Kohelet: The Veiled God

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It really, absolutely no seeing.
Bertram Hessler, O.F.M.

KOHELET: THE VEILED GOD

I

AS THE Old Covenant draws toward its close, we meet a unique figure, perhaps the darkest and, at first sight, the most enigmatic of all its figures. Even his name is wrapped in silence: he calls himself, in his own tongue, "Kohelet"; we call him, in ours, "The Preacher," and the work which preserves his words "The Book of the Preacher" or Ecclesiastes.

There is no end to the riddles about this figure. As early as the first Christian centuries, God-fearing rabbis found his words a stumbling block and therefore wished them struck from the Canon; only after long, embittered controversy was it decided that this wise man wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and that hence his work was a holy work. Time and again in the course of the centuries, the same dispute blazed anew. By some the book was called "the high song of skepticism," by others "the high song of the fear of God." Some saw in its author an "enlightened" Jew who, having wandered from the faith of his fathers, blindly and indiscriminately drank in all the wisdom of Hellenism, all that Greek philosophy of his day offered in the way of unthought-out problems and interpretations of life. Others considered him a pious Jew who, unbroken in the midst of conflicting philosophical opinions on the worth or unworth of life, clung to the God of the fathers; who, shaken by the insight that life's ultimate issues were insoluble, answered with a defiant "still," with the "nevertheless" of faith. Or a pious man who, rather than inquire into the meaning and value of existence, fled blindly into the sheltering arms of God. Finally, there were those who thought him like an ostrich burying his confused head in the desert sands of ancestral faith.1

1. Among the works on Kohelet in English are two important Jewish commentaries which differ in many respects from Father Hessler's interpretation. Rabbi Vic-
Yet all who have ever encountered this puzzling man of wisdom have been stirred by him in their very souls, have been unable to free themselves from his grip. Soon the enigmatic sage no longer seemed an unknown, a nameless man of the third or second century before Christ, but some one well known, who expressed what had long been burning in their souls, even lain on their tongues, though a last reserve had forbidden them to spell it out. He was simply man—man as he wrestles with the dark questions of existence and bleeds from a thousand wounds; man bare, naked, at the limits of himself, standing before the veiled God.

It depended then on the strength of their own souls if this wise man became for his readers one “who taught the people knowledge” (12:9), a leader to his God, as holy Scripture puts it; or whether he became for them a leader astray, who abandoned them in the dreary desert of their own selves all alone, who left them cynics, despising the world and denying life, failures in their search for God, and perhaps even murderers who slew God in their own breasts.

II

VANITY of vanities,” says the Preacher; “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (1:2). This, set at the beginning and the end of his work, tor Reichert sees in Kohelet a “juxtaposition of piety and skepticism” which he considers part of “the whole paradox of the Jewish mind.” “Stoic fatalism and Epicurean hedonism have their say,” he maintains, “yet in the end we rise to the higher synthesis of reverence for God and obedience to His commandments” (The Five Megilloth, ed. A. Cohen, Hindhead, Surrey: Soncino Press, 1946, pp. 105, 106). Rabbi Robert Gordis thinks of Kohelet as a man whom personal experience or reflection had robbed of the traditional Jewish faith, yet who, like any Jew of ancient times, cannot doubt the reality of God for an instant. Dr. Gordis finds Kohelet’s “skeptical outlook . . . rooted in his temperament” and “nurtured also by his position among the well-to-do classes of society.” “To taste life’s joys without self-deception and to face its sorrows without despair” is his teaching, which, according to Dr. Gordis, fills “an everlastingly significant function.” Summing up, he writes: “In the deepest sense, Koheleth is a religious book, because it seeks to grapple with reality” (Koheleth—The Man and His World, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951, pp. 112, 118, 121, 122). For the most recent evaluation by a Catholic scholar, see the study by Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm., “The Pensées of Coheleth,” in the festive issue of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly honoring Archbishop Edwin V. O’Hara (XVII, 2, April 1955, pp. 304-314). Explaining the looseness of its composition by placing it in the same literary genre as Pascal’s Pensées, he calls it the reflections and jottings of a mature man on the meaning of life (edited, and perhaps reworked to some extent, by one of his disciples), which seem to anticipate Christ’s pointed question: “What does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul?” (Mt 16:26). [Editor.]
Wisdom seems to be the grand sum of his disappointments, the alpha and omega of his long, and yet so meaningless, life. Meaningless, for now that he has come to the end of his days, there dawns on him the shattering knowledge: what he was, he has remained, a wretched, helpless man, trapped within the laws and limits of his nature. After many laborious years, he has to confess that they all came to nothing; that the paths of his life—the twisted and the straight, the steep and the plane—brought him, by long and tiring journeys, only to his journey's start: to himself, to his own miserable being. He is still delivered to the order of nature, faring exactly like the wind, "which blows to the man south and turns about to the north; round and round the wind moves, only to return to the beginning of its round"; or like the rivers, which all "flow into the sea, yet never does the sea grow full; to the place where the rivers go, thither must they go again" (1:6, 7). And he knows also that all that remains for him is to go the way of all who went before him, to sink into the ocean of oblivion. "There is no remembrance," he laments, "of those of former times, nor will those that are to come be remembered by those that will come after" (1:11).

In the midst of this unremitting round of things he feels powerless in spite of all his energy; handed over to dark, blind laws; tossed to and fro from grief to gladness, from gladness to grief, from love to hate, from hate to love. Thus he avows:

Everything has its appointed time and every undertaking under the sky its hour. There is an hour to be born and an hour to die. An hour to plant and an hour to uproot that which is planted . . . An hour to weep and an hour to laugh; An hour to mourn and an hour to dance . . . An hour to embrace and an hour to shun embracing . . . An hour to keep and an hour to cast away . . . An hour to love and an hour to hate; An hour for war and an hour for peace.

(3:1-8)

Then, with tired resignation he draws up the balance: "What profit has a man of all his toil with which he toils beneath the sun?" (3:9; 1:3). For all his labor, he is but the sport of conflicting forces, not the master of his life.
In this continual hither-and-thither, man's life rushes away and, all at once, they are here, "the evil days of which you say: they please me not; when the sun is darkened, and the light, and the moon, and the stars" (12:1-2), when vitality sinks and the world becomes like a wide landscape in the heat of noon. All living things have crept into hiding, the streets are a waste and the stillness of death is in them, all is desert. The almond tree withers, its leaves fall; the grasshopper has to drag itself along over the dry grass, its end is near; and like all life our own cherished life too vanishes in this landscape of death. "Then the silver cord is severed, the golden bowl is shattered, the pitcher is broken at the fountain, the wheel falls broken into the well. The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, who made it." All that is left us is to call after this departing life the one word: "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity" (12:3-8).

Through the dark door of death, man walks into an icy silence, and takes with him on this last journey not even the comfort that he is any better than the beast, for experience tells him clearly and unmistakably: "As the one dies, so does the other, for there is the same breath of life in both of them. So man has no advantage over the beast. All go to one place, all come from dust and all return to dust. Who knows whether the spirit of men mounts upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?" (3:18-21). To this bitter sentence, the Preacher has apparently only this to add: "So I saw that there is nothing better for man than to rejoice in his works. This is his portion, for who shall permit him to share in what shall be after him?" (3:22).

Yet is not this flight into life ultimately a flight from life? Is this man, who seems to have nothing further to say on the problem of life than: "Eat your bread with joy. Drink your wine with gladness... Let your head not lack for oil. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all your days, vain as they are" (9:7-9)—is he not at bottom one whom life has broken? Has he not grown weary; does he not seek to drug life's anguish in the delirium of pleasure; must he not see time and again how, from the icy regions of death, frost settles on the joyous flowers of his life to destroy them?

III

But now there seems to rise before our eyes another Kohelet. Having spent many long and wakeful nights careworn and pondering, he is at
last resigned, pushes his books aside, puts out the lamp on his study table, and speaks: "As for the rest, be warned, my son! Of making many books there is no end and much study wearies the flesh" (12:12). Yes, there seems to rise another Kohelet, who knows no other way out of the dark riddles he has met in his studies than flight. But his flight is not into life and its pleasures, it is flight to God: "Let us all hear the concluding word: Fear God and keep His commandments. Such is every man's duty, for God shall bring every work to judgment, every hidden thing, whether it be good or evil" (12:13-14). So he counsels, and yet must confess that this flight fails, for fleeing from darkness he falls into new darkness. His flight does not take him to the father-arms of his God but only to the limit of his own self, to his own finitude and miserable creatureliness. He arrives at a chilling, inaccessible mystery, the "veiled God": "As you do not know how the breath of life enters the child in the womb of a woman, so you do not know the doings of God, who does all things" (11:5). His cry of distress, his anguished questions, his unceasing "why" and "wherefore," remain unanswered; they die away in the icy, silent mystery of his God: "God is in heaven and you are on earth" (5:1).

Must not this bitter cold mystery of a hidden God bring man to torpor, even to death? Is not that fear of God to which the Preacher exhorts us really the paralyzing anguish of the creature, laming our whole life? What good does such fear of God do us? Does not Kohelet himself say: "One lot comes to all, to the just and to the wicked, to the clean and to the unclean, to him who brings sacrifice and to him who brings not. As with the good, so with the sinner. As with him who swears, so with him who swears not" (9:2)? Indeed, he avows: "I have seen the wicked carried to their graves with honor, while those who had done right had to wander from the holy place and were forgotten in the city. This too is vanity" (8:10).

With all this, who would not rather be among those who think that "Kohelet the pessimist," "Kohelet the hedonist," "Kohelet the skeptic" is the more consistent—he who sings, with wounded heart, of the vanity of life, and all the while, though with trembling hands, serves up the goblet of joy? And who would not look with pity, perhaps even a certain contempt, upon the other Kohelet, who flees into the dark mystery of a God shrouded in icy silence, heedless of our cries of distress, and stifling our shouts of joy on our very lips? Who would not
Bertram Hessler, O.P.M.

prefer the one to the other?—provided, to be sure, that there is this double Kohelet.

IV

But so far we have ignored one thing. The book Kohelet is part of the Book of Books, of holy Scripture; it is a book of revelation, and the words of the Preacher are therefore—so St. Paul witnesses—helpful in instructing, reproving, correcting, and educating us in holy living (2 Tim 3:16). As Christians, we ask of this, as of every other book in the Old and New Testaments: What is its soteriological significance? In other words, what is its task in the history of salvation? What task did it have to accomplish for the man of the Old Covenant, and what task does it still have to accomplish for us men of the New, who live in the fullness of time? Hence we ask: Where is the key to unlock the enigmatic words of that unknown man who stands near the turning from the Old to the New Dispensation?

The key is first in the bitter knowledge that all things earthly are but shadows, and shadows of shadows, from the beginning to the end the cry, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," sounds through every experience of the Preacher. But others before him had found this key to the interpretation of the world and of life, and countless others after him, down to a Schopenhauer, a Heidegger, a Jaspers, indeed all the disillusioned and despairing of our unhappy day, perhaps even including ourselves. They all philosophized, or else acted and lived, out of the anguish life begets. Obviously, to experience the vanity of earthly things required no disclosure by the Spirit of God.

Another key must be hidden in the book to make us understand what is really meant by the hollowness of all things creaturely, a key given not by experience but by revelation. What it unlocks is not the fact of hollowness—this we experience sorely enough in our own persons almost every day—but its reason, its cause; not the "that" but the "why" of all the darkness that envelops our lives.

The great unknown at the threshold of the New Testament becomes thus the great knower, who knows of this key and, as far as is given him, unlocks with it the riddles of human existence. Kohelet knows of mankind's radiant beginning; he knows that "God has made every­thing beautiful in its time, even eternity has He set in the hearts of
Kohelet: The Veiled God

197

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men" (3:11). But he knows also of a darker sequel, of a guilt which

became man's doom. It is not without significance that the Preacher

hammers again and again, with utmost intensity, into the ears of his

hearers: "No one has power over the breath of life"; "All go to one

place, all come from dust and all return to dust" (3:20; 6:6; 8:8).

There is in these words the luminous knowledge of the sentence

pronounced by the Creator-God in mankind's bright morning: "Be-

cause you have eaten of the tree of which I have commanded you not
to eat: Cursed be the ground because of you; in toil shall you eat of

it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to

you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your brow

you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, since out of it you

were taken; for dust you are and unto dust you shall return" (Gen

3:17-19). Since that hour man lives in awayness from God, no longer

in nearness. Since that hour the fear of God is, as a sign of distance, the

soul's stand, the stand, that is, of man the sinner.

This fate some bore in penance and submission, awaiting the hour

of grace when God would step out of His remoteness, when He would

be no longer veiled but unveiled. Others opposed it in titanic defiance

and so continued the sin which was the sin of the first human pair:

rebellion against the limits of creaturehood and the haughty will to

invade God's realm as their own lords. "You will be like God, know-

ing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). Thus, as the history of salvation took

tits course, there were those who tried to wrench from life an ultimate

meaning and unshakable safeguard in earthly civilization and culture;

 theirs was a world from which the name of God was obliterated and

which, "stripped" of Him, saw itself as God. Even in the first pages of

the Bible, we have a hint of this (Gen 4:17-24). Again, some sought to

make their existence secure in the expansion of political power, com-

bining nations into a mighty, Godlike empire: we know the story of th e

tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). Then there were those—and here we

are at the Preacher's own period—who tried to wrest a last significance

from life by means of philosophical systems, by the motto, for instance:

Enjoyment is the last fulfillment of life; or: To know the mysteries of

the world is to enter the realm of the divine; or: The creation of a just

social order, of a commonwealth, is the true unfolding of life. Against

all these, the unknown Preacher, his heart wounded but believing,

hurls a determined "no," and utters an all the more determined "yes" to
the lot apportioned man by God since man's first sin. It is his "yes" of submission to life's darkness, of hopeful waiting for the hour when God's unveiling of Himself will lift the veils of our existence and take away its night.

V

THROUGH the words of the Preacher, from beginning to end, run a "no" and a "yes," a "no" which denies that life's mysteries can be disclosed from within the world, and a "yes" which waits till God unveils them.

This is his "no": Man cannot of himself thrust through the limits of his creaturely state, he cannot break through the iron yoke of natural laws to which he is fettered as creature. The most visible proof is death: relentless, armed with natural law, it will call man from the stage of life, as it does any other creature, when his God-set hour comes. "All go to one place, all come from dust and all return to dust" (3:20).

But not even for the brief span given him does man succeed in being a sovereign, at home in this world. Time and again he experiences that he is not alone in determining his life, that there is a higher will determining it with him, down to its smallest details. It is precisely here that he senses the whole calamity of his creaturely existence: not even for the brief span between birth and death can he create for himself an undisturbed and indestructible home. Ultimately he remains a homeless wanderer, a fugitive. "The just and the wise, together with their works, are in the hands of God. Whether love or hatred will come to him man does not know. Anything may be his future" (9:1-2).

It is not knowledge that can help man transcend the limits of his finitude; nor can it assure him, in this world, of firm ground to stand on. To his era's craze for knowledge and to the human defiance that wishes, by means of knowledge, to thrust into the realm of the divine—Kohelet hurls an equally defiant "no." And this he puts into the mouth of Solomon, whom the ancient Orient considered to be without a doubt the embodiment of the wise man. To him God had said: "Lo, I shall give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will have been none before you like you nor will any like you arise after you" (3 Kg 3:12). Now, what does Kohelet make this wisest of all the wise say to all who are not made wise by intuition and experience, by the abundance of life? "Whoever has a "no," know how it is folly, I have said. "All is vanity, what has been before will be again and all is vanity and a pursuit of wind" (1:16-17).

Thus the Preacher speaks to the human striving, to the human dream of making a no a yes. It is folly, rather the promise of a no, a new life based on a new death. As dies the body, so dies the spirit. "All is vanity, and life is a breath" (3:15).

In vain man seeks to make his life a no. As dies the body, so dies the spirit. Man cannot thrust through the limits of his creaturely state, cannot break through the yoke of natural law to which he is fettered as creature, is not alone in determining his life. Ultimately he remains a homeless wanderer, a fugitive. "The just and the wise, together with their works, are in the hands of God. Whether love or hatred will come to him man does not know. Anything may be his future" (9:1-2).

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time which enshrouds life—death, the dark door through which wise and foolish, man and beast alike, have to pass. They have to pass through it (2:15-16), and yet no human eye can ever penetrate its darkness. “No advantage has man over the beast. As dies the one, so dies the other. All is vanity. Who knows whether the spirit of man mounts upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?” (3:19, 21). At this frontier, then, the man of wisdom encountered the veiled God Himself. “No man can fathom God’s work here under the sun. However much he strives to read its meaning, he will not understand it” (8:17). So knowledge ends in darkness, and to those who offer it as the answer to life’s riddle, Kohelet replies with a defiant “no."

No more can vitality and its satisfactions grant ultimate fulfillment to human existence. Again Kohelet opposes a stark “no,” this time to the motto: Enjoy the pleasures of life. And again it is Solomon whom he makes his mouthpiece, to whom it was said: “Even the things you have not asked, I shall give you, both riches and honor, so that there will be no king like you all the days of your life” (3 Kg 3:13). But Solomon too had to acknowledge: “Great works have I done, houses I built for myself and vineyards I planted. I laid out gardens and orchards planted with every kind of fruit tree. I made pools to water the forest of growing trees. I bought menservants and maidservants and I had slaves born in my house. I owned cattle and sheep, much more than all who lived before me in Jerusalem. I heaped together silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired men singers and women singers, all the delights of men, of young women a great number. So I grew great, greater than all who had been before me in Jerusalem. . . . Whatever my eyes desired I did not deny to
them, nor did I refuse to my heart any pleasure. . . . And then I turned to look on all the works my hands had wrought and on the labor I had spent on them. And lo, all was vanity and chasing of wind. Nothing is gained under the sun” (2:4-11).

The Preacher has yet another "no" to speak, his last, defying all those who think that by social activity they can wrest a meaning from this fleeting life, that they can give ultimate security to human existence by means of a welfare state. But theirs is a calculation which omits a decisive factor: man's sinfulness, which blights all such efforts at the root, which again and again wrecks them at the very start. "Still another thing I saw under the sun: the place of law taken by wickedness, and the place of justice taken by wickedness” (3:16).

VI

Were this triple "no" of scorn wisdom's final word, Koheleth would really be nothing but a pessimist, a negator of life. But that is just what it is not: for him "no" is not wisdom's end but wisdom's beginning. It is the point of departure from which he soars to that higher wisdom which teaches him to submit to the limits of his creaturehood, modestly to remain within the boundaries God's will has set for him. Koheleth knows full well that within this frame there is to be had a relative satisfaction and fulfillment, for to him the world is by no means essentially corrupt. He knows that the very first page of Scripture judges the world thus: "God saw all that He had made; and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). So he too can say: "He has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11). The things of earth turn evil only in the hands of man, who misuses them for his own selfish purposes. Hence Koheleth can counsel: "There is nothing better for man than to eat and to drink and to let his soul be merry in all his labor. Indeed, I saw that this too comes from the hand of God. For who can eat or who can be merry without Him?” (2:24-25).

Hence the things of earth are emptied of meaning for man only when used by him against their meaning, as if they were the ultimate fulfillment of his creaturely existence and could fill the space in man that God alone can fully fill. Koheleth is not filled by them, not sated. He is a man who stands at the bounds of his creaturehood as one ultimately un-filled—more, as one who is broken but not broken apart, broken by his self but raised by his God. He does not despair, rather does he believe, he "Fear God and keep His commandments, for that is the entire duty of man while he lives. For God shall bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be bad” (10:27-28).

His heart was filled with God. Since man's fate is afar, a God no longer grants to sinful man everlasting ways; indeed, a God contradictory in His darkness will give the fear of God, sign under the weight of her sin, made humanly know of all things here on earth, the heart to know at least the reward is given the one who has their hatred, their will they have paid.

Perhaps nowhere are intimations of ultimate salvation for the sin, who wants to hear the moment he was through existence immediately that moment every carry him from here and alertness to await the hour when to man.

The words of Koheleth resound the unsin-laden existence of others spoken in the hiddenness of harmonies of earthly disharmonies with the disharmonies
I then does he believe, hear, and obey. And this is the issue of his wisdom: "Fear God and keep His commandments. Such is every man's duty, for God shall bring every work to judgment, every hidden thing, whether it be good or evil" (12:13-14).

His heart wounded, but his faith strong, Kohelet bows before his God. Since man's first sin, this God is no longer the near God but God afar, a God no longer of unveiling but of veiling. He is a God who grants to sinful man no insight into the ultimate reasons behind His ways; indeed, a God who appears to human eyes simply enigmatic, contradictory in His doings, cold in His relationship with the world.

This darkness which envelops God grows more a burden, and the fear of God, sign of His farness, becomes more and more a bending under the weight of His hiddenness, because what is particularly taken from man the sinner is a clear gaze into the beyond. What he can humanly know of it is not much more than that it is the ceasing of life here on earth, the ceasing of all man's vital functions: "The living know at least they they will die, but the dead know nothing. No reward is given them anymore, their memory is forgotten. Their love, their hatred, their passion—all have perished long ago. Nevermore will they have part in anything that is done under the sun" (9:5-6).

Perhaps nowhere else than in the dark uncertainty about these questions of ultimate concern is there so manifest the calamity of the man of sin, who wanted to be like God, knowing good and evil. As punishment he was thrown back from an existence immediate to God to an existence immediate to himself, that is, to his own mortal being. From that moment every road was blocked on which his own efforts could carry him from his world-immanence to the realm of the divine; from that moment there remained to him only one possibility—in obedience to eat and alertness to stretch his arms toward his Creator and in patience to await the hour when God would step out of His veiledness and descend to man.

The words of the Preacher are grave, very grave; words in which resound the unspeakable suffering and the whole calamity of man's sin-laden existence; words which show with inexorable force—as do no others spoken in the course of sacred history—the shadows which the hiddenness of God spreads over man's life and lot: the disharmonies of empirical life, the disharmonies of the ethical realm, the disharmonies which the dark fate of death sends into man's existence, the disharmonies which the obscure, God-given order of the world
brings about. They are words of confession, but at the same time words of renunciation. Unconditionally they break with man who rules himself and on his own tries to change his misery; they break with man who looks on himself as a god. And in this breaking, they grow into words of desire, into a burning cry for the unveiling of this God before whom man sees himself a riddle and a wretchedness; they become a penetrating cry for the revelation of the New Testament, which is "truth and life" (Jn 14:6).

VII

What the Apostle says of the whole Old Testament, that in its innermost essence it was "a tutor leading to Christ" (Gal 3:24), is true also of the enigmatic figure of the Preacher. As the days of the Old Dispensation neared their end, he revealed man's utter wretchedness. Thus he too is a tutor leading to Christ, and thus his words turn into one of the most stirring messianic "prophecies." By disclosing the misery of man the sinner in his remoteness from God, by leading him again and again to the limits of his own being and before the mystery of God veiled, his words awaken in him a desire for God's unveiling. They also make him ready to reach toward Him in whom God clearly and forever stepped out of His veiling into the unveiling, to reach toward Him who is "the likeness of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), "the brightness of His glory and the image of His being" (Heb 1:3). But for us, men of the New Testament, the words of Kohelet standing at its threshold, disclose no less the gladness of our redemption.

For Jesus, the Christ, is God's final emergence out of the veiling into the unveiling, the light which illumines the night of God's hiddenness. On His face we see shining the glory of God the Father (2 Cor 4:6). And this radiance of the divine glory issuing from Him takes from our face the shadow of care, anguish, and greed, or even the devil's darkness, and lets the face of man redeemed become again the mirror of God. In Christ, God receives man back into the arms of His father-goodness, into His love, and puts on his lips the words "our Father," leading him thus from anguish and concern into the carefreeness of a child of God. The troubled words: "No man knows what the future will bring, for who can declare to him what shall be?" (8:7), He answers with the assurance: "Do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? For the things of this world pass away. But seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you." The Word of God teaches the power of God and the power of the Father and the Holy Ghost. Life; death; hope; death; life; death; life; death; life; life; death; life; death; life; death. This is to look on oneself as a god. And in this breaking, they grow into words of desire, into a burning cry for the unveiling of this God before whom man sees himself a riddle and a wretchedness; they become a penetrating cry for the revelation of the New Testament, which is "truth and life" (Jn 14:6).

To die is forever, for we know not what death is, only that life is forever, as the Apostle says of the whole Old Testament, that in its innermost essence it was "a tutor leading to Christ" (Gal 3:24), is true also of the enigmatic figure of the Preacher. As the days of the Old Dispensation neared their end, he revealed man's utter wretchedness. Thus he too is a tutor leading to Christ, and thus his words turn into one of the most stirring messianic "prophecies." By disclosing the misery of man the sinner in his remoteness from God, by leading him again and again to the limits of his own being and before the mystery of God veiled, his words awaken in him a desire for God's unveiling. They also make him ready to reach toward Him in whom God clearly and forever stepped out of His veiling into the unveiling, to reach toward Him who is "the likeness of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), "the brightness of His glory and the image of His being" (Heb 1:3). But for us, men of the New Testament, the words of Kohelet standing at its threshold, disclose no less the gladness of our redemption.

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eat? What shall we drink? Or what are we to put on? (After all these things the Gentiles seek.) For your Father in heaven knows that you need them all" (Mt 6:31-32). To man's fearful lament: "None has power over the breath of life, to hold back the breath of life; none has power over the day of death and there is no discharge from [its] agony" (8:8), God replies in Christ: "I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me, even if he die, shall live" (Jn 11:25). Death, the great affliction, is "swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54), is merely the last dusk behind which God's glory will rise and radiate forever, will rise as the last veils fall from our mortal eyes and we see Him face to face.

To the Preacher, still, "the day of death is better than the day of one's birth" (7:2); for the redeemed man, the day of death is the day of birth. While the Preacher laments: "What profit has a man of all his toil with which he toils beneath the sun?" (3:9; 1:3), the redeemed man rejoices: "Our present light affliction, which is for the moment, prepares for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond measure" (2 Cor 4:17). Indeed, for redeemed man, mere endurance of this fleeting world is changed to the looking forward "in blessed hope to the glorious coming of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Tit 2:13). He looks forward to the final unveiling of God at the end of days, which will be God's definitive unveiling not only before our eyes but also in ourselves. For He will "refashion the body of our lowliness, conforming it to the body of His glory by exerting the power by which He is able also to subject all things to Himself" (Phil 3:21).

The Preacher's first and last word is of the great futility of life: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!" The redeemed man's first and last word is "O blessed vanity" for he knows that, through Christ, God has planted into the perishable world even now the seed of imperishableness. The Preacher—man, prisoner of his limits and his sins—laments the worthlessness of existence, but man freed by the good news turns the lament into jubilation: "The eager longing of creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For creation was made subject to vanity—not by its own will but by reason of Him who made it subject—in hope, because creation itself also will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19-21).