were certain values, even if relative. These were eating, drinking, and the enjoyment of life’s pleasures (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9-10). These are, to be sure, resigned conclusions, for they are colored by death and also by uncertainty. But they are to be accepted and treasured if they turn out to be the portion that falls to one’s lot. Such pleasures are the gift of God, as he constantly affirms (e.g., 3:13; 5:18). One can never count on them, or view them as secure achievements. One never knows when these “gifts” would be lost, or on what score they would ever be given in the first place. There is no secure system of reward: “As it is for the good man, so it is for the sinner” (9:3). Life, then, had to be played out against the mysterious designs of God: who can make straight what God has made crooked (1:15; 7:13)?

God is at the center of this mysterious puzzle. Incidentally, one should not cavil at the consistent employment of *'elohîm* instead of the sacred name *yhwh*. Qoheleth’s God is the God of Israel, the creator (12:1), who has made everything “appropriate to its time” (3:11), the times of birth and death, war and peace (3:1-8). But God has put *ha 'olam* (eternity) into the human heart so that humans cannot discover, from beginning to end, the divine “work” that goes on (3:11). There are two important factors in this famous passage of 3:1-11. One is the total determination of times by the Almighty. The text of 3:1-8 is deceitful in its simplicity. It can be read as a colorful description of choices made at critical points. But this is not Qoheleth’s intent. He fixes these in a system of divine determinism. In one sense this is nothing new—the entire Bible recognizes the hand of God in all that occurs, good or evil (1 Sam 2:6-8; Amos 3:6; Isa 45:7). But it is unmistakably expressed by Qoheleth. The second factor is

the trick that God has played. In contrast to the particular time (*et* in 3:1-8), he has put into the human heart the timeless, a sense of duration (*ha 'olam*), that keeps us from understanding what God is about in all the key undertakings of life. It is a case of divine sabotage: things are appropriate to the times fixed for them, but humans are out of kilter, on another time line.

The mystery of the “work of God” is at the core of Qoheleth’s thought. Elsewhere in the Bible the “works” (plural, as in Ps 104:24) are celebrated in song, for they signify important aspects of the divine action, such as creation (Ps 104) or deliverance (Ps 118:17). For Qoheleth the work of God is an impenetrable mystery. Human beings are unable “to find out all God’s work that is done under the sun” (8:17). Just as we cannot fathom the mystery of gestation, so we cannot understand the work of God (11:5).

Perhaps one might expect that Qoheleth’s reaction to this mystery would be “faith.” Rather, it is “fear God.” He does not use the phrase common to the rest of the Bible, “fear of the Lord/God.” Although this phrase may too often suggest servile fear to the modern, the connotation in the Bible is different. Indeed it has several connotations. The basic meaning is the

numinous, i.e., the profound reaction of human beings before the numen or divinity, the *tremendum*. Although the phrase is not used in Isaiah 6, the scene of the prophet's inaugural vision exemplifies what is meant by fear of the Lord. It is far from being craven and servile; it is an awareness of the gulf between the human and the divine. During the course of the Old Testament it also comes to have a cultic meaning. Those who fear the Lord, in the Psalms, are the pious, the worshiping community. In the Deuteronomic tradition they are those who demonstrate their loyalty and obedience to the covenant God. In certain Psalms (1, 119) observance of the Torah is the mark of one who fears the Lord.

Already in Proverbs the phrase had been associated in a particular way with wisdom. It is echoed in the programmatic statements found in the Bible (Prov 9:10; 15:33; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28): "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 1:7). Gerhard von Rad marvelled at this insight: "The thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God is a statement of penetrating perspicacity....It contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge....She was, in all seriousness, of the opinion that effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts a man into a right relationship with the objects of his perception, that it enables him to ask questions more pertinently, to take stock of relationships more effectively and generally to have a better awareness of circumstances."<sup>3</sup>

Qoheleth understands fear of God in a sense that suggests the numinous quality. "Thus has God done that they (human beings) may fear him" (3:14). He is speaking of the unchangeability and mystery of the divine activity which was described above (3:11). As Walther Zimmerli remarks in his comment on the passage, this is not a life style that is filled with light and success. Rather, one walks without any assurance (lightning can strike at any time), relying on God even in the riddles of life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 67-78.

<sup>4</sup>Walther Zimmerli, "Das Buch des Predigers Salomo," *Sprüche/Prediger* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 174.

Similarly in 5:6 there is the gruff statement, "rather, fear God!" This comes as a conclusion to tough-minded admonitions about making promises to God. The implication is that actions, not words, are needed. "God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few" (5:1).

In 7:18 the meaning of fear of God is not clear. It comes at the end of a section that seems to be a cynical recommendation to hold on to two extremes of conduct. Since even the just suffer, don't be over-righteous, or you can expect worse treatment. On the other hand, the wicked die early according to the traditional theory, so don't be over-wicked. Neither of these pat conclusions can be trusted. The only recourse, for Qoheleth, is to fear God.

Finally, the command to fear God appears in the epilogue of the book at 12:13. But it represents the editor rather than Qoheleth, for the latter never joins fear of God and observance of the commandments. That is the mentality of Sirach (Sir 1:26-30). In this sense fear of God is observance of the Torah. While this is a reasonable inference from the book, it does not represent Qoheleth's emphasis.

The emphasis of Qoheleth, in contrast to that of the editor, seems to lie clearly in the literary inclusion which marks his book: the repetition of 1:2 in 12:8: "Vanity of vanities, says

Qoheleth, all things are vanity!” *Hebel*, or “vanity,” is his favorite word, occurring some 37 times and, along with “chase after wind,” frequently served up as a judgment on values which he investigates. His critique roams over large areas. In chapter 2, where the aura of Solomon is attached to this “son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1), he describes his pursuit of pleasure. The experiment is explicitly described as being carried out “in wisdom” (2:3, 9). But his final verdict is that this was vanity (2:11). Neither does toil give any satisfaction to the toiler. Such a person has to leave the results of his labor to another, and “who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool?” (2:18-23). Riches lead to covetousness, and this brings trouble (5:9-11). Wisdom, as we have seen, is unattainable. Hence the judgment of vanity is roundly pronounced on all human activities and values. Yet it is astonishing that he can recommend to “do with power anything you put your hand to” (9:10). His advice to youth (11:9) is to rejoice while young, and to trust the ways of the heart and vision of the eyes (even if all this is subject to the mysterious divine judgment). This recommendation is clouded by the fact of death, which is the end of all activity. But Qoheleth serenely urged enjoyment of life (because “the days of darkness will be many,” 11:8). The presumption is, of course, that this is the gift of God, as we have seen above, which is mysteriously bestowed but to be enjoyed if it is given.

This brief sketch of Qoheleth’s view of life seems perhaps excessively dour and pessimistic. Or, where it is not that, his recommendation to eat and drink smacks of Greek epicureanism. There seems to be no room for speaking of “faith.”

## II. THE FAITH OF QOHELETH

The definition of faith is not an easy matter, as a perusal of the various biblical dictionaries demonstrates. The direction of *pistis* and *'emet*, *'emûnâh*, so

characteristic of biblical “faith” terminology, will not help us with Qoheleth. This is not surprising, since faith is, in the words of Anthony Thiselton, a “polymorphous thing.”<sup>5</sup> Faith in the Bible has to be answered in relation to what the issue at stake is, not in the abstract. It can be seen in the disposition of a person who trusts in God, or it can have a future orientation (such as the famous definition in Heb 11:1), or it can have the sense of a credal confession (Deut. 26:1-12; Rom 10:9). The difference between Paul and James in the New Testament makes it quite clear that an abstract definition of faith can be misleading.

Thiselton reminds us that one must establish the context of a given language-game or language-situation in discussing faith in Paul and in James. So also with Qoheleth. First we can eliminate consideration of the typical Israelite expression of faith as manifested in the famous “little credo” of Deuteronomy 26:1-11. This is not where Qoheleth is at. It is quite gratuitous to comment on his view of salvation history or the great saving acts of God in Israel’s history. He says nothing about this, but there is no reason to presume that it did not form part of his identity as an Israelite. Nor is there any profit in extrapolating concerning his thought about salvation history in his own century. He does not know what God is up to, as we have seen, but we cannot use this fact as an answer to his faith in the covenant or promise.<sup>6</sup> The author of Psalm 89 has made it clear that he also does not know what God is up to. The apparent rejection of the Davidic covenant leads the psalmist to a strong lament and questioning of the divine plan (“where are your ancient favors, a Lord?” 89:51). The psalmist constantly repeats *'emet* (faithfulness) and

*hesed* (steadfast love) throughout the psalm. In this “language-game” faith in the promises is directly at issue. But Qoheleth brackets out the traditional salvation history; he adheres to the path established by Israelite wisdom (Proverbs, Job): the experience of the world, and the lessons of the past which were based on this experience.

What is the wisdom experience? Gerhard von Rad has provided abroad description of this in terms of faith (*Vertrauen*):

It has been rightly said that in all knowledge faith (*Vertrauen*) is also at work. Thus here in proverbial wisdom, there is faith in the stability of the elementary relationship between man and man, faith in the similarity of men in their reactions, faith in the reliability of the orders which support human life and thus, implicitly or explicitly, faith in God who put these orders into operation. If one understands those sentences which are expressed in wholly secular terms against their total intellectual background, then they, too, are undoubtedly dependent both on knowledge and on faith in God. Indeed, it was precisely because this knowledge of Yahweh was so strong, so unassailable, that Israel was able to speak of the orders of this world in quite secular terms.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 408. His entire discussion of faith and other concepts in terms of Wittgenstein’s “language-game” is helpful.

<sup>6</sup>Several commentators do make such an extrapolation. Cf. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible 18; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965) 191.

<sup>7</sup>G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 62-63. The English translation does not always clearly distinguish between *Glauben* and *Vertrauen*, faith and trust. See the variations in G. von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970) at the appropriate places. Von Rad ultimately considers Qoheleth to have failed in trust (*Vertrauen*). He contrasts Qoheleth with the earlier sages who do have trust—trust in the orders set by the Lord. But Qoheleth’s lack of trust is not properly a loss of faith in God. Rather, the issue seems here to be Qoheleth’s quarrel with traditional wisdom as being too optimistic. However, von Rad singles out the “hiddenness of the future,” and he regards as scandalous the sentence, “All that comes is vanity” (11:18). He goes on to say that Qoheleth “was incapable of entering into a dialogue with the world” which “had become for him a silent, unfriendly outside force which he was able to trust only where it offered him fulfillment of life.” I would prefer to say that the world did not hear the challenging questions which Job heard. See the pertinent discussion in *Wisdom in Israel*, 234-37; German edition, 302-306.

The world of the sage, then, was the everyday world with its wins and losses, its delights and pains. It is the encounter with reality that has begotten the sayings. Proverbs are the encoding of a lived experience, observations generated by life. These are all penetrated by a certain transcendent relationship to God. As von Rad has remarked, “The experiences of the world were for [Israel] always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experience of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

From this standpoint, therefore, one must view the faith that is reflected in the wisdom books. Job, who is identified as a non-Israelite, who speaks and argues like an Israelite (cf. the outcries of the psalmists), never refers to the events of national salvation. Yet he believes in the will and the power of God to deliver him; in fact he seems to identify God as his *go’el* or Vindicator in 19:25. This is not to deny his biting attacks on this same God (e.g., 9:22-24). Job fluctuates between faith and despair, as humans do. And in the end God recognizes that he truly

had faith, that he “spoke rightly” (42:7). This helps us to understand the nature of faith of Qoheleth.

There is no theophany to tell Qoheleth that he had spoken rightly. But there is the same honesty and integrity to his speech. He does not undergo the personal agony of the character, Job. There is a poignant cry in 2:16: “How is it that the wise man dies as well as the fool?” But the emotional impact of Job’s words (Job 31:35-37) is missing. Qoheleth is cool and analytical. He observes coldly that in the face of oppression there is none to comfort the oppressed (4:1-2), that humans cannot tell (from experience) whether God loves them or hates them (9:1). He is unwilling to compromise with specious arguments that might provide a more optimistic view of life.

Neither does Qoheleth betray a close and warm relationship to God. If one is going to define faith by feeling, there is no evidence of this in the book. If he had a warmer side to his relationship with the Divinity, he did not betray it. But he knew where he stood *vis à vis* God:

Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked?  
(7:13)

Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Let your approach be  
obedience....God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be  
few. (4:17-5:1)

Qoheleth was a no-nonsense type of man. How can one characterize his faith? I would suggest the following: He took God on God’s terms. And God’s terms were most mysterious for him. So difficult were they that he termed life futile. He meant this on a level that we can scarcely dream of. But he meant it,

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 62.

and he never ceased repeating it—in a perspective of faith. Abraham, too, accepted God on God’s terms when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. He did not worry about a “suspension of the teleological.” While the faith of Abraham is depicted warmly in the pages of the Book of Genesis, the climax of his life (Gen 22) is in the hard but firm acceptance of God on the terms offered to him. So also Qoheleth. He challenges us to define God’s terms for us, and to accept them.

Let it not be thought that the faith of Qoheleth was inferior to, or less salvific than, the faith of the Christian. The Christian also accepts God on God’s terms, which is believed to be the good news in Jesus Christ and eventual resurrection with him in eternal life. This contrasts vividly with the Old Testament notion of death and Sheol. The contrast often provokes admiration at the strength of Old Testament faith. Israel was centered on this world, in which the experience of God was an essential part, not on the next world. Such faith is admirably suited to correct the distortion which is found among those who identify faith with the existence of a life beyond death, or “heaven.” Faith is one thing, and the specifics of life beyond death is another. Everything depends upon God’s terms.