

Modern Significance of Kohelet

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One of the important areas of concern for contemporary Biblical scholarship is the issue of the canonization of Hebrew Scripture. The process of determining which books should or should not be included in the Biblical canon was by no means a simple one and it elicited much discussion and debate. Among the books whose status was questioned was the book of Kohelet, which we read this Yom Tov/Shabbat morning.

According to rabbinic tradition, Kohelet was considered unworthy of inclusion in the Holy Bible for three different reasons:

1. There are many inconsistencies and contradictions in this work.

בקשו חכמים לגנוח ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה (שבת ל:)

2. It consists merely of superficial, insignificant "sayings" and lacks sufficient substance to merit the distinction accorded a Biblical work.

מפני שהם משלות ואינן מן הכתובים (אבית דר' נתן, א')

3. It contains matters which smack of skepticism and heresy.

שמצאו בו דברים שהם נוטים לצד מינות (ויקרא רבה כח: א, קהלת רבה

ג: א, פסיקתא דר' כהנא, ח')

Nevertheless, in spite of these negative factors, it was included because it begins and ends by stressing the importance of Torah.

ומפני מה לא גנווהו מפני שתחלתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה (שבת ל:)

This debate over the status of Kohelet within the Holy Scriptures is important because it reflects our dilemma as human beings as well. We, too, suffer from the three drawbacks which the rabbis associated with this work:

1. In our own personal lives, we too are never consistent. We constantly vacillate between optimism and pessimism, honesty and deceit,

joy and sadness, love and anger, harshness and compassion, piety and non-observance, etc. Just some two weeks ago, on Yom Kippur, we behaved one way; a few days later we already behave quite differently.

2. So much of our lives is superficial, insignificant and inconsequential as we go from one day to the next in the course of our ordinary, mundane daily existence. So little of our lives is insightful, profound or creative. When asked in 1980 what it had been like to leave the world of music for five years, the late John Lennon responded:

At first, it was very hard. But musically my mind was just a clutter. . . . There was no inspiration, and it gave off an aura of misery. I couldn't hear the music for the noise in my own head. By turning away, I began to hear it again. It's like Newton, who never would have conceived of what the apple falling meant had he not been daydreaming under a tree. That's what I'm living for. . . . the joy of having the apple fall on my head once every five years. (Newsweek, September 29, 1980, p.77)

Our "highs" are, indeed, few and far between.

3. Finally, on occasion, we too "tend toward skepticism," or even heresy. In this modern, scientific, secular, post-Holocaust world it is inevitable that any thinking, serious and sensitive person will have doubts. It isn't easy for anyone to be an unequivocal believer in these tumultuous times. In 1978 the controversial German theologian, Hans Kung, wrote a book entitled, *Does God Exist?* in which he consolidated all the proofs and arguments in favor of the existence of God—all in a mere nine hundred pages!

But, nevertheless, Kohelet teaches us that with all our inconsistencies, superficialities and skepticism we need not feel unworthy. We too can be considered part of the "Biblical Canon"—as long as we recognize the importance and centrality of "keeping His commandments."

As Dr. Norman Lamm has argued in a major essay on this subject, Judaism *does* allow for genuine, honest and sincere doubt, but only as long as it is limited to the "cognitive" or thinking realm and is not carried over into the "functional" or acting realm. In the theoretical sphere one need not come to a definite conclusion. Practically, however, no such luxury is possible. "One can suspend intellectual judgment; one cannot suspend action. . . . In practice, you must act *as if* there were a God or *as if* there were no God. There is no middle ground; inaction is also a decision." (N. Lamm, *Faith and Doubt* [New York, 1971], 18-19.)

Even if we lack consistency and profundity and even if we are on occasion, plagued by doubt, we are never to feel rejected as long as we *act* in accordance with Jewish law. סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלהים ירא ואת מצותיו (קהלת יב: יג). שמור כי זה כל האדם (קהלת יב: יג).

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