

# KOHELETH AND GOETHE'S FAUST

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From time immemorial, man has been striving to comprehend the purpose and meaning of life. Ordinary people, no matter what their station in life, ponder over the value of their existence, no less than the philosopher weighing life's good and bad sides on the scales of reason. Religion itself, be it the product of a national ethos or a conviction developed by an individual, involves a quest for the value and purpose of life, and we might not be amiss in viewing the effort to find the answer as the origin of all religious feeling. Such an answer, by its very nature, can only be formulated in the most general terms.

The problems of everyday life, however, present us with puzzling phenomena that will not fit into a framework of preconceived answers. Thus, while we might expect *God saw all that He had made and behold it was very good* (Gen. 1:31) to answer all questions about our existence, practical experience frequently calls such an idea into question. Moses, according to the Midrash (Exodus Rabba 45:5), asks God why so many good people suffer while fortune smiles upon the wicked. The prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1) articulates this very problem.

The Book of Job brings us a detailed comprehensive probe into the meaning of life's suffering. Job suffers although he is innocent, his friends searching in vain for the cause of his misfortune. They firmly believe that God is righteous and must therefore assume that Job is guilty of some wrongdoing. It is a tragic conflict with a deeply disturbing impact. Job musters all his moral energies to debate the theodicy of his friends, including condemnation of his own conduct. The closing chapters of the book would seem to provide an answer to the problem when God Himself appears. However, instead of explaining to Job the reason for his suffering, He only

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reminds him that his knowledge and insight are too limited to grasp God's infinite wisdom.

Whereas the Book of Job concerns itself with the disparity between happiness and virtue, the Book of Koheleth [Ecclesiastes] portrays life itself – with all its evils and contradictions – as a problem in need of explanation and justification. It becomes a laboratory for an analysis of the manifold phenomena of human existence. This may, at first glance, appear inappropriate and partially explain the doubt initially felt about the inclusion of Koheleth in the canon. But the book is certainly not as anti-biblical as it was once thought to be. Its purpose is not to deny the beauty of life, but rather to investigate its values on a basis of descriptions of its varied manifestations.

#### KOHELETH

Koheleth, like Faust in Goethe's drama, is driven by a passionate yearning for wisdom. He storms through every phase of life, testing those activities in which he may safely engage without any transient gratification causing him long-term unhappiness. We will discover that Faust and Koheleth have many traits in common, sharing perhaps a basic human relationship. On the face of it, there is, of course, a wide gap between the two works. There is *Faust* on the one hand, unique in its kind, majestic and powerful, lucid in its construction, a moving, beautiful work of art. On the other hand, there is Koheleth, an investigative study without a philosophical system, meandering and often obscure and impenetrable. If, however, we leave aside such elements as artistry of presentation and brilliance of structure and execution, and consider only the contents and tendency of both works, we will find so many similarities in viewpoint as to justify the conclusion that Goethe was influenced in his writings by Koheleth.

The basic theme of Koheleth is reflected in these words:

*And I beheld all the acts of God, that no one can comprehend what takes place under the sun. No matter how greatly man may labor, he will not comprehend it. Even if the wise man thinks he recognizes it, he will not comprehend it (8:17).*

The emphasis here is on man's inability to fathom the mystery of the universe and, above all, the mystery of life in all its manifold aspects. Neither wisdom

nor insight comes to his aid. As soon as man presumes to exceed the limits of cognition assigned to him and attempts to explore the inner nature of things – the whys and the wherefores of life – his intellect will fail him. Wisdom will then plague him, and he will be like the dumb animal.

That is not to say that Koheleth regards wisdom as totally worthless. He sees it better than folly, just as light is better than darkness (2:13). But this is only in regard to the practical or worldly wisdom directed to structuring one's life and lending meaning and dignity to one's existence. Once man begins to search for that absolute wisdom that would attempt to understand the Creator's plans for the world, the result will be utter despair. *For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow.* (1:18). Koheleth cautions man not to concern himself with those things which he will never be able to understand, nor to trouble himself about the mysteries of life. He should, rather, be content and enjoy whatever God in His goodness bestows on him. Koheleth's investigations lead him to this conclusion, as is expressed at the end of the book.

Koheleth opens with the classic words that summarize its central thought: *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit does man have from all his labors under the sun?* (1:2,3). The transience and futility of man's endeavors are shown in sharp contrast to the grandeur and majesty of the universe and its stable and unchanging order. Thus, a proposition that has yet to be tested and proven in the book is presented to us at the very onset as an established fact.

Since wisdom has failed to give him satisfaction, Koheleth turns to the pleasures and joys of life, in the hope that they will help him solve the riddle of human existence. He surrounds himself with every earthly delight that his vast wealth can acquire, denying himself nothing. But when he observes all the work he had done, this, too, seems dull and vain, bringing him no contentment (2:10,11). Since wisdom will not lend his life enduring value, he comes to the conclusion that the wise man will die just like the fool, and that man has no pre-eminence over the beast because they both share the same ultimate fate (3:19).

Koheleth, therefore, counsels man to enjoy, in moderation, the riches and pleasures that God has granted him: *For there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and make his soul enjoy the pleasures of his labor. This also I saw, that it is from the hand of God* (2:24).

Koheleth repeatedly stresses moderation as the only genuine value among man's perverse labors and aspirations. Delights savored in this spirit are the true gifts of God that man should accept in gratitude: *At the end of the matter all becomes clear. Fear God and observe His commandments for this is man's whole duty. For God shall judge every deed, even everything hidden, whether good or evil (12:13,14).*

#### FAUST

After this introduction on the nature of Koheleth, we turn to *Faust* to compare the contents, tendency and action of the drama with those in Book of Koheleth. Goethe once wrote:

The legend of Faust echoed and re-echoed within me in an infinite multitudes of tones. Like Faust, I, too, have roamed through many fields of knowledge and soon found out that they were all vanity. I, too, tried out many life-styles, but came away each time more dissatisfied and troubled than before.

These words probably offer the best key to an understanding of *Faust*. The poem reflects the struggles that tormented Goethe's soul, and thus the human soul in general. We see in the person of Faust the searching, struggling spirit of man trying to fathom the heights and depths of earthly existence. Frustrated in this quest, he seeks out the pleasures of the senses, only to be repelled by the shallowness of self-indulgence. He finally concludes that intense labor for the good of others is the only worthwhile and desirable way of life. Every aspect of human existence in its varicolored forms is presented to us in this monumental work, and the value of each is tested in terms of Faust's own evaluation. It is a drama that is dream-like in form but starkly realistic in substance.

Even this brief exposition of the tendency and the contents of *Faust* indicates that it shares with Koheleth the same theme and the same basic idea, and though the treatment of the subject matter in the two books is completely dissimilar, many surprising similarities will become apparent.

We begin this analysis with the Prologue to *Faust*. The Prologue is modeled after the Book of Job although, in substance, much has been borrowed from Koheleth. In both works, the timeless majesty and splendor of creation are contrasted with the instability and futility of human aspiration.

The chants of the three archangels correspond almost verbatim to the opening verses of Koheleth, even if Goethe's grand style may make the concise, prosaic utterances of Koheleth somewhat scanty: *The sun rises and the sun goes down. It hastens always to its place, where it rises once again* (1:5). Thus says Koheleth.

In *Faust*, Raphael, the first of the three archangels, sings:

The sun intones, in ancient tourney, with brother spheres, a rival air; and his predestinated journey he closes with a thunderous blare. His sight, as none can comprehend it, gives strength to angels; the array of works, unfathomably splendid, is glorious as on the first day.

Gabriel's chant corresponds to Koheleth: *All rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place where the rivers go, there will they return* (1:7).

Gabriel sings:

Unfathomably swiftly speeded Earth's pomp revolves in whirling flight, as Eden's brightness is succeeded by deep and dread-inspiring night; in mighty torrents foams the ocean against the rocks with roaring song – in ever-speeding spherical motion, both rock and sea are swept along.

And finally, the chant of the archangel Michael corresponds to Koheleth: *The wind goes toward the south and turns around to the north; the wind turns continuously in its circuit, and to its circuit it returns* (1:6).

Michael sings:

And rival tempests roar and ravage from sea to land, from land to sea, and, raging, form a chain of savage, deeply destructive energy. There flames a flashing devastation to clear the thunder's crashing way; yet, Lord, Thy herald's admiration is for the mildness of Thy day.

And the three archangels chant in unison:

The sight as none can comprehend it gives strength to angels; Thy array of works, unfathomably splendid, is glorious as on the first day.

This appears to be modeled after Koheleth:

*All things toil to weariness; man cannot declare it, the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. That which has been will be that which has been done shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun (1:8,9).*

As opposed to the angels who sing the praise of God and His creation, Mephistopheles contrasts the splendors of the world with the wretchedness of man: "Of suns and worlds I know nothing to say; I only see how men live in dismay." And while the angels declare that the works of God are as splendid now as they were on the first day, Mephistopheles says: "The small god of the world will never change his ways, and is as whimsical as on the first of days." Koheleth speaks in a very similar manner: *For what profit has a man from all his labor and the striving of his heart in which he labors under the sun? (2:22).*

Like Mephistopheles, Koheleth calls man's God-given intelligence to account for all the sufferings of mankind: *For in much wisdom there is much vexation, And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow . . . . It is a sore task that God has given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith (1:18;1:13).* Mephistopheles speaks in much the same vein: "His life might be a bit more fun, had you not given him that spark of heaven's sun; he calls it reason and employs it, resolute to be more brutish than is any brute."

His answer to the Lord's question whether he has come only to accuse, is also in the spirit of Koheleth. Mephistopheles says: "No, Lord. I find it still a rather sorry sight. Man moves me to compassion, so wretched is his plight. I have no wish to cause him further woe."

The Prologue thus appears to express, at the very onset, the conclusion to which Koheleth arrives at the end of the book; namely that man is incapable of understanding the plans of Divine Providence.

The Lord delivers Faust into the hands of Mephistopheles – that is, into the sway of temptation – without the former suspecting that his fate was discussed on high. He now rushes headlong through life, troubled and restless, longing to enjoy within his inner self that which has been apportioned to mankind. And what has this impetuous rush through life, with its constant testing of every phase of existence, brought him? Faust answers this question in Part II of the poem:

Through all the world I only raced; whatever I might crave, I laid my hand on, what would not do, I would abandon. And what escaped, I would let go. I only would desire and attain, and wish for more, and thus with might and main I stormed through life; first powerful and great; but now with calmer wisdom and sedate. The earthly sphere I know sufficiently, but into the beyond we cannot see.

His goal of attaining all-encompassing understanding of the essence of life's phenomena has remained beyond his reach. Even as Koheleth, after repeated failures, cautions against too much speculation and reflection, so does Faust now abandon his quest for an understanding of those phenomena that are beyond the physical world.

As we pursue the development of the drama, we encounter Faust sitting in his study as gloomy and depressed as Koheleth. Says Koheleth: *And I applied my heart to know wisdom, And to know madness and folly I perceived that this too was striving after the wind* (1:17). Faust says: "I have, alas, studied philosophy, jurisprudence and medicine too, and worst of all theology. With keen endeavor, through and through – and here I am for all my lore, the wretched fool I was before."

Just as Koheleth considers himself wiser than all who lived in Jerusalem before him (1:16)), so does Faust consider himself smarter than all "the shysters, the doctors, and teachers, and scribes and Christers." Like Koheleth, he, too, hates life, but while the former merely considers the dead more fortunate than the living, Faust wants to die by his own hand.

Convinced of his inability ever to attain that sublime level of true knowledge, Faust, like Koheleth, tries out a life-style of self-indulgence, and in greedy despair abandons himself to it. Goethe depicts this surrender in terms of Faust's relationship with Mephistopheles. In his portrayal of Mephistopheles, Goethe has embodied the concept of evil in all its dimensions, in the person of one human figure that represents not only the diabolic character popularly attributed to the devil, but also the evil in human nature. He consistently presents the bad side of things, and his ironic judgments are often correct. As against Faust, Mephistopheles is portrayed as a subtle seducer. Once he has led Faust along his sinful path, he shows himself as sin itself in all its starkness. The two figures thus appear to merge

as one. If we would see Faust as representing mankind in general, then Mephistopheles emerges as the dark aspect of human nature.

Seen from this point of view, we will detect the philosophy of Mephistopheles in those passages where Kohelet repeatedly stresses the negative side of human experience. Indeed, not even Mephistopheles is as bitter and sarcastic as is Koheleth contemplating his life:

*Then I thought in my heart: the fate of the fool will befall me too, and why was I then more wise . . . . For of the wise man, as of the fool, there is no lasting memory . . . . For the fate of man is like the fate of the beast. Both have one and the same fate. As one dies so does the other. Man has no superiority over the beast, for all is vanity (2:15,16; 3:19).*

The dark side of Koheleth is even more in evidence as he demonstrates the futility of human existence (4:2,3). In striking similarity to Faust, he blames human intelligence for all of man's troubles.

As we return to Faust, we see that in his relationship with Mephistopheles, he has completely broken with the past.

The thinker's thread has been snapped; wisdom has been cast aside. I feel, I gathered up and piled up high in vain the treasures of the human mind: When I sit down at last, I cannot find new strength within – it is all dry. My stature has not grown a whit, no closer to the Infinite.

Koheleth similarly rejects wisdom when it did not provide him with a ready solution for the mysteries of life.

Faust now adopts a new lifestyle, choosing the path of self-indulgence. He wants to experience all the emotions which move and rejoice the human heart, in the hope of raising his own existence to a higher level. As Faust and Mephistopheles set out on their journey, life passes before our eyes in all its ever-changing forms. Mephistopheles introduces Faust into different ways of life in order to show him how people deal with the enigma of life and find happiness and contentment. While Faust spent his time in meditation, these simple folk pass their time in light-hearted pursuits without a care for the world's mysteries. Faust comes to realize how much wiser they are than he; they know how to enjoy life. Among these people he feels that he is a man among men, and he wishes he could share their happiness: "Here is the

people's paradise, and great and small shout joyously: 'Here I am human, may enjoy humanity.'"

In much the same way, Koheleth praises the simple pleasures of a modest life-style:

*Go, eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart, For God has already accepted thy works. Let thy garments always be white, and let thy head lack no oil. Enjoy life with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy life . . . which He has given thee under the sun. For that is thy portion in life, and in the labor wherein thou laborest under the sun (9:7,8,9).*

But the fiery spirit within them both does not permit them to attain a peaceful enjoyment in life. Faust declares: "Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast, and one is striving to forsake its brother. Unto the world in grossly loving zest, with clinging tendrils, one adheres; the other rises forcibly in quest of rarefied ancestral spheres." Nor do Koheleth's ruminations on life allow him any peace or comfort.

Faust plunges with Mephistopheles into a whirlpool of wild sensual excesses at the Auerbach cellar, where everyone can be seen enjoying life to the full. Mephistopheles says: "Above all else, it seems to me, you need some jolly company. To see life can be fun – to say the least, the people here make every day a feast." We might compare this scene with the words of Koheleth: *Rejoice, young man, in thy youth and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart and in the sight of thy eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring thee to judgment (11:9).*

In the final act of *Faust*, just as Koheleth repeatedly counsels prudence and moderation, so does Goethe show us, via the medium of an elderly couple, a life that is in stark contrast to the storms and stresses of Faust. These two old people have spent their modest lives in mutual harmony and peace with their lot, while Faust has frittered away his time in restless activity without ever finding peace and contentment.

Faust resolves to devote his energies to the welfare of mankind, realizing that man's greatest bliss derives from the free development of his energies. Mephistopheles thinks he can triumph, believing that he has won his wager. He does not realize that only the spiritual joys of altruism, not the memories of sensual pleasure, made it possible for Faust to anticipate supreme bliss.

Just as Koheleth's doubt eventually gave way to faith in God, so did Faust's pure endeavors enable him to ascend to higher spheres.

It is obvious from his pact with Mephistopheles that Faust has completely abandoned his belief in God and in the world to come. Koheleth, too, might appear to deny the existence of the world to come when he says: *All go to one place; all were made of dust and all return to dust. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth?*(3:20,21). However, it is more likely that Koheleth only means to stress the futility of proving from life's experience whether the spirit of man does indeed soar upwards, since, in another passage he exclaims: *And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it* (12:7). These words clearly express his belief in the immortality of man.

We thus find both works offering similar solutions: The closing words of Koheleth have been quoted above: *At the end of the matter, all becomes clear. Fear God and observe His commandments* (12:13,14). In the case of Faust, he is received into the circle of the blessed. The one crucial difference between Koheleth and Faust is that the endeavors of each culminate in differing domains: Koheleth achieves peace of mind by a renewed faith in God, whereas Faust ultimately finds his way to God by means of his selfless labors in behalf of mankind.

Despite the basic differences in denouement in *Faust* and in Koheleth, the chant of the angels on high applies to both, though in different measure: "We can save him who strives with all his might."