

Watching the world of vanity from the temple perspective

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In Ecclesiastes Solomon refers to himself as “the Preacher”. This term relates to him gathering the people to bring the ark into the Holy of Holies. The temple, corresponding to the ecclesia today, provides the only perspective by which the world can be understood.

ECCLESIASTES begins, “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (1:1,2). Solomon states his conclusion from the start: “all is vanity”. Of course, he writes with surety because he was inspired by God. Yet the inspired words he was given reflect the correct perspective he had adopted. He was looking at the world from God’s perspective. In this article we will see how Solomon in Ecclesiastes draws attention to the bringing of the ark into the temple. It is from the perspective of the temple that Solomon is able to understand the world. This provides us with instruction as to how we should regard the world in these last days.

The temple

The Hebrew for “preacher”, *qoheleth*, is related to *qahal*, which means ‘assemble’. It is sometimes said that this relates to the way Solomon collected together proverbs: “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth” (12:9,10). But the Hebrew word *qahal* is not used here. When used of Solomon, *qahal* concerns the bringing of the ark into the temple:

“Then Solomon assembled [*qahal*] the elders of Israel, and all the heads of the tribes, the chief of the fathers of the children of Israel, unto king Solomon in Jerusalem, that they might bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD [Yahweh] out of the city of David, which is Zion. And all the men of Israel assembled [*qahal*] themselves unto king Solomon at the feast in the month Ethanim, which is the seventh

month . . . And the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the LORD [Yahweh] unto his place, into the oracle of the house, to the most holy place, even under the wings of the cherubims” (1 Kgs. 8:1,2,6).

1 Kings 8:1 emphasises that Solomon was the focal point of the gathering of the people, with Solomon’s name being repeated: “Solomon assembled . . . unto king Solomon in Jerusalem”. Truly, Solomon was a *qoheleth* in this regard.

There is a similarity in the way Solomon is referred to in Ecclesiastes and 1 Kings 8. In Ecclesiastes the phrases “king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and “king over Israel in Jerusalem” (v. 12) compare with “of Israel, unto king Solomon in Jerusalem” (8:1).

The use of the word *qoheleth* in Ecclesiastes shows there is a link between Ecclesiastes and the assembling of the people to bring the ark into the temple. In fact, in Ecclesiastes 5, Solomon writes about going to the temple: “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil” (v. 1). The sacrifice here refers to the peace offering, and this was one of the offerings made at the dedication of the temple: “And Solomon offered a sacrifice of peace offerings, which he offered unto the LORD [Yahweh], two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the LORD [Yahweh]” (1 Kgs. 8:63).

Again, in Ecclesiastes 8 Solomon writes of going to and from the temple. In this case he is speaking of the wicked (presumably priests) who had gone to and from the temple during their lifetime: “And so I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of the holy, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done: this is also vanity” (v. 10).

The link with the bringing of the ark into the temple is further strengthened at the end of Ecclesiastes. It concludes by drawing on the words of Solomon when he prayed to God, and then blessed the people, after the ark had been

brought into the Oracle. Solomon wrote, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). In his prayer in 1 Kings 8, Solomon twice mentioned fearing God: "that they may fear Thee all the days that they live in the land which Thou gavest unto our fathers" (v. 40); "hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to Thee for: that all people of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee" (v. 43). And when Solomon later blessed the people, he twice mentioned the keeping of God's commandments: "that He may incline our hearts unto Him, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers" (v. 58); "Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD [Yahweh] our God, to walk in His statutes, and to keep His commandments, as at this day" (v. 61).

What is the significance of the above links? Ecclesiastes is about the vanity of the world, but Solomon understood that the world is vanity because he had a knowledge of the Truth. He understood it because he understood the things typified in the temple. He was inspired to write Ecclesiastes from the viewpoint of one who was, as it were, in the temple. Even if Ecclesiastes was written a long while after the events of 1 Kings 8, the use of the word *qoheleth* reminds us that the writer has a Divine perspective when looking out on the world. He is writing from the perspective of the Holy of Holies.

Given the above links, the form of the phrase "vanity of vanities" is seen to provide an ironic contrast. It matches "the most holy", literally, "holy of holies". The "vanity of vanities" of the world contrasts with the "holy of holies" of God's temple.

Psalm 73

Psalm 73 contains a key verse in understanding the book of Ecclesiastes. At the beginning of the psalm, the psalmist writes of how he had been on a journey: "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (vv. 2,3). On his journey he nearly slipped, but where did his journey end? Verse 17 is the key verse: "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end". He had been walking towards the temple, just as Solomon and the children of Israel did when they carried the ark. As he walked, he looked at the people

in the world and was envious of the wicked. But he heeded the advice of Solomon: "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God". Finally he came to the temple, and only then was he able to understand the end of the wicked. Likewise, Solomon was only able fully to understand the vanity of the world by looking at the world from the temple. By referring to himself as the *qoheleth* Solomon was, as it were, saying, 'I have gone to the sanctuary of God, I have understood their end, I have understood that all is vanity'.

It is sometimes suggested that Psalm 73:17 alludes to the plates on the altar, which had been placed there following the destruction of the 250 men who followed Korah, Dathan and Abiram. God said, "The censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them broad plates for a covering of the altar: for they offered them before the LORD [Yahweh], therefore they are hallowed: and they shall be a sign unto the children of Israel" (Num. 16:38). If the psalmist had considered these plates, he would truly have understood the end of the wicked.

The Hebrew word translated "plates" occurs twenty-seven times in the Old Testament, but twenty-three times it is translated as "snare". One such occasion is in Ecclesiastes 9: "For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them" (v. 12). This verse is an apt description of the sudden destruction that came upon the rebels in Numbers 16. The plates on the altar were a constant reminder of the snare which Korah, Dathan and Abiram fell into.

There are other links with the rebellion of Korah in Ecclesiastes. Solomon, in describing old age, writes of when "the almond tree shall flourish" (12:5). The Hebrew word translated "flourish" in Ecclesiastes is actually a word usually translated by words such as 'despise', 'provoke' or 'blaspheme'. In Numbers 16 it is used of the rebels: "these men have provoked the LORD [Yahweh]" (v. 30). The mention of almonds also alludes to the rebellion, in that the rod of Aaron "budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (17:8) as "a token against the rebels" (v. 10).¹ In Numbers 16 God is addressed as "the God of the spirits of all flesh" (v. 22). This compares with Solomon's comment

1. See Forbes, P. L. (1977), "I made . . .", *Testimony*, April, pp. 148-9, where these links are discussed.

that when a person dies, “the spirit shall return unto God Who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7).

Conclusion

As members of the ecclesia we are part of the “house of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). We are stones being prepared for that temple of believers that will be built when Christ returns: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:19-21). As such, Paul writes, “This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind” (4:17). We have moved from the “vanity” of the world to the “temple”.

A knowledge of the gospel brings with it a scriptural understanding of the true nature of the world. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things [he understands that ‘all is vanity’], yet he himself is judged of no man [those in the ‘vanity of their mind’ do not understand those in Christ]. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:14-16).

As we watch the world becoming an increasingly fearful place, let us ensure we continue to look faithfully at the world from a Divine perspective, knowing that it is only in the sanctuary of God that we will understand the end of the wicked.

Paul’s epic journey to Rome

13. Farewell to Malta

Tom Barling

Leaving Malta, where they had been treated most kindly, Paul and his companions travelled via Sicily to Rhegium on the toe of Italy on the last stage of their voyage.

WHEN WE reread Luke’s account of the sojourn in Malta, it occurs to us that the emphasis is on the islanders’ kindness to Paul and his fellow-travellers, and the response on the part of Paul in his cure of the father of Publius, the chief man on the island, and the representative of the Roman imperial government.

It would appear from the use of ‘us’ and ‘we’ in Acts 28 that Luke himself was personally involved in this response. It has been suggested that Luke’s part was purely medical. For minor and medically treatable complaints, his assistance would certainly be available as a physician, but there can be little doubt that Luke, like Paul, was endowed with the Holy Spirit. In any case, whatever the exact situation, it provoked a generous response on the part of the Maltese. One of the great ironies of the whole situation is that the man who was carrying the gospel of salvation for all mankind, who loved his own people, and Jerusalem, “the city of the great King”, had been

obliged to invoke his privilege as a Roman citizen to escape the murderous fury of his own people; whereas the Maltese, a wholly Gentile people, had shown great kindness to him and the other refugees from the storm.

Time to leave Malta

The time would inevitably come when the winter weather was being replaced by signs of spring. Whilst we remind ourselves of what Vegetius has to say about the favourable times for sailing,¹ we must always recall that the Mediterranean is a vast, virtually inland, lake, and there must inevitably be great variations in weather conditions. Moreover, it often occurs that a period of storm and turbulence is succeeded by calm. It is as though nature has exhausted itself and needs to rest. There certainly appears to be an indication of this in the fact that, after three months on the

1. Vegetius, in a work earlier quoted in this series (Jun. 2007, p. 206), declares that it was perilous to venture on the sea up to 15 May; Bruce, in *The Book of Acts*, using Pliny the elder, mentions a date as early as 8 February (pp. 500-01).