

## Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

### C. Ecclesiastes: The wisdom of the sceptic

#### Activity 8.4

Read Ecclesiastes 1 – 4, 9 and 12

Note down what these chapters seem to be saying about the problem of evil and suffering.

Like Psalm 90, Ecclesiastes is a response to the problems of toil and mortality, the brevity and pointlessness of life. Wesley Fuerst comments: 'This small book is certainly unlike the rest of the Old Testament. it poses harder questions, raises graver doubts and arrives at more despairing conclusions than any other book' (*Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations*, page 91).

The book is attributed to Solomon, but this is the convention for the wisdom books, in the same way that the Law is attributed to Moses. It is likely to be very late, and is often put around the 3rd century B.C. It is a sharp challenge to easy piety and in particular the conventional belief that wisdom by itself provides a sufficient foundation for life and brings great rewards.

According to the 'preacher' this is rubbish. 'What is crooked cannot be made straight' (1:15). Conventional wisdom teaching simply avoids experience, which teaches us that life is unhappy and pointless and made up of futile toil; everything goes round in circles, there is nothing new' under the sun'.

For example, chapter 3 quotes a poem which says that God has a time for every purpose under heaven and then asks: if that is so, what is the use of toil? If God has a time for everything, but we don't know what it is because we cannot discern the end from the beginning, that means that we cannot avoid the cycle of good and bad times simply by trying. All we can do is rejoice when times are good and accept it when times are bad.

Furthermore, if God has a time for everything, he should have a time to judge the wicked. but this is not what we see: all we see is that everyone dies and we have no idea what comes next. The only thing you can do in response to this is to enjoy life while you can. But whatever you do, don't blame God. It is he who makes things crooked as well as straight (7:13); our responsibility is to respond in the right way, whatever life may send us.

Addison Wright sums up a response to Ecclesiastes or 'Koheleth' in this way:

"The presence of Ecclesiastes in the canon validates in every age the same kind of critical assessment of theology, conventional wisdom and piety as Koheleth practised, and validates it not as an optional activity but as one constantly necessary to keep religion honest and in touch with reality. The book's insistence on enjoyment is an important voice to be heard by anyone who locates the message of biblical religion more in asceticism than in love and social concern ... Koheleth's negative assessment of the workaholic should be constructively provocative for those who believe that posture to have value or to be synonymous with religious dedication. Finally, in no way can Koheleth be said to have had a close personal relationship with God. Not infrequently the rhetoric of the believing community creates the impression that all the faithful should be experiencing such a relationship ... clearly, countless thousands of devout people travel in the dark as did Koheleth and they can find dignity in the believing community because Koheleth was deemed worthy to have a place among the biblical writings."

*The New Jerome Commentary: Ecclesiastes*

### Activity 8.5

Reread the passages from Ecclesiastes we have looked at.

In what ways do his observations and conclusions, and the feelings implicitly expressed, challenge your own faith?