Kohelet on Wealth and Wisdom

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KOHELET ON WEALTH AND WISDOM:

BETWEEN THE PROMISE OF PROVERBS AND THE REALITY OF LIFE

Introduction

Kohelet is a philosophical and introspective work that confronts the tension between inherited ideals—wisdom, righteousness, reward—and the painful unpredictability of real life. Among its central themes is the question of whether wealth and wisdom—so extolled by traditional texts like Proverbs—can truly offer a good life. Kohelet affirms their value, yet constantly challenges expectations about their efficacy, reliability, and permanence.

Traditional Assumptions about Wisdom and Wealth

While Proverbs teaches that wisdom and righteousness generally lead to blessing, Kohelet challenges this assumption more radically: not just that reward is delayed, but that it may never come at all. According to received wisdom, the wise understand the world, choose rightly, and flourish accordingly. The righteous, diligent person should be rewarded—through material success, moral

clarity, and social stability. The wicked, by contrast, should suffer consequences. Wisdom, in this model, is not only morally elevating but pragmatically effective.

Kohelet affirms the tradition, yet challenges its promises in light of human experience.[i] Real life, Kohelet insists, often fails to conform to the neat structures of traditional moral logic. The race is not always to the swift, nor bread to the wise (9:11). The wicked are buried with honor while the righteous are forgotten (8:10). In Kohelet's view, these apparent injustices do not disrupt the system—they are part of the system.

The Futility and Fragility of Wealth

Kohelet probes the instability of material success. The lover of money never finds satisfaction (5:9); the rich man cannot sleep (5:11). Wealth can be lost in an instant (5:13), or inherited by one unworthy (2:21). Even if a man possesses great riches and lives many years, if he cannot enjoy them, he is worse off than a stillborn child, who at least is spared the pain of longing unfulfilled (6:1–6). Death renders all accumulation meaningless—"as he came, so shall he go" (5:14). The world itself seems to sever the link between effort and outcome. This is not a condemnation of wealth per se, but a critique of the illusion that it can deliver security or permanence.

And yet, Kohelet does not advocate laziness. "The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh" (4:5). Nor does he argue for despair. Rather, he calls for modest, balanced effort: "Better a handful of rest than two fists of toil and pursuit of wind" (4:6). Practical wisdom teaches: diversify your investments (11:2), sow your seed even when conditions are uncertain (11:6). Work hard, but do not become obsessed.

Wisdom's Enduring but Imperfect Value

More painful to Kohelet than the flaws of wealth are the limitations of wisdom. For Kohelet, wisdom is not only practical—it is personal. That even this cannot secure justice or meaning is the book's deepest sorrow, because wisdom, unlike wealth, is supposed to be an anchor of religious meaning. Wisdom, we are

taught, should guide us toward meaning and righteousness. Yet even here, Kohelet finds disappointment. “I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (2:13)—yet “the same fate befalls them both” (2:14). The wise are forgotten, their achievements impermanent (9:15). Even a poor wise man who saves a city is ultimately ignored (9:16).

Still, Kohelet insists: wisdom is better than power (9:16), and “wisdom preserves the life of its possessor” (7:12). It is not worthless—it is just not a guarantee. Its value lies not in control, but in the capacity to respond meaningfully to the world’s uncertainties.

Living with Complexity: Humility and Joy

Kohelet holds two truths at once: that wisdom and righteousness matter—and that they do not guarantee success. This refusal to resolve contradiction finds resonance in Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s theological method. Jewish thought often accepts contradiction—not as a failure of logic, but as a reflection of reality:

> Judaism has never accepted the two-value Aristotelian logic which, in its principle of contradiction and the excluded middle, states that, if A contradicts B, then only one of them is right and the other is wrong; the thing is either B or A, to the exclusion of either being both together or being neither A nor B. Judaism has ignored this principle and has quite often acted as if both A and B are right, in spite of their mutual exclusiveness. Even in the halakhic realm, Judaism believes that there is a possibility for a contradiction in the objects without negating either of them. Jewish philosophy and the metaphysic of man can only be understood if the dialectical principle is adopted as the point of departure.[ii]

Kohelet affirms both the value of wisdom and its limits; both the possibility of joy and the inevitability of death.

Instead of entitlement or nihilism, Kohelet offers humility. We do not earn our portion by merit alone. Our *helek* (portion) is a gift, and we are meant to enjoy it—with awe before God and within bounds of morality (9:7–10; 11:9). “Rejoice, young man, in your youth… but know that for all these, God will bring you into judgment” (11:9). Joy is not a distraction from righteousness, but a fulfillment of it.

Kohelet concludes: “The end of the matter, when all is heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man” (12:13). Not because doing so guarantees success, but because it is what we were created for.

In a world where justice is deferred, where wisdom is fallible, and where wealth is fleeting, Kohelet offers a theology of realism: work honestly, pursue wisdom, enjoy life as a divine gift—and trust that God’s judgment encompasses more than we can see. This is not cynicism, but sanctified clarity. Wisdom and wealth may not ensure success—but Kohelet teaches us to live wisely and gratefully anyway.

Kohelet does not promise certainty. He offers instead a life of disciplined joy, grounded effort, and humble fear of God.

[i] In addition to the extensive commentaries on Kohelet by Michael V. Fox (*Ecclesiastes* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004], *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999]), see especially his article, “The Epistemology of the Book of Proverbs,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007), 669–684.

[ii] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007], 29.