

BETWEEN TRANSCIENCE AND FEAR OF GOD: Drafts and aspects of human fulfilment in Old Testament Wisdom Literature

Andreas Vonach

Introduction

The questions about the meaning of life, the possibilities for real human fulfilment and the relationship between creature and creator seem to be as old as mankind itself. Even the Hebrew Bible deals with these questions, tries to give various answers in different times and situations and indicates an intensive wrestling with these basic themes through many epochs by scholars and religious teachers as well.

An overlook over the development and trends in trying to give an answer to these questions in the scriptures of Old Testament Wisdom Literature draws an impressive picture about the changings in the ways of hope, faith and satisfaction of people. How they try to reach fulfilment, how they see their personal rights and duties in their lives, and how they define their relation to god of course depends on the political, social and economical background of their lifetime. But the Wisdom-Tradition of the Old Testament also shows one big continuity, namely the insight, that human fulfilment lies in the hands of god, that it's not at least man-made, but god-made. God — and this is a very important fact — gave man the possibility to take his portion during his life, but it's not always easy to catch the right time and the appropriate situations.

But let us stick to the biblical traditions and deal with some wisdom texts.

The Book of Proverbs

This book shows us the traditional israelite norms and standards of value. Real human fulfilment is — in strong and direct connection with the Pentateuch — having a long and healthy life, many children and honour. The only way to reach this, is to live ones life in justice und to fear god. Living in justice in this case means to keep the commandments of the Torah, to fear god means to believe in him as the creator of everything and as the one, who grants for

justice and brings everything to justice, and — of course — to take part at the cult and rituals of the temple.

Everyone who acts in such a way is not only a just and religious person, but also a wise one, the real sage. This means, that in this tradition the happy and lucky man, who is able to reach fulfilment, is in any case identical with the wise and god-fearer. Two short passages in the Book of Proverbs may show this:

My son, if you take in my words
and make my commands your treasure,

giving your ear to wisdom,
inclining your heart to understanding;

if you call out for perception
and summon understanding;

if you seek for her like silver
and search for her like hidden treasure;

Then you will understand the fear of the Lord,
and acquire knowledge of god.¹

These verses illuminate very well the close relationship, which were seen between wise acting, fear of god and appropriate life-style. The very connection between this and the only way to receive satisfying human fulfilment is well documented in Prov 2, 20-3, 2:

In order that you may go in the way of the good,
and observe the paths of the just,

because the upright will dwell in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;

But the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the faithless will be uprooted from it.

My son, do not forget my teaching,
and let your heart keep my commands,

for length of days and years of life
and peace will they bring you.²

1 Prov 2, 1-5; for this translation see Murphy (1998), 12f.

2 For translation see Murphy (1998), 13; 18.

These texts illustrate exactly the way, in which the old israelite tradition defined human fulfilment. And this system worked as long as the israelite or even judean society was a more or less self-ruled, self-organized and self-contained nation with its own ways of thinking. The central issue of it was the unscrutinizable believing in the so called "deed-consequence-connection", which guaranteed for everybody a fate according to his or her actual way of life. This fate was seen as god's justice and believed to happen immediately.³ But this very faith in the deed-consequence-connection was also used in the reversed case, which means, that if somebody died very early, suffered from an incurable disease or sustained any other bad fate, the other people automatically assumed, that he or she must have been acting in any way foolish or even wicked. This is the main problem, the Book of Job is dealing with.

Relating to the image of god, this system led to a kind of certainty concerning the whole reality of life, and god itself was after all somehow predictable.

So it is no wonder, that sooner or later this way of thinking gave reason for criticism. One of the most famous criticisms inside the Old Testament Wisdom Tradition itself presents the Book of Qohelet.

The Book of Qohelet

This scripture, written at the end of the third century B.C. by a wisdom teacher in Jerusalem⁴, indicates a troublesome time, in which many matters of course began to rock. The hellenization of the judean society also caused a new way of analysing the world-order and the ways and possibilities of human life in it. Of course, this new hellenistic influence also shed new light on the question about human fulfilment.

For Qohelet the old traditional certainties did not even more build the main basis for interpreting the world and human life in this world, but he rather adopted the hellenists analytical way of thinking. So his first step is a sharp observation of human life as it is. From this point of view he then questions the believed wisdom-traditions, the role of god in man's life and the possibilities for human beings to reach real fulfilment.

Therefore, for Qohelet some of these old traditions lost their plausibility, above all the deed-consequence-connection. With very impressive formula-

3 For further information about the "deed-consequence-connection" see v. Rad (1982), 165-181.

4 Concerning the historical background of Qohelet, see Whybray (1989), 3-14.

tions he states, that the observations of daily life show us a fundamental failure of such a draft:

I have seen everything in my vain days:
A just person, who perishes despite his justice,
and an evil person who lives long despite his evil.⁵

There is a vanity that is done on earth:
there are just who are treated as if they had acted wickedly,
and there are wicked who are treated as if they had acted justly.
I said, this also is vanity.⁶

With examples like these, Qohelet tries to convince his audience from the failure of any certainty, that the deed–consequence–connection may work in all situations. On the contrary, the pure opposite can happen and seems to happen quite often.

But Qohelet also criticises the above mentioned optimism concerning an enigmatic world–order and a total predictability of god:

Indeed, there is a time and judgement for everything;
but misfortune lies often upon a person.

In that no one knows what will happen,
because how it will turn out — who can tell him?

There is no one who has power over the wind so as to retain it,
and there is no one who has power over the day of death.⁷

The just and the wise and their actions are in the hand of god.
Love as well as hatred, people have no way of knowing everything,
what has been before them.

Everything is the same for everybody:
The same lot is for the just and for the wicked,
for the good and for the clean and for the unclean,
and for the one who offers sacrifice and for the one who does not.
As it is for the good, so it is for the sinner;
as it is for the one who takes an oath,
so it is for the one who fears to take an oath.

5 Qoh 7, 15; for this translation see Murphy (1992), 68.

6 Qoh 8, 14; for translation see Murphy (1992), 79.

7 Qoh 8, 6–8a; for translation see Murphy (1992), 79.

This is an evil in all,
which is done under the sun:
There is the same lot for all.⁸

I have also observed under the sun:
Swiftness does not win the race nor strength the battle.
Food does not belong to the wise,
nor wealth to the intelligent,
nor success to the skillful;
time and chance govern all.⁹

In all the pericops mentioned above Qohelet shows that he himself is not too happy having to state this failure of the deed–consequence–connection, but he could not avoid doing so. Therefore he saw it as his task to search for something else, which could give fulfilment to human life. But in contrary to traditional wisdom–teachers he is much more careful in formulating new certainties. He gives more hints, based on his faiths and hopes.

In a normal human life — as Qohelet sees and experiences it — his point of view reaching real fulfilment is not possible. But this impossibility in his opinion is not manmade, but it is part of the godmade world–order from the beginning, which means since creation took place.

But god put something else into the human nature, which Qohelet calls the ability to take ones חֵלֶק (*ch^äl^äk*) during his life. The hebrew term חֵלֶק means “lot” or “portion”. So for Qohelet one can not reach a totality of fulfilment during one’s life, but one can take one’s portion in life. And this portion at least consists in eating, drinking and feeling happiness or joy; in other words: Taking one’s portion means enjoying one’s life, but not in a sense of pure hedonism. This real and good way of enjoying life must on the other hand happen in justice, care and responsibility.

In Qohelets mind the liberty and freedom of a person ends, where he or she harms other people because of his or her lifestyle. It is everyones own responsibility to take his portion during his life, but not to take it in ignorance of other people.

A significant example for Qohelet’s understanding of the חֵלֶק one can take during one’s life is Qoh 5, 17:

Look, what I have seen as good:
That it is beautiful to eat and to drink and to prosper with all the toil,

8 Qoh 9, 1b–3a; for this translation see Vonach (1999), 101f.

9 Qoh 9, 11; for text and translation see REB (1989).

that one must toil at under the sun,
 during the limited number of days of life god gives.
 For that is one's portion.¹⁰

The same request is also debated more explicit in Qoh 8, 15:

So I praised joy,
 because there is nothing better for a human under the sun
 than to eat and drink and to be joyous.
 This can be his portion with¹¹ the toil during the days of his life
 which god gives him under the sun.

It is noteworthy, that man's portion in Qohelet's draft is not a result of his toil or a reward for it, but it is something independent from the toil, which functions more as a kind of balance beneath all the toil man has to live with. Only under this premise is man's portion really understandable as god's free gift, a thought which arises from Qohelet's very faith. He expresses this in plain terms in Qoh 3, 13:

And also, if anyone eats and drinks and prospers with all his toil —
 that is a gift of god.

Not only the world and human life in it, but also the joyous moments of life are made and given from god the creator. But it is man's task grasping after the god-given chances to take one's portion and in this sense to enjoy one's life.

In view of a deeper understanding of Qohelet's ideas it is also necessary to recognize, that this portion itself as well as the ability to take it, are the very values in man's life in Qohelet's opinion. Therefore his realistic worldview caused him not only to refuse the deed-consequence-connection, but also to give up some other important standards of the tradition. Many supposed values of the old israelite tradition could not withstand his analytical and basical way of doing research and multiplying knowledge. Qoh 6, 3. 6 may deal as an example with this fact:

If a man beget a hundred children and live many years
 — though many be the days of his years —
 if his desire for good things is not met,

¹⁰ This translation is based on Vonach (1999), 54f.

¹¹ REB (1989), on which the above transmission of this verse is based, translates "for the toil"; but the hebrew particle **ב** means "in", "at", "with", so that this correction seems necessary for an adequate understanding of Qohelet's thoughts.

then even with a burial,
I say the stillborn is better off than he.

If one were to live twice a thousand years,
but without experiencing good,
do not all go to the same place?¹²

Even the absolutely best of what could happen to a human being in all the tradition, namely to live for a very long time, is not a value as such for Qohelet. It is more important, if during one's life — how long it ever may endure — one will be able to take one's portion or not. Qohelet's comparison with the stillborn is rather hard, but understandable. Not only how long, but first of all how somebody lives his life is the most important question.

But in addition to this sober and realistic worldview, which in itself does not imply any possibility for real human fulfilment, it remains the strict faith and hope in gods justice, which concludes Qohelet's thoughts. It is his deep hope, that there will be a fair and just judgement of god at the end of each human life. Many texts show this very clearly:

But I also feel that those who fear god will be well off,
because they fear him,

and that the wicked person will not be well off,
and will not belong his shadowy days,
because he does not fear god.¹³

First of all the expression "I feel" must attract attention. Qohelet normally starts his statements with phrases like "I know", "I saw", "I noticed", "I recognized" e. a. 8, 12b is the only beginning with "I feel". This shows, that the following statement is not so much an objective matter of fact, but more something coming out of the heart of Qohelet. It is a matter of his inner belief, of his deep hopes, at least of his very faith.

For Qohelet — as he knows his god — there must be some fair judgement; and if this divine judgement does not happen during one's life (which is an obvious fact), it must happen at some other time.

In other pericopes he defines his thoughts more about this:

Rejoice, o youth, while you are young.
Let your heart be happy in the days of your youth.

¹² For translation see Murphy (1992), 45.

¹³ Qoh 8, 12b. 13; according to the translation and a better understanding of these very difficult verses, see Vonach (1999), 79–83.

Walk where your heart leads you and where your eyes look,
but know that on all these god will bring you to judgement.

Banish trouble from your heart and remove suffering from your body,
for youthfulness and black hair are fleeting.

But remember your creator in the days of your youth.¹⁴

Twice Qohelet in this text, again invites his hearers and readers to enjoy their life whenever they have the possibility to do this. But here he also reminds them to live this enjoyment in responsibility and awakesness, because their whole life lies before god, who will bring it to judgement. It is implicitly obvious, that this divine judgement will take place at the end of, or sometimes after their life.

In vers 12, 13b, 14, which indicates the very end of the Book of Qohelet, this thought is explicitly expressed:

Fear god and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of everyone.

For god will bring every deed to judgement,
over all that is hidden, whether good or evil.¹⁵

Here it is also said, that the divine judgement will be an individual one over the whole life. In this verse at the end of his book Qohelet formulates as a matter of fact, what he believes in his innerheart.

So Qohelet strictly rejects the belief in the traditional deed-consequence-connection, but he trusts in a just judgement of god at the end of the life. It is not explicitly said, but it hides implicitly behind these thoughts, that Qohelet must have believed in some kind of afterlife, because otherwise gods judgement at the end could not have had any importance.¹⁶

With his ideas and believings Qohelet made a relatively wide step away from Proverbs, stating that man can satisfy some fundamental desires by taking his portion during his life from time to time, but real fulfilment can only be in god's good judgement at the end of or even after this life. But according to his very realistic way of thinking, Qohelet does not formulate these insights as certainties, but rather keeps them as a matter of faith and hope.

It will be the Book of Wisdom, which proclaims new norms for a way of life in fulfilment.

14 For translation see Murphy (1992), 111.

15 For translation see Murphy (1992), 123.

16 For further information about the idea of an afterlife in the Book of Qohelet see Farmer (1991), 203-206.

The Book of Wisdom

What we noticed in Qohelet as his deep hopes and believings, the Book of Wisdom will explain as certainties and standards. Especially the faith in an afterlife is now expressed explicitly and directly:

But the souls of the just are in god's hand,
and torment shall in no way touch them.

In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to be dead;
their end was reckoned as suffering

and their journey hence utter ruin.
But they are at peace.

For even if in the sight of men they shall have been punished,
their hope is full of immortality.¹⁷

Here it is clearly argued, that there is an afterlife and that those who lived in justice will feel well there. For such an argumentation in the Book of Wisdom, it was not only possible to give up some traditional topics — as is the case in the Book of Qohelet too — but also to change them into the direct opposite of their original meaning. A splendid example for this is Wis 4, 7–11. 13–14a:

But the righteous man, so he die an untimely death,
will be at rest.

For it is not length of life that makes for an honorable old age,
nor is it measured by numbers of years;

but rather is it wisdom which constitutes a man's silvery brow,
and a spotless life the true ripeness of age.

Being well-pleasing to god he was dearly loved,
and while yet living among sinful men he was translated.

He was snatched away lest evil alter his intelligence,
or wile deceive his mind.

Perfected in a short span,
he completed a full measure of time:

For his soul was pleasing to the Lord,
therefore he urged it forth out of the midst of wickedness.¹⁸

17 Wis 3, 1–4; for this translation see Winston (²1981), 124.

18 For text and translation see Winston (²1981), 136.

The old value of a long life-span is now somehow perverted. In a kind of new religious thinking it was now possible to argue, that even a very short and brief life can be the result of god's special care and even welfare.

The fact that things could now be formulated like this, is again a result of the political, economical and social circumstances of the Book of Wisdom, which was written during the last 30 years B.C. in the Alexandrian diaspora under the very influence of hellenistic culture as well as oppression.

So real and full human fulfilment, very clearly can be reached only after one's earthal life. But — and this is very important — also in the Book of Wisdom the way of earthal life is decisive of this later fulfilment and also (or even more) here it remains a gift of god.

Conclusion

The Old Testament Wisdom Literature in common is convinced, that our earth is god's creation and therefore it is worth living on it. It is also convinced, that man should live on this earth in a manner of justice, solidarity and god-fearing. And at least it is convinced, that man will be judged by god and that human fulfilment must in some way be related to this just god.

But according to the questions about time, place and even kind of human fulfilment the various books of Old Testament Wisdom differ. We stated a kind of development in this question from a model of direct and manifold human fulfilment in Proverbs, through a combination of life-joy as portion and hope for full fulfilment in future in the Book of Qohelet, to the definite believe in an ultimate fulfilment by god in the afterlife.

This theological development also indicates changes inside the society, which led to different lifestyles. Whereas the Book of Proverbs points more to a tribal situation in a closed and self-owned region, Qohelet argues from a city-centred point of view and the Book of Wisdom indicates a diaspora-situation in a multicultural and multireligious society.

Such theological differences and developments could also be seen through many other biblical and especially Old Testament themes. So in this sense the Old Testament can be seen as a real compendium of statements to central themes of human life, which are given from various points of views, but lead at least to one common interest — to god. In this matter of fact lies a good starting point for fruitful dialogues, dialogues between cultures, dialogues between east and west, and dialogues of course between India and Austria.¹⁹

¹⁹ This article is the written form of a paper I read in the occasion of a conference in Pune/India, which was held in September 2000 in the context of the relationship between the Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck/Austria and Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Pune/India.

References

- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)* (1983). Ed. R. Kittel, W. Rudolph, H. P. Rüger. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.
- The Revised English Bible (REB)* (1989). Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press.
- Farmer, K. A. (1991) *Who knows what is good? A commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. Erdmans.
- Murphy, R. E. (1992) *Ecclesiastes (WBC 23A)*. Word.
- Murphy, R. E. (1998) *Proverbs (WBC 22)*. Thomas Nelson.
- Rad, G. v. (1982) *Weisheit in Israel*. Neukirchener Verlag.
- Vonach, A. (1999) *Nähere dich um zu hören. Gottesvorstellungen und Glaubensvermittlung im Koheletbuch (BBB 125)*. Philo-Verlag.
- Whybray, R. N. (1989) *Ecclesiastes*. Erdmans.
- Winston, D. (1981) *The Wisdom of Salomon. A new translation with introduction and commentary*. Doubleday & Company.