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The Book Ecclesiastes and Pessimism: Drawing Wisdom from Our Toils

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Abstract: ‘Thirst for wisdom’ drives human beings in the past, at present and in the coming future. In the history we could witness thoughts of wisdom of various times were collected together and named as wisdom literature. These literatures focus the practical aspects of how one should live, moral concerns through reflection on human experiences and to form a society filled with justice, righteousness, and equality. We also find in Bible wisdom books. Kings, priests, prophets and teachers were authors of these books. The book of Ecclesiastes observed the natural world as well as human’s life experience and shared some practical applications for people to live their daily lives. Many claims Ecclesiastes as a book of pessimistic thoughts. Nevertheless, a philosophical enquiry about

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the teachings of the book could unveil the optimistic teachings which is dealt with.

Keywords: Pessimism, Wisdom, Teacher, Unity, Literature, Hope, Book Ecclesiastes.

Philosophy deals with the problems of life and therefore it searches for a deep, clear and systematic reflection of our life questions. Almost all the cultures around the world have literature which deals with life questions. Such literature is called wisdom literature. In the Bible we find collections of literature dealing with the wisdom of life too. The book Ecclesiastes is one of them. This book contains a famous sentence: ‘All is vanity’. The word ‘vanity’ is repeatedly used in the book, and refers to human narcissism and pessimism. We agree with this idea. Naturally this theme provokes a rational enquiry into the theme of pessimism. In the Bible much of the wisdom is written in poetic form. The book of Ecclesiastes, one among wisdom literature uses this poetic form, and it is an acceptable form to repeat certain verses. We shall analyze the text to find a better answer for our search. In our query we would like to ask the following questions: 1. What is pessimism? 2. Does the book of Ecclesiastes speak only about pessimism? Or is there any other aspect dealt with in the book other than pessimism?

1. Understanding Pessimism

The English learner’s dictionary defines pessimism as follows “Feeling that bad things may happen and that something will not be successful.” This definition gives a general idea of pessimism as an expression of anxiety and fear.

‘All is vanity’. The word ‘vanity’ is repeatedly used in the book of Ecclesiastes, and refers to human narcissism and pessimism.

However, we would like to attempt to give a philosophical explanation. Britannica defines pessimism as: “An attitude of hopelessness towards life and toward existence, coupled with a vague general opinion that pain and evil predominate in the world.” We use this definition for our essay.

Though this definition points the attitude of hopelessness towards life as pessimism, the book Ecclesiastes advocates, “Whoever is joined with all the living has hope” (Ecc9:4). The Existentialists claim human existence is ‘conscious of our being’, but Ecclesiastes identifies whoever belongs to the living should also hope. In history as well as in psychology hope is very often identified with motivation in view of future achievement. Christian theology considers hope as one among the theological virtues. Immanuel Kant considers hope as a rational demand in a particular context and the object of hope is the highest good embedded with moral progress of the whole human race. Here I would like to specify that the book Ecclesiastes praises hope as the basis of all living beings and thus it deals hope not hopelessness.

Many philosophers in the past have made adequate discussions on pessimism. We would like to mention some of them here. Thomas Aquinas begins his Philosophy with nihilism, nevertheless he acknowledges an incontrovertible point that he is stuck with and further moves forward. He proposes the transcendent being, *esse* (the act of existing). Heidegger begins his philosophy with ‘angst (fear)’ but moves to discuss the horizon of being. At this incontrovertible point during the significant moments of life we are stuck with bare reality. Nevertheless, as Nietzsche puts it “He who has a why to live for can bear with any how.” In all these thoughts we could find the underlying aspect that pessimism has enriched their philosophical inquiry.

The book Ecclesiastes consists of the words of a teacher. It says: “Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge” (Ecc:11,9). “He wrote the words of truth plainly” (Ecc:11,10b). The teacher deals with the ultimate question of life and death. He

analyzes proverbs, connects them to day today life experiences and he finds suitable words to put them in black and white. As a teacher, he wants to communicate to his students (world) that there are contradictions in life. For example, “God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes” (Ecc7:29b). Furthermore, the teacher does not recommend that an individual should remain idle after knowing the probabilities of success are less, rather the first step is to acknowledge the plain truth. The situation should not make an individual get frustrated. The teacher proposes course of action from reflecting his life to accept frustrations and uncertainties of life. “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might” (Ecc9:10a). He adds further, “Whoever observes the wind will not sow; and whoever regards the clouds will not reap” (Ecc11:4). So, he recommends avoid anxiety from your mind to enter into action (Ecc11:10). It motivates the reader for personal reflection on life, rather than to reach premature and self-assured conclusions. The presence of injustice and unfaithfulness in the world are a big riddle for him to comprehend and to solve.

A common expression of pessimism is ‘The former (olden) days were better than these (now) days’ and many think it a wise saying. Ecclesiastes 7:10 condemns this expression and this expression only unfolds the ignorance one possesses. One should live in the present than to compare with the past. Thus, the Book of Ecclesiastics analyzes explicitly pessimism and explains well its relation to hopelessness. It admits also its reader ‘to live is to hope’. Let us now focus on the other aspects that are discussed in the book.

For the antique philosophers the question of how one can find happiness was also a central query. They claim that a wise person is not a philosopher, but the one who has achieved the natural goal of human existence and accomplished happiness for himself/herself.

2. Pessimism and the Book of Ecclesiastes

We find that the book analyzes the dimensions of life, death, joy and pain. These dimensions have been addressed by philosophers of various times. The search for an answer involves more puzzles. Like the philosophers, the book also delves into the puzzles in search for answers. For instance: humans meet vanity in concrete life experience, however it increases their striving for wisdom. This striving could be a starting point to open ourselves to a new world of hope overcoming pessimism. We shall expose and examine some ideas in the following focal points.

a. Search for Wisdom: As Socrates puts it: Philosopher is actually a lover of wisdom and someone who strives to attain wisdom. These words are applicable to the book Ecclesiastes. Though the book uses very often the word vanity but it never advocates any compromise to give up our search for wisdom. As a teacher of wisdom, the author proposes his readers to aspire to wisdom; for him wisdom is the highest virtue. He analyzes the characteristics of wisdom in detail. He says, “Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (Ecc2:13).

Further in chapter 7:11,12 wisdom is equaled with inheritance and it gives life to one who possesses it. In addition, the teacher considers wisdom as greater than weapons used in war and he observes, “Wisdom helps one to succeed” (Ecc10:10b). Thus, it is explicit, wisdom as a highest virtue does not allow a person to be in a pessimistic attitude but leads the person to hope for right action.

b. Find Joy in the Toil: For the antique philosophers the question of how one can find happiness was also a central query. They claim that a wise person is not a philosopher, but the one who has achieved the natural goal of human existence and accomplished happiness for himself/herself. Philosophically speaking we are being with limitations, but always strive to know more, reflect and act. Chapter 5:18-20 of the book deals with this aspect. The book suggests to admit our limitation. We accept our situation (lot) as gift given by God and find enjoyment in our toil. Here, we may come to the conclusion that it is a way of taking refuge in God in our limitation. Nevertheless, Ecclesiastes finds it is good and fitting under the sun to find enjoyment in our toil. This is observed from concrete life experiences. This could be understood better in the following example: When people say that they want to learn music, they have to accept the reality that music tones come from the seven basic tones. Here, a pessimist would view that there are only seven tones. Whereas an optimist would view the same seven tones inspiring to create more than the basic ones. Thus, it is clear that the book Ecclesiastes admits human limitations, but motivates its reader in an optimistic way to toil under the sun to reap enjoyment.

c. Community and Unity: For the Greek Philosopher Aristotle human being is fundamentally a community being. Friendship is a transition from the individual to the community. It is also an essential virtue. The book Ecclesiastes also admires an ideal of having a friend and value it. We observe it in chapter 4:9-12.

The interdependency between two people in happy and trial moments could contribute to support one another and to lead a better life. The book does not define exactly how and what kind of rules and regulations should be followed in a friendship but it wants to indicate the communitarian aspect which involves interdependency and growing together. After Aristotle, in the late twentieth century we perceive many thinkers engaging themselves in the discussions of ‘communitarian’ aspect. Michael Walzer (1935) is also one among them. His political theory defends well pluralism and equality. The book Ecclesiastes also deals with the communitarian

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aspect of human life. It holds further unity is strength through the classical analogy: “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecc4,12b). Hence, it is explicit ‘united we stand, divided we fall. Therefore, unity exists for the sake of a happy and good life. Then, the communitarian aspect is as an essential virtue, which strengthens interdependency and leads its members to a better life.

d. Be Responsible for Our Actions:

Holding ourselves as responsible for our actions and the consequences of actions is a fundamental moral practice. It involves the individual as well as the collective in an interpersonal relation. So also, at the end of the book the teacher speaks about the responsibility of everyone. “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecc12:13b,14) This part of the book is considered as epilogue. Though it was added later, but still advocates as a teacher of wisdom that there is God to watch and to judge our actions. Through this piece of writing the author wants to give meaning and purpose to the life we live at present. He analyzes

the concrete life, which consists of our actions and deeds, plainly and finds vanity in life, but for him God gives the guarantee for meaning in life. Thus, when we take responsibility for our actions, by striving for meaning through concrete life experiences, God is there to reward us. The responsibility for our actions as a moral principle expresses our hope in God more than a hopeless pessimistic attitude towards our life experiences.

Conclusion

Finally, in our appraisal of the book of Ecclesiastes we have come to the point that the book addresses pessimism that prevails in the world perceived through concrete life experiences. The book does not stop here but as a response to pessimism, it suggests an optimistic attitude towards life. It proposes: to live is to hope, always aspire for wisdom as the highest virtue, live your life in a community and consider fear of God as the touch stone to engage in our concrete actions. The world with contradiction does not demand resignation (pessimism) from concrete actions, but deserves to live optimistically with hope in our search for wisdom. Find joy in our toil, united with the community and be responsible for our actions.

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