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Gone with the Wind

MIKE FALLEN

REL 2040: Bible, Qur'an and Western Culture, Spring 2018

Nominated by: Dr. Mark Verman

Mike Fallen is an English major at Wright State University. He likes to write and offers this quote from Thoreau to describe himself: "Here is life, an experiment to a great extent yet untried by me."

Mike notes:

I was interested in the ways in which Konoletch employed wind as an analogy for the ephemeral view of human nature he finds in Ecclesiastes.

Dr. Verman notes:

This essay is in response to an assignment that required students to select a short book of the Bible and discuss it in two parts. The first section offers an academic appreciation and analysis of the work. In part two students were challenged with imagining that they were a disciple of the author of the book and were asked to compose a funeral eulogy for their recently deceased teacher. Mike's wonderful essay on Ecclesiastes, a biblical meditation on the meaning of life, is consistently engaging. At times lyrical in phrasing, it is both evocative and insightful--a joy to read.

Gone with the Wind

Life is short. As the universal time-scale stretches further and further – back to whatever caused our universe-sized vortex of planets, stars, atoms and dust – the human time-scale shrinks. The universe is purportedly 13.8 billion years old. The average life-span for a male in western society ranges from 70-80 years, a drop in the bucket. Every action a man takes in his life won't affect the motion of the cosmos. Science tells us everything tends towards entropy. The universe will eventually turn back to meaningless information in the form of heat. So why bother? Man's attempts to stay are as fleeting and futile as his attempts to control the wind.

What exactly is futility? Existentialist philosophers, like Albert Camus, have tried defining it. Camus provides his definition in the form of allegory. *The Myth of Sisyphus* places Sisyphus in an eternal toil imposed by the Gods for his failure to find meaning in life. He is tasked with spending his time pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down again. Sisyphus toils away knowing that nothing will come of it.

The Book of Ecclesiastes agrees with Camus' definition of futility. In Ecclesiastes the Hebrew word, "hevel" is often translated as futility, or, in an equally common translation, vanity. But no word truly captures this sensation. Kierkegaard used despair, dread, and anxiety. Camus used absurdity. Nietzsche used Nihilism and aphorisms. But, perhaps hevel is best captured by the metaphor for the flight of the wind employed in Ecclesiastes.

"Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind; on its rounds the wind returns" (EC 1:6). What effect can man, in all his endeavors, have on the wind? What are man's actions but various wind-like twists and turns. The book of Ecclesiastes seeks to answer this question. It answers with a firm rejection of man's ability to cause lasting change on earth. Ecclesiastes makes the claim that, "All is futile" (EC 1:2).

Ecclesiastes is self-attributed to "Koheleth." Who was Koheleth? The text marks him as, "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (EC 1:1). Scholars agree that this Koheleth is intended to be Solomon. Koheleth in Hebrew, is not a name, but a noun signifying, according to JSB an "Assembler."¹ Assembler here meaning an assembler of utterances, or possibly someone who

¹ JSB 1602

assembles people to read Ecclesiastes. According to Ehrman, Koheleth could also mean simply “preacher” or “teacher.”²

But, Koheleth cannot be Solomon. Both JSB and Ehrman, and the scholars they cite, agree that the book was written after the reign and life of Solomon. Ehrman says, “There is no way [Koheleth] actually was Solomon.”³ Ehrman cites anachronistic Aramaic and Persian vocabulary, as well as themes from the book which seem to derive from later “Hellenistic” philosophical traditions.⁴ The desperate themes explored in the book also contribute to its questionable heritage. The book does not seem to jive with the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. It’s canonization within the Hebrew Scriptures is, according to Crenshaw in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, likely a result of the book’s epilogue, which, “removed the sting from Qohelet’s skepticism and advocated traditional views concerning observance of Torah.”⁵ The epilogue will be treated in greater detail later. Exploring a sort-of ancient Pascal’s wager, Ecclesiastes seeks to show that our material, earthly, existence is fleeting and futile. Rather than instantiating hope for the future of the children of Israel, Ecclesiastes denies material gain and places the question of an Afterlife in brackets. Koheleth poses the rhetorical question, “What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun?” (EC 1:3). The readers are prompted to silently answer: none.

Koheleth has seen the world and searched for wisdom across the earth. He searched for it in “merriment” (EC 2:1). Koheleth is left with the question, “What good is that?” (EC 2:2). Chapter 2 seeks to list Koheleth’s various attempts to “learn which of the two was better for men to practice in their few days of life under heaven” (EC 2:3) He tries to acquire material possessions. He tries food. He tries concubines. He tries ranching. Over and over, he likens each of these attempts to a “pursuit of the wind” (2:26).

So, according to Ecclesiastes, why bother? “Appreciate your vigor in the days of your youth,” answers Koheleth. Ehrman says, Koheleth’s answer is “We should live life to the fullest as long as we can.”⁶ Hedonism seems to

² Ehrman 203

³ Ehrman 203

⁴ Ehrman 203

⁵ Harper’s 520

⁶ Ehrman 204

be the answer. What does it mean to live life to the fullest? Koheleth says, “the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself. That much can accompany him, in exchange for his wealth, through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun” (EC 8:15). If everything beneath the sun is fleeting like the wind, all one can do is enjoy oneself.

The Hebrew God is portrayed very differently in Ecclesiastes than elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Genesis, God walks among Adam and Eve and creates the earth. He instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, turns someone to a pillar of salt, and rains fire down on Sodom and Gomorrah. In Ecclesiastes, there’s no doubt of his existence, but his hand in affecting the movement of human beings is restricted only to giving them life. God’s hands are folded in his lap. He is patiently watching mankind as they toil away in *hevel*, in futility, in vanity.

Ecclesiastes holds God at arm’s length until finally, in the last words, Koholeth says, “The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind.” Uphold His commandments? The last verses of Ecclesiastes ring like a discordant note compared to the harmony of the rest of the book. According to JSB and Ehrman, this discordance is owed to a “later orthodox editor.” Koholeth did not write the ending. But, this supposition begs the question “Why would a later orthodox editor want to include the book of Ecclesiastes in the corpus of the Hebrew Scriptures?”

Camus, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard all reached the same conclusion as the writer of Ecclesiastes. But, each of them rejects suicide, rejects a hatred of human existence, and instead, in their own ways, revolts against this conclusion. Camus finds Sisyphus happy. Nietzsche encourages us to transcend a priestly morality. Dostoyevsky’s Ivan Karamozov dies. Kierkegaard remains a Christian. Koholeth’s wisdom leads him to seek deep enjoyment from life. The later orthodox editor must have included Ecclesiastes alongside Genesis, Exodus, and the whole corpus of the Hebrew Scriptures, to inculcate readers and future generations from succumbing to *hevel*, this much is obvious. But, according to Ehrman, the later addition “provided a means for interpreting everything that went before it, which now is read in light of the fact that there is a judgement day coming.”⁷

⁷ Ehrman 205

It would seem then, that the later orthodox editor, added their ending to discuss life after death. Modern Christians might interpret this book along the following lines: all is *hevel*, so uphold God's commandments and be rewarded in the afterlife for your toiling here on earth. Though the Hebrew Scriptures, analyzed separate from the New Testament, does not support this interpretation. The Hebrew Scriptural notion of the afterlife is, according to Ehrman, "a place of rest."⁸ The modern Christian interpretation must be abandoned; it was not the intention of the later orthodox editor to invoke the afterlife.

It is shocking that mankind can be so doubtful about the ultimate meaning of their earthly existence and still toil away on earth. Tragedy happens, suffering is an aspect of life, yet, here we are performing our various meaningless tasks: working, eating, procreating, writing essays. No existentialist author thinks we should ignore suffering. But, instead, they all agree that it is possible to derive morality, meaning, or purpose *from* suffering. Although our lives are filled to the brim with *hevel*, we need not despair. Koholeth takes this argument a step further. He goes on to cite all sorts of idols and ideals which enthrall mankind (wealth, sex, leisure, wisdom), and shows them all as meaningless.

The task I have been asked to carry through today is impossible. And, not only is it impossible, it is unlikely to matter to many of you, who, gathered here today, are also doing the impossible by attending the funeral of a nameless man. Surely, he was given a name at birth. Surely, he had a mother, a father, a family, somewhere. But, the call of the wind encouraged him to abandon them. He abandoned everyone and everything he couldn't heft onto his shoulders. He had no friends. He had no name. He was wholly alone.

He spent his life traveling. Whipped by the wind, he meandered as far north as Damascus, and as far south as Beersheba. Not wistfully, but solemnly. It was not pure pleasure which guided him, but a careful study of one sensation: the feeling of the wind at his back, of dust clouds hovering always close at his heels.

⁸ Ibid. 204

Contrary to his youth, his last years were spent holed away in his study. Commissioned by the King, to whom, as you all know, he was a distant relative, he spent his last three years dictating a book. The road had not left him with time to learn reading or writing, and it was only accident that I was chosen as his transcriptionist. I was sent to him and told to do exactly as he asked. When I arrived, all he asked was that I keep up.

His task, like mine, was impossible. He knew his days were numbered. At the time we began writing, his health was very poor. He would sit huddled in a chair across from my desk. He was usually wrapped in wool blankets and had a terrible cough. He shook. Though he knew his life was coming to a close, he figured he would have just enough time to finish telling me everything. The impossibility of death, though it loomed at the back of his mind, was not the most pressing impossibility he had to confront. He was being asked to translate a life swept by the wind onto a sheet of papyrus as permanent as stone.

When we started, it soon became clear that his memory had not held up. He recounted thousands of different stints in different cities. There were gaps, and long pauses while he dug down into bedrock to retrieve only a few disparate glimpses. It also became clear that the man we're gathered here today to celebrate, was a diligent and watchful man. Yet, when the time came to share what he had seen, he was left with nothing firm. He told me of great buildings he had helped build. He told me of plantations he grew from the first seed, of great riches he had gained and lost, of revelry, of friendship. And, in each of these glimmers, his memories seemed like ledger entries: this great accomplishment in this small city with this many people affected. But what would last? As he sat across from me, recounting, I watched his memories wriggle through his fingers and disappear in air.

A year into writing, he had a realization. We burned everything we had written up to the point and embarked anew. He told me that day, "We will capture the wind." For the next month, he spoke with a peculiar lucidity. Closing his eyes, he told me of the poles of life. He asked that question: What would last? He sought his answer zealously. Pleasure was futile, his youth had convinced him of that. In his mind, the space saved for his youth, was hollowed out by his pursuit of pleasure. Riches were futile. Wisdom, futile. He struggled with wisdom. It had seemed to him that the wisdom of his realization was deeply meaningful. Nothing lasts. But, how would he reconcile what seemed to him to be a bedrock truth with what that truth

revealed? He couldn't. Not for lack of trying. Not even for lack of time. There came a day, about three months ago, when I knocked on his door. He let me in, we sat down, and he told me that he had decided to stop his book, and that he believed it was finished. He saw no need for a proper ending, and I was to collect his papers, assemble them, and give them to the King. He also said that he would not claim the piece. He wanted it attributed to Qoheleth, for this is all he did, assemble a few scraps of paper.

He did not concern himself with the fame he would have received for writing his book. He would not carry any of that fame with him where he went after his death.

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