

THESE IS an intriguing passage in Ecclesiastes which reads like this: "Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account: which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found. Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (7:27-29).

Solomon's rate of success here is not very impressive. One in a thousand men is not a great hit-rate, and the failure to find any women at all is even worse! But what does the passage really mean? What *sort* of man or woman is Solomon seeking, and to what purpose?

We can first note that the verses revolve around the idea of *finding*: "this have I *found* . . . counting . . . to *find out* the account . . . my soul *seeketh* . . . I *find* not; one man . . . have I *found*; but a woman . . . have I not *found*. Lo, this only have I *found* . . . [men] have *sought out* many inventions".

So Solomon is certainly looking, but what is he looking *for*? Paradoxically, in the first sentence of the passage he does not tell us! The effect is highly ironic: "Behold, this have I found [Eureka! We now expect it to be revealed, but what it actually *is* is not disclosed] . . . counting to find . . . my soul seeketh [and now the punch line], *but I find not*". So perhaps what he has found is that he hasn't found anything! Perhaps Solomon has been so busy counting that he has lost himself in the search. Along the way he manages to pick up a thousand wives and concubines, but what he was actually supposed to be seeking he does not find.

Yet while the irony of this is both delicious and, I suspect, deliberate, he *had* actually told us a few verses earlier the nature of his quest: "All this have I proved by wisdom: I said, I will be wise; but it was far from me. That which is far off, and exceeding deep, who can find it out? I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness: and I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her" (vv. 23-26).

So he had been seeking *wisdom*, but it was too far away for him ever fully to grasp it. Even for a

man of his abilities, unparalleled as they were, he could never truly attain to the wisdom he craved. There was a gulf fixed, as it were, between him and God and the full wisdom he craved. But what he most certainly did find was the bitter, deathly woman who represents the way of the flesh. He found the perverseness of his own nature and fell into its clutches too often. It is easier to stoop low than to reach high.

This casts light on the 'woman in a thousand' passage. Is Solomon's 1/1,000 hit-rate for men and 0/1,000 for women because men are more spiritual than women—just a little bit, even though the percentages are still minuscule? Probably unlikely. Perhaps more likely is that Solomon got distracted by other things about women that attracted him and forgot to look for the spiritual qualities he should have been seeking. And isn't it interesting that the very number of wives and concubines that Solomon had (1,000) matches perfectly the number of good women that he failed to find, the missing woman in a thousand? While a spiritual person of either gender is a rare find and one of unspeakable value, it is an awful lot harder if you are looking for or distracted by the wrong thing! The passage is about what Solomon failed to *find*, not what women (or men) actually *are*.

And though Solomon did indeed seek the personified woman of wisdom, she was always too far away from him, and his closer encounters were with the other woman of sin. The passage concludes, "God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions". It was true in Solomon's own life. He was 'upright' in the sense of the remarkable blessing of wisdom that God gave him and the righteous starting point from which his reign began. But even his very endeavours described in Ecclesiastes, his perpetual researching and seeking, ended up getting the better of him. He, of all men, can be said to have sought out many inventions (as well as many women). He learned that these things did not bring him nearer to God. They only clarified the emptiness of our existence without Him. With Solomon's experience to warn us, we each need to ensure we are seeking for the right things and are not distracted by the obvious attractions of the wrong.

Mark Vincent