Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective

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[1]KOHELET

SANCTIFYING THE HUMAN PERSPECTIVE[2]

INTRODUCTION

Tanakh is intended to shape and guide our lives. Therefore, seeking out *peshat*—the primary intent of the authors of Tanakh—is a religious imperative and must be handled with great care and responsibility.

Our Sages recognized a hazard inherent to learning. In attempting to understand the text, nobody can be truly detached and objective. Consequently, people's personal agendas cloud their ability to view the text in an unbiased fashion. An example of such a viewpoint is the verse, "let us make man" from the creation narrative, which uses the plural "us" instead of the singular "me" (Gen. 1:26):

R. Samuel b. Nahman said in R. Jonatan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, "And God said: Let Us make man," etc., he said: "Sovereign of the Universe! Why do You furnish an excuse to heretics (for maintaining a plurality of gods)?" "Write," replied He; "And whoever wishes to err will err." (*Gen. Rabbah* 8:8)

The midrash notes that there were those who were able to derive support for their theology of multiple deities from the this verse, the antithesis of a basic Torah value. God would not compromise truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that if they wish, people will be able to find pretty much anything as support for their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of God:

?It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted

each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him, God created in the beginning, I shall make man in image and likeness. (*Megillah* 9a)

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man." For this anticipated audience, God inspired the elders to deviate from the truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

While this educational discussion is central to all Tanakh, Ecclesiastes probably concerned our Sages and later commentators more than any other biblical book. By virtue of its inclusion in Tanakh, Ecclesiastes' teaching becomes truth in our tradition. Regarding any book of Tanakh, if there are those who wish to err in the conclusions they draw, they will do so. However, our Sages worried that Ecclesiastes might cause even the most sincerely religious people to draw conclusions antithetical to the Torah, thereby causing greater religious harm than good. and consequently they considered censoring it from Tanakh:

R. Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilat said in Rav's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (*Shabbat* 30b)

Our Sages discerned *internal* contradictions in Ecclesiastes, but they also worried that Ecclesiastes contained *external* contradictions, that is, verses that appear to contradict the values of the Torah. They addressed this alarming prospect by concluding that since Ecclesiastes begins and ends with religiously appropriate teachings, those verses set the tone for the remainder of its contents. If one reaches anti-Torah conclusions from Ecclesiastes, it means that something was read out of context. A striking illustration of this principle is a midrashic teaching on Ecclesiastes 11:9. The verse reads:

O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things.

To which our Sages respond:

R. Benjamin b. Levi stated: The Sages wanted to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, for they found in it ideas that leaned toward heresy. They argued: Was it right that Solomon should have said the following: O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth (Ecc. 11:9)? Moshe said, So that you do not follow your heart and eyes (Num. 15:39), but Solomon said, Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes (Ecc. 11:9)! What then? Is all restraint to be removed? Is there neither justice nor judge? When, however, he said, But know well that God will call you to account for all such things (Ecc. 11:9), they admitted that Solomon had spoken well. (*Lev. Rabbah* 28:1; cf. *Ecc. Rabbah* 1:3)

Were our Sages genuinely worried about people not reading the second half of a verse and consequently adopting a hedonistic lifestyle? Based on the midrashic method of reading verses out of their natural context, this verse likely posed a more serious threat in their society than it would for a *pashtan* who reads verses in context. The best defense against such egregious errors always is good *peshat*. This chapter will briefly consider the challenges of learning *peshat* in Ecclesiastes, and then

outline a means of approaching Ecclesiastes as the unique book it is.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the level of *derash*, many of our Sages' comments on Ecclesiastes appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. The word "Torah" never appears in Ecclesiastes. Such midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Ecclesiastes to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to *peshat*, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of the verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Ecclesiastes appears to threaten traditional values.[3]

For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success: wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising, but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning:

> For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache. (1:18)

Sforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the *parshan* himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is *peshat*, that is, does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the Talmudic passage cited above.[4]

Some commentators attempt to resolve certain internal and external contradictions in Ecclesiastes by attributing otherwise troubling (to these commentators) statements to other people—generally evil people or fools. Take, for example, one of Kohelet's most life-affirming declarations:

> Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed, and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun—all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. (9:7-9)

Ibn Ezra—the quintessential *pashtan*—writes, "This is the folly that people say in their hearts." Ibn Ezra maintains that Kohelet's own view is the opposite of what this passage says.[5] However, such a ttempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.[6]

Commentators also devote much energy to reconciling the internal contradictions of Ecclesiastes. See, for example, the lengthy discussions of Ibn Ezra (on 7:3) and Mordechai Zer-Kavod (introduction in *Da'at Mikra*, pp. 24-33). Some reconciliations are more textually convincing than others. Regardless, it is critical to ask why there are so many contradictions in the first place.[7] That so many strategies were employed to bring Ecclesiastes in line with the rest of Tanakh and with itself amply demonstrates that this Megillah is unusual. Ecclesiastes needs to be understood on its own terms rather than being reinterpreted

away. *Pashtanim* also developed a methodology for confronting Ecclesiastes' challenges directly, as will be discussed presently.[8]

ATTEMPTING A *PESHAT* READING: GUIDELINES

In order to approach Ecclesiastes, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. Ecclesiastes is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression *tahat ha-shemesh* (beneath the sun) appears twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha?shamayim* (under heaven) appears three additional times, and Rashi and Rashbam[9] maintain that this expression is synonymous with *tahat ha?shemesh*. In the same vein, people are called *ro'ei ha-shemesh* (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. The word *ani* (I) appears twenty-nine times, and its appearance is not grammatically necessary. The emphasis on *tahat ha-shemesh* demonstrates a this-worldly perspective, while the repetition of the word *ani* highlights the personal nature of the presentation. Michael V. Fox notes the difference between how 1:12-14 is written:

> I, Kohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun.—An unhappy business that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit of wind.

Fox then imagines how these verses could have been written without the focus on the personal narrative:

> Studying and probing with wisdom all that happens under the sun is an unhappy business, which God gave men to be concerned with! All the happenings beneath the sun are futile and pursuit of wind.

Without the personal reflections that are central to Kohelet's thought, we are left with a series of dogmatic pronouncements. Kohelet's presentation invites readers into his mind as he goes through a personal struggle and process of reflection.[10]

Given this starkly anthropocentric perspective, Ecclesiastes *should* reflect different perspectives than the theocentric viewpoint of revealed prophecy. All people perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. On the basis of this observation, R. Simeon ben Manasia maintained that Ecclesiastes was not inspired altogether:

> R. Simeon ben Manasia says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands because it is only Solomon's wisdom. (Tosefta *Yadayim* 2:14)[11]

Though his minority view was rejected by our tradition (which insists that Ecclesiastes is divinely inspired), Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of human wisdom.

The word *adam* appears forty-nine times in Ecclesiastes, referring to all humanity (except for one instance in 7:28, which refers specifically to males). Kohelet speaks in a universal language and does not limit its discourse to a Jewish audience. Torah and other specifically Jewish themes do not appear in Ecclesiastes, which focuses on more universal *hokhmah* (wisdom) and *yirat Elokim* (fear of God).

Similarly, God's personal name—the Tetragrammaton—never appears in Ecclesiastes. Only the generic name Elokim appears (forty times), signifying both the universalistic discourse of Ecclesiastes and also a distant, transcendant Deity, rather than a close and personal relationship with God. In Ecclesiastes, God appears remote, and it is impossible to fathom His means of governing the world. For

example, Kohelet warns:
Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; that is why your words should be few. (5:1)

Since God is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose and much harm in protesting against God (cf. 3:11; 7:13-14). Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks *about* God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience.

Tying together these strands of evidence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) attempts to explain why Ecclesiastes is read (primarily by Ashkenazim[12]) on Sukkot:
It is written in Zechariah chapter 14 that in the future the nations of the world will come [to Jerusalem] on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot to bring offerings…. And this was the custom in King Solomon's time. This is why Solomon recited Ecclesiastes on Hol HaMo'ed Sukkot in the presence of the wise of the nations…. This is why it contains only the name Elokim, since [non-Jews] know only that Name of God. (*Harhev Davar* on Num. 29:12)

Needless to say, this means of justifying a custom is anachronistic from a historical vantage point. Nonetheless, Netziv's keen perception of Kohelet's addressing all humanity with universal religious wisdom captures the unique flavor of this book.

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Ecclesiastes' textual contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted and often paradoxical human condition. Significantly, Ecclesiastes' inclusion in Tanakh and its consideration as a divinely inspired book elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious truth.

While Ecclesiastes contains truth, it is but one aspect of truth rather than the whole truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality:
I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun. (4:1-3)

Kohelet never calls on God to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop it. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in 1:4-7 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history, prophecy reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

Kohelet grapples with the realities that wise/righteous people do not necessarily live longer or more comfortable lives than the foolish/wicked and that wisdom itself is limited and fallible:
Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration…. For I have set my mind to learn wisdom and to observe the business that goes on in the world—even to the extent of going without sleep day and night—and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them. (8:14-17)

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: God is just, but there are injustices manifested in the real world. While Kohelet cannot solve this dilemma, he discovers a productive response. Once a person can accept that the world appears unfair, one can realize that everything is a gift from God rather than a necessary consequence for righteousness.[13] We ultimately cannot fathom how God governs this world, but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly,[14] even though wisdom is limited and the wise cannot guarantee themselves a more comfortable life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.[15]

On a deeper level, the human psyche is profoundly attracted to being godlike. This tendency lies at the heart of the sins of Eve (Gen. 3:5, 22) and the builders of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).[16] Kohelet blames God for creating us with this desire while limiting us, rendering this innate drive impossible (7:14; cf. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra on 1:13). Confrontation with our own limitations leads to the extreme frustration manifest in Ecclesiastes. However, once we can accept that we cannot be God, this realization should lead to humility and awe of God:

> He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass. Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God. I realized, too, that whatever God has brought to pass will recur evermore: Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it—and God has brought to pass that men revere Him. (Ecc. 3:11-14)[17]

Michael V. Fox summarizes Ecclesiastes' purpose as follows:

> When the belief in a grand causal order collapses, human reason and self-confidence fail with it. This failure is what God intends, for after it comes fear, and fear is what God desires (3:14). And that is not the end of the matter, for God allows us to build small meanings from the shards of reason.[18]

While Kohelet challenges us at every turn, he simultaneously provides us the opportunity to find meaning beneath the unsolvable dilemmas.

Similarly, the universality of death tortures Kohelet. Once Kohelet accepts the reality of death, however, he concludes that it is preferable to attend funerals rather than parties, since focusing on our mortality will encourage us to live a more meaningful life:

> It is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting; for that is the end of every man, and a living one should take it to heart. (7:2, cf. Rashbam)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik expands on this idea, and says that it is not that there can only be meaning in life if there is death:

> The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…. For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[19]

Certain paradoxes and limitations are inherent to human existence, and not even the wisest of all men can make them disappear. Instead, Kohelet teaches us how to confront these challenges honestly and then embark on a process of intense existential frustration that ultimately leads to a greater recognition of the infinite gap between ourselves and God, leading in turn to humility and fear of God, leading in turn to living more religiously in every sense.[20]

CONCLUSION

A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims. (12:9)

Kohelet relentlessly challenges received wisdom rather than blindly accepting it. This process is accompanied by formidable dangers and responsibilities; but ignoring that pursuit comes with even greater dangers. Kohelet never abandons his beliefs nor his normative sense of what all God-fearing people should do; yet he also never abandons nor solves his questions and his struggles with human existence. By presenting this process through a personal account with inspired wisdom, he becomes the teacher of every thinking religious individual.

One midrash suggests that Solomon made the Torah accessible in a manner that nobody had done since the Torah was revealed. He taught those who were not prophets how to develop a relationship with God:

> He listened and tested the soundness (*izzen ve-hikker*) of many maxims (12:9)—he made handles (*oznayim*) to the Torah…. R. Yosei said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, until one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So until Solomon arose, no one ?could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah. (*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:8)

Tanakh needed prophecy so that we could transcend ourselves and our limited perspectives to aspire to a more perfected self and world, and to reach out across the infinite gulf to God. Ultimately, however, it also needed Ecclesiastes to teach how to have faith from the human perspective, so that we may grow in our fear of Heaven and observe God's commandments in truth.

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[2] Throughout this chapter, "Ecclesiastes" refers to the name of the book, and "Kohelet" refers to the author. This chapter is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective," *Sukkot Reader* (New York: Tebah, 2008), pp. 39-54; reprinted in Angel, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings: Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 190-204.

[3] For a survey and analysis of some of the distinctions between the readings of Rashi and Rashbam on Ecclesiastes, see Robert B. Salters, "The Exegesis of Rashi and Rashbam on *Qoheleth*," in *Rashi et la Culture Juive en France du Nord au Moyen Age*, ed. Gilbert Dahan, Gerard Nahon and Elie Nicolas (Paris: E. Peeters, 1997), pp. 151-161.

[4] For a discussion of the interplay between text and commentary regarding the faith of Abraham, see Hayyim Angel, "Learning Faith from the Text, or Text from Faith: The Challenges of Teaching (and Learning) the Avraham Narratives," in *Wisdom from All My Teachers: Challenges and Initiatives in Contemporary Torah Education*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 192-212; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 127-154.

[5] It should be noted that Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative interpretation for these verses. Precisely because he is so committed to *peshat*, Ibn Ezra occasionally resorts to attribution of difficult (to Ibn Ezra) verses to other speakers instead of radically reinterpreting those verses. See, e.g., Ibn Ezra on Hab. 1:1, 12; Ps. 89:1; Ecc. 3:19.

[6] Beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some critical scholars employed the opposite tactic, i.e., that Eccelesiastes was a work that denied beliefs found elsewhere in Tanakh, and a later "Orthodox glossator" added to the text to correct those errors. One traditional rabbinic commentator—Shadal—actually adopted this argument in his commentary (published in 1860) and expressed the wish that our Sages would have banned Eccelesiastes from Tanakh. Four years after publishing his commentary, however, he fully regretted and retracted that view and expressed appreciation of Eccelesiastes' religious value. For a discussion of Shadal's initial interpretation of Eccelesiastes in light of his anti-haskalah polemics, see Shemuel Vargon, "The Identity and Dating of the Author of Eccelesiastes According to Shadal" (Hebrew), in *Iyyunei Mikra u?Parshanut 5, Presented in Honor of Uriel Simon*, ed. Moshe Garsiel et al. (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 365-384.

[7] Ibn Ezra and those who followed his approach assumed that intelligent people do not contradict themselves: "It is known that even the least of the sages would not compose a book and contradict himself" (Ibn Ezra on Ecc. 7:3). However, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik considered this perspective Aristotelian. Jewish thought, in contrast, accepts dialectical understandings of humanity and halakhah (*Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007], p. 29). Cf. Michael V. Fox: "Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them" (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1999], p. 134).
See also Shalom Carmy and David Shatz, who write that "the Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy… Philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature" ("The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection," in *History of Jewish Philosophy* vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Frank & Oliver Leaman [London: Routledge, 1997], pp. 13-14).

[8] See further discussions in Gavriel H. Cohn, *Iyyunim ba-Hamesh ha-Megillot* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, 2006), pp. 253-258; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, pp. 1-26.

[9] *The commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth*, ed. and trans. by Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985).

[10] Michael V. Fox, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), introduction p. xvii.

[11] See discussion of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), pp. 104-120.

[12] In Tractate *Soferim* chapter 14, the practice of reading Ecclesiastes is not mentioned when the other Megillot are. The first references to the custom of reading Ecclesiastes on Sukkot are in the prayer books of Rashi and *Mahzor Vitry* (eleventh century).

[13] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7; 11:9.

[14] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 7:12, 19; 8:1; 9:18; 10:12.

[15] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 2:13-15; 6:8; 7:15-16, 23; 8:17; 9:1, 11, 16.

[16] In relation to the introduction of this chapter, Lyle Eslinger ("The Enigmatic Plurals Like 'One of Us' [Genesis I 26, III 22, and XI 7] in Hyperchronic Perspective," *VT* 56 [2006], pp. 171-184) proposes that the "plural" form of God that appears three times in Genesis expresses the rhetorical purpose of creating boundaries between God and humanity. The first ("Let *Us* make man") distinguishes between God and the godlike human; the other two occur when the boundaries are threatened by Eve and then the builders of the Tower of Babel.

[17] Cf. e.g., Ecc. 5:6; 8:12; 12:13.

[18] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, p. 49.

[19] *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, p. 33.

[20] In this regard, Eccelesiastes resembles the Book of Job. While a rigid system of direct reward and punishment is refuted by empirical evidence, this belief is replaced by an insistence on humble submission to God's will and the supreme value of faithfulness to God. Suffering has ultimate meaning even if we cannot fathom God's ways. See Michael V. Fox, "Job the Pious," *ZAW* 117 (2005), pp. 351-366.