

Qohelet: Some Fleeting Thoughts

By Dr Annette M. Boeckler

The book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) – the *megillah* for Sukkot – may seem an obvious choice for this year’s Kol HaKehilah theme, “Satiation (*Dayenu*): When do we say we have enough?”. Qohelet says it straight away, “Vanity of Vanities... What profit does a person have for all his labour which he toils beneath the sun?” (1:1.3). The book elaborates the answer scathingly over 12 chapters – all striving is for nothing. In the end, nothing really matters.

Modern Biblical scholarship has uncovered similarities between the Biblical Qohelet and Hellenistic [Epicurean] philosophy. As a result, we now tend to focus on the scepticism and nihilism found in this writing. But the Mishnaic and Talmudic rabbis also noticed its pessimism, hedonism and cynicism and struggled with the book, even debating whether to include it in the canon.

Ultimately, Qohelet was accepted in the Tanach (in part because it was argued to have been written by King Solomon). Indeed, the book even reached the liturgical level of becoming an annual teaching aid vis-à-vis the High Holiday season. Sometime between the 11th and 12th centuries Qohelet became the festival scroll (*megillah*) for Sukkot. The link between Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Qohelet is in Qoh 11:2: “Distribute portions to seven or even to eight, for you cannot know what misfortune may occur on earth”. According to the midrash, seven refers to Sukkot, eight to Shemini Azeret.

I would like to offer some thoughts on the reasoning behind the liturgical use of Qohelet. What light is shed on its meaning by its being linked to Sukkot, and vice versa?

In the Talmud, Sukkot was simply referred to as *HeChag*, and it was considered the most important festival in ancient times. Over time, Sukkot accumulated a multitude of meanings, as follows:

- On Sukkot, we have an **obligation to joy** (*zeman simchateinu*).
- It is a time of supplications for **water** and sustenance (*tefillat haGe-*

shem on Shemini Atzeret; willow-beating on Hoshana Rabba; the shaking of the lulav and Hoshanot).

- As an autumn festival it celebrates the **harvest of fruits** (see the Torah reading on the first two days of Sukkot for this aspect).
- Sukkot is the most **universal festival** (the offering of 70 bulls corresponds to the 70 nations).
- It has a tradition of **public communal study of Torah**, something that evolved in the Babylonian exile in the absence of the Temple (Deut 31:10-13; Nehemiah 8:14-18).
- Sukkot is the festival of **Temple dedication** (1 Kings 8:2), a meaning preserved in the Haftarah readings. The symbolism of the sukkah as representing **God’s presence** is based on this Temple symbolism. Accordingly, Sukkot expresses hope for **the restoration of the Temple and messianic times** (as we say in Birkat Hamazon, “may the merciful one erect for us the fallen sukkah of David”, *yakum lanu et sukkat david hanofelet*).

You may have missed something in this list: The sukkah also reminds us of the **fragility of our lives**. “By moving into the sukkah for a week, Jews demythologize solid walls and controllable security. ... One should accept vulnerability and live more deeply, rather than build thick walls that are intended to protect from hurt but end up cutting us off from life” (Irving Greenberg).¹ To reflect on the fragility and vulnerability of life on Sukkot, however, seems to have been influenced by the reading of Qohelet. Although this is a late meaning, it became one of the best known ones.

This is how Qohelet has influenced the meaning of Sukkot. Let us now see how Sukkot can influence our understanding of Qohelet.

1. TORAH

“Qohelet” literally means “she who is assembling” (feminine particle of Q-H-L). As feminine forms often express abstract nouns, the title could simply mean

“collection”. The medieval commentators, as you can imagine, pondered how King Solomon could be called “Qohelet”. The Spanish liturgical scholar David Abudraham (14th cent.) said in the name of Ibn HaJarchi, “On Sukkot the King would assemble the people and publicly read the Book of Devarim, as it is commanded in Deut 31:10-13. In addition to this reading, Solomon would deliver a sermon against preoccupation with worldly striving and material possessions. Therefore he is called *Qohelet*, derived from *Haqhel*, ‘Assemble (for torah study).’ Therefore we read *Divre Qohelet* on Sukkot, when the people are thus assembled.”²

The Aramaic translation of Qohelet (dated between the 7th and 9th centuries C.E.) renders the book in complete agreement with rabbinic theology as an admonition to study Torah. The Aramaic Targum interprets the book of Qohelet from its self-contained summary: “The sum of all is: Revere God and observe his commandments!” (Qoh 12:13). From here the Targum reads aspects of Torah study into the whole of Qohelet. For example, “What profit does a man have *after he dies* from all his labour which he labours under the sun *in this world unless he occupies himself with Torah in order to receive a complete reward in the world to come before the Master of the world*” (TargQoh 1:3; the italics are Aramaic additions to the original Hebrew).

2. SIMCHAH

Surprisingly, the pessimistic book of Qohelet is among the Biblical books that mention joy (*simchah*) most often. In its 12 chapters, the root *s-m-ch* occurs 15 times. This is surpassed only by the books of Psalms (66 times) and Proverbs (28 times).

The Biblical Scholar Michal V. Fox noticed that *Simchah* in Qohelet “means pleasure, not happiness and certainly not joy. Pleasure is not an independent emotion or sensation, but an experience or, more precisely, a ‘feeling-tone’ attached to a more comprehensive experience... Happiness is an emotion, a condition that permeates the entirety of consciousness

while it is active. Pleasure is at most a contributing factor to happiness.... Joy refers to an intense and stable type of happiness directed at a worthy object (one's family, accomplishments, etc.)."³

According to Qohelet, *simchah* is a gift from God, however one translates the word. "To the one who pleases him he has given wisdom, knowledge and *simchah*" (2:26). "There is nothing better than to have *simchah* and do good" (3:12), teaches Qohelet. This *simchah* is not blind or superficial, but is aware that "the days of darkness will be many" (11:8). Qohelet, however, also knows a frivolous *simchah*, which he discards (2:2).

3. TESHUVAH, TEFILLAH AND TZEDAKAH

The Aramaic Targum of Qohelet emphasises not only Torah study, but also repentance, prayer and charity (*teshuvah u'tefillah u'tzedakah*). These have the power to save us from ending in utter vanity, transforming it into a lasting reward in the world to come. According to the Aramaic understanding, aspects of Unetanne Tokef can be found in Qohelet; man faces judgment, but can influence its outcome. For instance, on repentance: "The Lord will judge the innocent and the guilty on the great day of judgment, for a time is allotted to every matter and to every deed which they did in this world for them to be judged there.... Wounds and evil diseases come upon them in order to test them and to try them. The Lord did it to see, if they will return in repentance, so that they will be forgiven and healed" (TargQoh 3:17-18). On prayer: "Do not be rash with your utterance to make a mistake with words of your mouth and let not your heart hurry to bring out speech when you pray before the Lord." (TargQoh 5:1). And on charity: "Every man to whom the Lord gave wealth and property and the Lord gave him the power to eat from it in this world and to do charity from it and receive the complete reward of his portion in the world to come and to rejoice in his labour with the righteous" (TargQoh 5:18).

This list could be much enlarged, but the examples suffice to show the direction in which the Targum wants to guide us when reading Qohelet on Sukkot. All is vanity if a person does not repent and return to God, does not use his material wealth for charity, and does not build his relationship with God in prayer. With these themes of *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah* read into Qohelet,

the megillah is linked to the whole of the High Holiday season, culminating with Sukkot.

4. TEMPLE

Sukkot is the Temple dedication festival. It is easy, of course, to connect King Solomon with the "houses that he build" (2:4). What else could this be other than the Temple and its courtyards and the houses of the Sanhedrin in Yavne (TargQoh 2:4)? Megillat Qohelet is, according to the Targum, "the words of prophecy which Qohelet, that is, Solomon the son of David the king who was in Jerusalem, prophesied. When Solomon King of Israel saw ... that Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed and the people of ... Israel would go into exile, he said to himself, 'Vanity of Vanities is this world. Vanity of Vanities is everything for which I and David my father laboured'" (Targ Qoh1:1-2).⁴ Solomon's "prophecies" in Qohelet are thus understood to be about the destruction of the Temple, the end of the Davidic kingship, the loss of the land and the dispersion of the people.

5. SURVIVAL AND HOPE

All the *megillot* in the Tanach were inspired by the first and original *megillah* – the Book of Esther. Each *megillah* tells us: There will be catastrophe, but also hope. Salvation and redemption are assured, even if not in sight at the moment. In Esther and Eicha (Lamentations) this story line is easy to spot. For Shir haShirim this reading depends on an allegorical understanding. Ruth has to be read from the perspective of Naomi, representing Israel's development from catastrophe to hope and new beginning.

Regarding Qohelet, this reading is supplied by the Midrash and the Targum. King Solomon, the builder of the Temple in Jerusalem, the inheritor of the united Davidic kingdom, foresees that his Temple will fall, and Israel will go into exile, and so laments: "vanity of vanities". But at the same time, *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* and *Tzedakah* can turn the fate of the people, and Torah study can restore God's presence in Israel. There is hope that God's presence will be with us, even without the Temple, and that there will be a future, messianic redemption.

The literal meaning of Qohelet, which modern Biblical scholarship has rediscovered, may speak more directly to our time. We should not think too highly of ourselves. "Humans have no superiority over animals, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust" (Qoh 3:9-20). In a world where human beings think of themselves as all-powerful, this admonition to satiation adds a new, modern meaning to the ancient Temple dedication festival Sukkot and its messianic hopes to experience God's presence anew. ■

¹ Form of Prayer for Jewish Worship, vol II, London 1995, p. 57.

² *Abudraham* Hashalem, Jerusalem, 1963, p. 240.

³ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to tear down and a time to build up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, 1999, p. 113.

⁴ Quoted from Knobel, Peter S., *The Targum of Qohelet. Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes (The Aramaic Bible 15: Job, Proverbs, Qohelet)*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991, p. 20.

