

THE AUTHOR OF ECCLESIASTES.

AN IDEAL BIOGRAPHY.

AMONG the many enigmas of the Old Testament the book of Ecclesiastes is preëminently enigmatic. It comes before us as the sphinx of Hebrew literature, with its unsolved riddles of history and life. It has become almost a proverb that every interpreter of this book thinks that all previous interpreters have been wrong. Its very title has received some dozen discordant interpretations. The dates assigned to its authorship by competent experts range over very nearly a thousand years, from B.C. 990 to B.C. 10. Not less has been the divergence of opinion as to its structure and its aims. It has been regarded as a formal treatise, or as a collection of unconnected thoughts and maxims, like Pascal's *Pensées*, or Hare's *Guesses at Truth*; or as a dialogue, after the manner of Plato; or like the discussions between the *Dotto* and the *Ignorante*, that form a prominent feature in the teaching of the Italian Jesuits, in which the writer holds free debate with his opponents.¹ Those who take the latter view are, unfortunately, divided among themselves as to which interlocutor in the dialogue represents the views of the writer, and which those that he is seeking to refute.² As to the drift of the book,

¹ See Ginsburg's exhaustive survey of the literature of Ecclesiastes in the *Introduction* to his Commentary. Herder may be named as the author of the Dialogue theory, but he has been followed by many others.

² One school, e.g., maintains that the seemingly Epicurean sentiments, another that the gloomier views of life, are stated only to be rejected (Ginsburg, *ut supra*).

we meet with every conceivable variety of hypothesis more or less skilfully maintained. Men have seen in it the confessions of the penitent and converted Solomon,¹ or a bitter cynical pasquinade on the career of Herod the Great,² or a Chesterfield manual of policy and *politesse* for those who seek their fortune in the palaces of kings.³ It has been made to teach a cloistral asceticism,⁴ or a healthy life of natural enjoyment,⁵ or a license like that of a St. Simonian "rehabilitation of the flesh."⁶ Those who looked on one side of the shield have found in it a direct and earnest *apologia* for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul;⁷ those who approached it from the other were not less sure that it was a polemic protest against that doctrine as it was taught by Pharisees or Essenes.⁸ The writer aimed at leading men to seek the things eternal, or sought to draw them away from the cloud-land of the Unknown that men call eternity. Dogmatism and scepticism have alike claimed the author as their champion. It has been made to teach the mysteries of the Trinity and the Atonement,⁹ or to rebuke the presumption that speculates on those mysteries. It has been identified alike with the Creed of Athanasius and with that of the Agnostic.

Think, too, for a moment of the varying aspects which it presents to us when we come in contact with it, not as handled by professed interpreters, but as cropping up

¹ This is, I need hardly say, the current traditional interpretation of Jewish and Patristic and early Protestant writers (Ginsburg, *ut supra*).

² Grätz, *Comm. on Koheleth*.

³ Jacobi, quoted by Ginsburg, p. 186.

⁴ The view was that of Jerome, Augustine, and the whole crowd of Patristic and mediæval interpreters.

⁵ Luther, *Comm. on Eccles*.

⁶ Grätz, *Commentary*.

⁷ So most Patristic and early Protestant scholars; and Hengstenberg and Delitzsch among those of our own time.

⁸ So emphatically Grätz.

⁹ See the Commentaries of Jerome, Augustine, and others of the same school, as collected by Pineda.

here and there in the pages of history, or the lives of individual men. We think of Gelimer the Vandal king, led in chains in the triumph of Belisarius, and, as he walked on without a tear and without a sigh, finding a secret consolation in the oft-echoed burden of "*Vanitas vanitatum! omnia vanitas!*" or of Jerome¹ reading the book with his disciple Blæsilla, that he might persuade her to renounce those vanities for the life of the convent at Bethlehem;² or of Thomas à Kempis taking its watchword as the text of the *De Imitatione Christi*; or of Laud writing to Strafford when the policy of "Thorough" had broken down, and counselling him to turn for consolation to its pages.³ We remember how Luther found in it a healthy *Politica* or *Æconomica*, the very mirror of magistracy and active life, as opposed to that of the monks and friars who opposed him;⁴ how Voltaire dedicated his paraphrase of it to Frederick II., as that of a book which was the king's favourite study.⁵ It has, in the history of our own literature, been versified by poets as widely contrasted as Quarles and Prior. It has furnished a name to the Vanity Fair of Bunyan and of Thackeray, and the latter in a characteristic poem has sung the changes of rhyme and rhythm on its *Mataiotes Mataiotētón*. Pascal found in it the echo of the restless scepticism which drove him to take refuge from the uncertainty that tormented him apart from God in the belief that God had revealed Himself, and that the Church of Rome was the witness and depository of that revelation.⁶ Renan, lastly, looks on it as the only charming work—" *le seul livre aimable*"—that has

¹ Gibbon, c. xli. ² Hieron, *Pref. in Eccles.* ³ Mozley, *Essays*, i. p. 60.

⁴ Luther, *Pref. in Eccles.* ⁵ Voltaire, *Œuvres*, vol. ii. Ed. Paris, 1837.

⁶ Pascal, *Pensées*, vol. i. p. 159. Ed. Molines.

ever been written by a Jew, and with his characteristic insight into the subtle variations of human nature, strives to represent to himself St. Paul in his declining years—if only he had been of another race and of another temperament, *i.e.*, if he had been quite another Paul than he whom we have known—as at last discovering, *désillusionné* of the “sweet Galilean vision,” that he had wasted his life on a dream, and turning from all the prophets to a book which till then he had scarcely read, even the book Ecclesiastes.¹

It may be inferred from the fact that I invite the attention of thoughtful students to what I have to say on the subject which has shewn what I may call its strangely zymotic power under such manifold and varying forms, that I am not satisfied with any of these conclusions. I can honestly say that I have worked through them, and have not found them to satisfy the laws of evidence or the conditions of historical probability. I do not know whether the view which I now submit to the judgment of inquirers will commend itself as more satisfying. The nature of the case, the necessary limits of time and space, forbid me to lay before them either the evidence on which my own belief rests, or the process by which I have been led to it. I can only submit it for the present as a hypothesis, and ask those who read it whether it appears to them to fulfil what is, at least, the first and last condition of a tenable hypothesis—that it includes and explains phenomena. And it seemed to me that I could best commend that hypothesis to those whose judgment I seek to win in the form of an ideal biography of the writer of the mysterious book.

It would be a comparatively easy task, of course, to

¹ Renan, *L'Antéchrist*, p. 101.

write the life of the traditional author of Ecclesiastes. The reign of Solomon "in all his glory" and with all his wisdom has often furnished a subject both for the historian and the poet. There would be a special interest if we could treat the book before us, as leading us into the region that lies below the surface of history, and find in it an autobiographical fragment in which the royal writer laid before us his own experience of life and the conclusions to which he had been led through it. The Confessions of Solomon would have on that assumption a fascination not less powerful than those of Augustine or Rousseau. For reasons which I have not now time to state, I cannot adopt that conclusion, and am compelled to rest in the belief that Ecclesiastes was the work of an unknown writer about two hundred years before the Christian era. To write the life under such conditions may seem a somewhat adventurous enterprise. One is open to the charge of evolving a biography out of one's inner consciousness, of summoning a spectral form out of the cloud-land of imagination. I have felt, however, looking to the special character of the book, that this would be a more satisfactory way of stating the view that I have been led to hold as to the occasion, plan, and purpose of the book than the more systematic dissertation with which the student is familiar in Commentaries and Introductions. The book has so little of a formal plan, and is so much, in spite of the personated authorship, of the nature of an autobiographical confession—partly clear and deliberate; partly, perhaps to an extent of which the writer was scarcely conscious, betraying its true nature beneath the veil of the character he had assumed—that the task of portraying the lineaments which lie beneath the veil is comparatively easy. As

with the *Pensées* of Pascal or of Joubert, or the *Sonnets* of Shakespeare, we feel that the very life of the man stands before us, as *votivâ . . . veluti descripta tabellâ*, in all its main characteristics. We divine the incidents of that life from the impress they have left upon his character, and from chance words in which more is meant than meets the ear.

Koheleth (I shall use the Hebrew equivalent of Ecclesiastes by anticipation, as better than the constant repetition of "the writer," or "the subject of our memoir") was born, according to the view stated above, somewhere B.C. 220. He was an only son, "one alone and not a second," without a brother (Eccles. iv. 8). His father lived in Judæa,¹ but not in Jerusalem, and to find "the way to the city," the way which none but the proverbial "fool" among grown-up men could miss, came before the child's mind at an early age as the test of sagacity and courage (Eccles. x. 15). The boy's education, however, was carried on in the synagogue school of the country town near which he lived, and was rudimentary enough in its character, stimulating a desire for knowledge which it could not satisfy. He learnt, as all children of Jewish parents learnt, the *Shemâ* or Creed of Israel, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord" (Deut. vi. 4), and the sentences that were written on the Phylacteries which boys, when they reached the age of thirteen and became Children of the Law, wore on their forehead and their arms. He was taught many of the Proverbs which proclaimed that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," and learnt to reverence Solomon as the ideal pattern of the wisdom

¹ So Ewald, *Introd. to Eccles.*

(Prov. i. 7) and largeness of heart that grow out of a wide experience. But it was a time of comparative deadness in the life of Israel. The last of the prophets had spoken some two centuries before, and there were few who studied his writings or those of his predecessors. The great masters of Israel and teachers of the Law had not yet raised the fabric of tradition which was afterwards embodied in the Talmud. The expectations of the Anointed King were for the time dormant, and few were looking for "redemption in Jerusalem" or for "the consolation of Israel." Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes, though the germs of their respective systems might be found in the thoughts of men, were not as yet stimulating the religious activity of the people by their rivalry as teachers. The heroic struggle of the Maccabees against the idolatry of Syria was as yet in the future, and the early history of the nation, the memories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, did not kindle the patriotic enthusiasm which they came to kindle afterwards. There was a growing tendency to fall into the modes of thought and speech and life of the Greeks and Syrians with whom the sons of Abraham were brought into contact. Even the sacred name of Jahveh or Jehovah, so precious to their fathers, had dropped into the background, and men habitually spoke of "God," or "the Creator," after the manner of the Greeks (Eccles. xii. 1). It was a time, such as all nations and Churches have known, of conventionality and routine. The religion of the people, such as the boy saw it, was not such as to call out any very deep enthusiasm. The wealth of his parents had attracted a knot of so-called devout persons round them, and his mother had come under their influence, and in proportion as she did so, failed to gain any hold on her son's

heart, and left no memory of a true pattern of womanhood for him to reverence and love. Even she formed no exception in after years to the sweeping censure in which he declared that among all the women he had met he had never known one who satisfied his ideal of what a righteous woman should be (Eccles. vii. 28). The religionists who directed her conscience called each other by the name of "Friend," "Brother," or "Companion," and claimed to be of those of whom Malachi had spoken, "who feared the Lord and spake often one to another" (Mal. iii. 16). Koheleth saw through their hypocrisy, watched them going to the house of God, *i.e.*, to temple or synagogue (Psa. lxxiv. 8), and heard their long and wordy and windy prayers—the very sacrifice of fools (Eccles. v. 1, 2). He saw how they made vows in time of sickness or danger, and then, when the peril had passed away, came before the priest, on whom they looked as the messenger or angel of the Lord, with frivolous excuses for its non-fulfilment (Eccles. v. 4-6); how they told their dreams as though they were an apocalypse from heaven (Eccles. v. 7). It was necessary to find a phrase to distinguish the true worshippers from these pretenders, and just as men, under the influence of the maxim that language was given to conceal our thoughts, came to speak of *la vérité vraie* as different from the ordinary *vérité*, so Koheleth could only emphasize his scorn of the hypocrites by contrasting them, as with the emphasis of iteration, with "those who fear God, who indeed fear before him" (Eccles. viii. 12).

As Koheleth grew to years of manhood, he was called to take his part in the labours of the cornfield and the vineyard. The wealth of his father did not lead him to bring up his son to a soft-handed leisure,

for men had not then ceased to recognize the blessedness of toil, and it had become a proverb that a father who does not teach his sons to labour with their hands teaches them to be thieves. The teachers of Israel remembered that the "king himself was served by the field" (Eccles. v. 9); and "despise not husbandry" was one of the maxims of the wise. In after years, when pleasure had brought satiety and weariness, and dainties palled on the palate, Koheleth looked back regretfully on that "sweet sleep" of the labour of earlier days, which followed on the frugal, or even scanty meal (Eccles. v. 12).

As he grew up to manhood, however, there came a change. Like the younger son in the parable (Luke xv. 12) he desired to see the world that lay beyond the hills, beyond the waters, and asked for his portion of goods and went his way into a far country. Among the Jews, as among the Greeks, and partly, indeed, as a consequence of their intercourse with them, this had come to be regarded as one of the paths to wisdom and largeness of heart. So the Son of Sirach wrote a little later: "A man that hath travelled knoweth many things." "He shall serve among great men, and appear before princes; he will travel through strange countries; for he hath tried the good and evil among men." (Ecclus. xxxiv. 9; xxxix. 4). And if a Jew travelled anywhere at that period, it was almost a matter of course that he should direct his steps to Alexandria. Intercourse between the two nations of Egypt and Judah was, indeed, no new thing. Psammetichus, in the days of Manasseh, had invited Jews to settle in his kingdom.¹ Alexander, in founding the new city which was to immortalize his name, had followed his example. The

¹ Letter of Pseudo-Aristeas.

first of the Ptolemies had brought over many thousands, and they occupied a distinct quarter of the city.¹ Philadelphus had, as the story ran, invited seventy-two of the elders of Israel to his palace that they might translate their Law as an addition to the treasures of his library, had received them with all honour, and invited them to discuss ethical questions day by day with the philosophers about his court.² A wealthy Jew coming to such a city, not without introductions, was sure to be well received, and Koheleth sought and found admission to that life of courts, which the Son of Sirach pointed out as one of the paths of wisdom (Ecclus. xxxix. 4). It was a position not without its dangers. It tempted the Jew to efface his nationality and his creed, and his hopes in the far-off future. It tempted him also to exchange the purity to which he was pledged by the outward symbol of the covenant and by the teaching of his home life, for the license of the Greek. Koheleth for a time bowed his neck to the yoke of a despotic king, and learnt the suppleness of the slaves who dare not ask a king, What doest thou? (Eccles. viii. 4). He watched the way the court winds blew, and learned to note the rise and fall of favourites and ministers (Eccles. x. 6, 7). He saw or heard how under Ptolemy Philopator the reins of power had fallen into the hands of his mistress, Agathoclea, and her brother; how the long minority of his son Epiphanes had been marked by the oppression of the poor and "violent perverting of judgment and justice" in the provinces (Eccles. v. 8), by all the evils which come on a land when its "king is a child" and its "princes revel in the morning" (Eccles. x. 16, 17.)³ He had seen the pervading power of a system of

¹ Joseph. *Ant.* xii. 1.² Letter of Pseudo-Aristeas.³ Justin, xxx. 1.

police espionage, which carried what had been spoken in whispers to the ears of the ruler (Eccles. x. 20). A training such as this could scarcely fail to make the man who was subject to it something less of an Israelite—to turn his thoughts from contemplating the picture which the prophets had drawn of a true and righteous King, to the task of noting the humours of kings who were neither true nor righteous, and flattering them with an obsequious homage, in the belief that “yielding” in such a case “pacifieth great offences” (Eccles. x. 4).¹

Temptations of another kind helped to complete the evil work. The wealth of Koheleth enabled him to surround himself with a certain magnificence, and he kept before himself the ideal of a glory like that of Solomon's: the wine sparkled at his banquets, and singing men and singing women were hired to sing songs of revelry and love, and the Greek *hetairæ*, the “delights of the sons of men,” the *demi-monde* of Alexandria, surrounded him with their fascinations (Eccles. ii. 3-8). His life became one of reckless sensuality. Like the Son in the parable, to whom I have before compared him, he wasted his substance in riotous living, and devoured his wealth with harlots (Luke xv. 13, 30). The tendency of such a life is, as all experience shews, to the bitterness of a cynical satiety. Poets have painted the Nemesis which dogs the footsteps of the man who lives for pleasure. In the Jaques,² perhaps to some extent even in the Hamlet, of Shakespeare, in the mental history, representing probably Shakespeare's own experience, of his Sonnets,

¹ So Bunsen, *God in History*, i. p. 159.

² For thou thyself hast been a libertine,
As sensual as the brutish sting itself.

As You Like It, ii. 7.

yet more in the Childe Harold of Byron, in the "Palace of Art" and the "Vision of Sin," of Tennyson, we have types of the temper of meditative scorn and unsatisfied desire that uttered itself in the cry, "All is vanity and feeding upon wind" (Eccles. i. 14).

But what is true more or less of all men except those who live—

Like a brute with lower pleasures, like a brute with lower pains,

was true then, as it has been since, in its highest measure, of the Jew who abandons the faith of his fathers and drifts upon the shoreless sea of a life of license. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. He has inherited higher hopes and nobler memories than the men of most other nations, and when he falls he sinks even to a lower level than they sink. The "little grain of conscience" that yet remains "makes him sour," and the features are stamped with the sneer of the mocker, and he hates life, and yet, with the strange inconsistency of pessimists, shrinks from death. He denies, or at least questions, the possibility of knowing that there is a life beyond the limits of this life (Eccles. iii. 18-21), and yet draws back from the journey to the undiscovered country, and clings passionately (Eccles. xi. 7) to the life which he declares to be intolerable (Eccles. ii. 17; vi. 3; vii. 1). The literature of our own time presents two vivid pictures of the character and words of one who, being a Jew, has passed through this experience. In the life of the Raphael of Kingsley's *Hypatia*, yet more in that of Heinrich Heine at Paris,¹ we have the counterpart of the life of Koheleth at Alexandria.

Under the thinly veiled disguise of the person of the

¹ Comp. Stigand's *Life of Heine*, ii. chap. I.

historic Solomon he afterwards retraced his own experience and the issue to which it had brought him. He had flattered himself that he was not making himself the slave of pleasure, but even in his wildest hours was gaining wide thoughts and enlarging his knowledge of good and evil, that even then his "wisdom remained with him" (Eccles. ii. 3, 9). Like Goethe, he was philosophic, or, to speak more truly, artistic, in the midst of his sensuality, and watched the "madness and folly" of men, and yet more of women, with the eye of a connoisseur (Eccles. ii. 12). It was well for him, though it seemed evil, that he could not rest in the calmly balanced tranquillity of the supreme artist which Goethe and apparently Shakespeare attained after the "*Sturm und Drang*" period of their life. The utter weariness and satiety, the mood of a *blasé* pessimism, into which he fell was as the first stepping-stone to higher things.

The course of his life at Alexandria had been marked by two strong affections, one of which ended in the bitterness of despair, while the other, both at the time and in its memory afterwards, was as a hand stretched forth to snatch him as "a brand from the burning." He had found a friend, one of his own faith, a true Israelite, who had kept himself, even in Alexandria, pure from evil, and gave him kindly sympathy and faithful counsel, who realized all that he had read in the history of his own country of the friendship of David and Jonathan, or in that of Greece, of Theseus and Peirithous, or Orestes and Pylades (Eccles. iv. 9, 10; vii. 28). He was to him what Pudens, the disciple of St. Paul, was to Martial, touching the fibres of reverence and admiration where

the very nerve of pudicity seemed dead and the conscience seared.¹ The memory of that friendship, perhaps the actual presence of the friend, saved Koheleth from the despair into which the other passion plunged him. For he had loved, in one instance at least, with a love strong as death, with a passion fiery and fond as that of Catullus for Lesbia; had idealized the object of his love, and had awakened as from a dream to find that she was false beyond the average falsehood of her class—that she was “more bitter than death,” her heart “as snares and nets,” her hands as “bands.” He shuddered at the thought of that passion, and gave thanks that he had escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler; yet more, that the friend of whom he thought as one that “pleased God,” had not yielded to her temptation.² (Eccles. vii. 26.) We are reminded, as we look first on this picture and

¹ O quam pæne tibi Stygiæ ego raptus ad undas,
Elysia vidi nubila fusca plagæ!
Quamvis lassa, tuos quærebant lumina vultus
Atque erat in gelido plurimus ore Pudens.

“Yea, all but snatched where flows the gloomy stream,
I saw the clouds that wrap the Elysian plain.
Still for thy face I yearned in wearied dream,
And cold lips, Pudens, Pudens! cried in vain.”

MART., *Æpig.* vi. 58.

² Here, too, identity of experience produces almost identity of phrase—

Non jam illud quæro, contra ut me diligit illa
Aut quod non potis est, esse pudica velit;
Ipse valere opto, et tetrum hunc deponere morbum,
O Di! reddite mi hoc pro pietate meâ.

“I ask not this, that she may love me still,
Or, task beyond her power, be chaste and true;
I seek for health, to free myself from ill,
For this, ye gods, I turn in prayer to you.”

CATULL., *Carm.* LXXVI.

then on that, of the marvellous and mysterious sonnet (cxliv.) in which Shakespeare writes—

“ Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still.
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooring his purity with her foul pride.”

The life of Heine presents hardly less striking a parallel. He, too, had known one friend—“the only man in whose society I never felt *ennui*; on whose sweet, noble features I could see clearly the aspect of my own soul.”¹ He, too, in what seems to have been the one real passion of his life, had found himself deceived and disappointed—

“ She broke her faith ; she broke her troth ;
For this I feel forgiving ;
Or else she had, as wedded wite,
Embittered love and living.”²

The heart-wound thus inflicted was not easily healed. Art, culture, pleasure failed to soothe him. There fell on Koheleth the “blank misgivings” of which Wordsworth speaks, the profound sense of nothingness which John Stuart Mill describes so vividly in his Autobiography, what the Germans call the *Weltschmerz*, the burden of the universe, or, in his own phrase, the “world set in the heart” (Eccles. iii. 11); the sense of an infinity and an eternity which man strives in vain to measure or apprehend.

It was in this frame of mind that Koheleth turned to the literature and philosophy of Greece. The library founded by the first Ptolemy, enlarged by Philadelphus, arranged and catalogued by Demetrius

¹ Stigand, *Life of Heine*, i. p. 88.

² *Ibid.* i. p. 47.

Phalereus, and thrown open for the free use of all students, claimed, we may well believe, not less than that of Thebes, which had the title graven upon its portals, to be the *Ἱατρεῖον ψυχῆς*, the "Hospital for the diseases of the Soul."¹ He had by this time gained sufficient knowledge of Greek to read at least the writings of the three previous centuries. They opened a new world of thought and language to him. He had grown weary of psalms and prophecies and chants, as men of our own time have grown weary of their Bible and Prayer-Book and Christian Year, and had not turned to them for comfort and counsel. His new reading brought him, at any rate, distraction. The lyric and dramatic poets he read indeed chiefly in the extracts which were quoted by lecturers, or the anthologies that were placed in the hands of young students; but in these he found words that relieved and even interpreted his own feelings. He learnt from Sophocles and Theognis to look on "not being" as better than any form of life (Eccles. iv. 2, 3); with the misogynist Euripides, who echoed his own cynical scorn, to utter bitter sneers at women's falsehood and frailty; with the pessimist Glycon to say of life that it was

πάντα γέλωσ, καὶ πάντα κόμισ καὶ πάντα τὸ μηδέν.

All is a jest, and all is dust, and all is nothingness.

From the earlier sages he learnt the maxims that had become the ornaments of school-boys' themes, and yet were new to him—the doctrine of the *Μηδὲν ἄγαν*, "nothing in excess;" the "*Surtout, point de zèle*" of Talleyrand; the not being "overmuch righteous or overmuch wicked" (Eccles. vii. 16). From Chilon he learnt to talk of the time, or *καίρος*, that was fixed for all things, of opportuneness as almost the one ethical

¹ Diodorus, i. 49.

criterion of human action (Eccles. iii. 1-11). He caught up the phrase "under the sun" as expressing the totality of human life (Eccles. i. 9, and thirty other passages).

It was, however, to the philosophy of Greece, as represented by the leading sects of Stoics and Epicureans, that he turned with most eagerness. The former had in its teaching much that attracted him. That doctrine of recurring cycles of phenomena, not in the world of outward nature only, but of human life, history repeating itself, so that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. i. 9, 10), gave to him, as it did afterwards to Aurelius, a sense of order in the midst of seemingly endless changes and perturbations, and led him to look with the serene tranquillity of a *Nil admirari* at the things that excited men's ambition or roused them to indignation. If oppression and corruption had always been the accompaniments of kingly rule, such as the world had then known it, why should he wonder at the "violent perverting of justice and judgment in a province" under an Artaxerxes or a Ptolemy? (Eccles. v. 8). From the followers of Zeno he learnt also to look on virtue and vice in their intellectual aspects. The common weaknesses and follies of mankind were to him, as to them, only so many different forms and degrees of absolute insanity (Eccles. i. 17; ii. 12; vii. 25; ix. 3). He studied madness and folly in that mental hospital as he would have studied the phenomena of fever or paralysis. The perfect ideal calm of the Stoic seemed a grand thing to aim at: as much above the common life of men as light is above darkness (Eccles. ii. 13). The passion, or the fashion, of Stoicism, however, soon

passed away. That iteration of events, the sun rising every day, the winds ever blowing, the rivers ever flowing, the endless repetition of the follies and vices of mankind (Eccles. i. 5-8), became to him, as the current of the Thames did to the jaded pleasure-seeking duke who looked on it from his Richmond villa,¹ unspeakably wearisome. It seemed to mock him with the thought of monotony where he had hoped to find the pleasure of variety. It mocked him also with the thought of the permanence of nature, or even of the mass of human existence considered as part of nature, and the fleeting nothingness of the individual life. The voice of the rivulet—

“ Men may come and men may go,
But I flow on for ever ”

brought no pleasant music to his ear. And, to say the truth, the lives of the Stoics of Alexandria did not altogether commend their system to him. They talked much of the dignity of virtue, and drew fine pictures of it ; but when he came to know them they were as vain, irritable, egotistic, sometimes even as sordid and sensual, as the men whom they despised. Each man was, in his own eyes, and those of his little coterie, as a supreme sage and king, almost as a God. There was something in them like the mutual apotheosis of which Heine complained in the pantheistic followers of Fichte and of Schelling.² Against that system, which ended in making every man his own deity, there rose in the heart of the Israelite, who had not altogether forgotten the lessons of his earlier life, a protest which clothed itself in the words, “ Fear thou God ” (Eccles. viii. 12, 13). And so Koheleth turned from the Porch to the Garden. It was at least less pretentious, and did

¹ Cox's *Quest of the Chief Good*, p. 81. ² Stigand's *Life of Heine*, ii. p. 162.

not mock him with its lofty ideal of an unattained and unattainable perfection. Even the physics and physiology of the school of Epicurus were not without their attractions for a mind eager in the pursuit of knowledge of all kinds. Their theory of the circulation of the elemental forces, the rivers flowing into the sea yet never filling it, but returning as through arteries and veins, filtered in their progress from the sea's saltness, to the wells and fountains from which they had first sprung to light (Eccles. i. 5-7); their study of the growth of the human embryo, illustrated as it was by dissections in the Museum of Alexandria,¹ shewing how the "bones grow in the womb of her that is with child" (Eccles. xi. 5); their discoveries, not quite anticipating Harvey, yet on the same track, as to the action of the heart and the lungs, the lamp of life suspended by its silver chain, the pitcher drawing every moment fresh draughts from the fountain of the water of life (Eccles. xii. 6); all this came to him as a new interest, a new pleasure.² It was as fascinating, that wonderland of science, as a new poem or a new *mythos*, or, in modern phrase, as a new novel or romance. And then its theory of life and death, did not that seem to point out to him the secret of a calm repose? The life of man was as the life of brutes (Eccles. iii. 19). His soul was compound, and so discerptible. All things had been formed out of the eternal atoms, and into the eternal atoms all things were evermore resolved. Admitting even, for the sake of hypothesis, that there was something more than the forms of matter which are palpable and visible in man's

¹ Dissection, and even vivisection, were first practised in the medical schools of Alexandria.—*Quarterly Review*, lxvi. p. 162.

² I purposely refrain from including the other anatomical references which men have found in Eccles. xii. 4, 5.

nature, some vital force or ethereal spark, yet what had been brought together at birth was, at any rate, certain to be dissolved at death. Dust to dust, the ether which acted in man's brain to the ether of the infinite azure, was the inevitable end (Eccles. iii. 21, but *not* xii. 7). Such a view of life served at least to strip death of the terror with which the *δεισιδαιμονία*, the superstition, the *Aberglaube*, of men had clothed it. It did not leave him to dread the passage into the dim darkness of Sheol, the land of the shadow of death, as Hezekiah (Isa. xxxviii. 11, 18) and the Psalmist (Psa. vi. 5; xxx. 9; lxxxviii. 11) had dreaded it (Eccles. ix. 10). It freed him from the terrors of the Gehenna of which his countrymen were beginning to talk, from the Tartarus and Phlegethon and Cocytus, the burning and the wailing rivers, in which the Greeks who were outside the philosophic schools still continued to believe. It left him free to make the most and the best of life. And then that "best of life" was at once a pleasant and an attainable ideal. It confirmed the lessons of his own experience as to the vanity and hollowness of much in which most men seek the satisfaction of their desires. Violent emotions were followed by a reaction, the night's revel by the morning headache, ambition and the favour of princes ended in disappointment. What the wise man should strive after was just the maximum of enjoyment, not over-balanced by the *amari aliquid* that rises even *medio de fonte leporum*—a life like that of the founder of the school—moderate and even abstemious, not disdaining the pleasures of any sense, yet carrying none to an excess. He had led a life of calm serene tranquillity, almost one of total abstinence and vegetarianism, and so the *ἀταραξία* which had become

identified with his name, had been protracted to extreme old age.¹ The history of men's lives had surely "nothing better" to shew than this. This, at any rate, was good (Eccles. iii. 12, 14, 22 ; v. 18 ; viii. 15). In such a life there was nothing that the conscience condemned as evil. It admitted even of acts of kindness and benevolence, as bringing with them a moral satisfaction (Eccles. vii. 1, 2 ; xi. 1, 2), and therefore a new source of enjoyment. Even the sages of Israel would have approved of such a life (Prov. v. 15-19 ; xxx. 7), though it might not satisfy the heroic aspirations and high-soaring dreams of its prophets. Enjoyment itself might be received as a gift from God.

Into this new form of life accordingly Koheleth threw himself, and did not find it altogether a delusion. Inwardly it made him feel that life was, after all, worth living (Eccles. xi. 7). He began to find the pleasure of doing good, and visiting the fatherless and widow in their affliction. He learnt that it was better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. The heart of the wise was in that house and not in the house of mirth (Eccles. vii. 2-4). Even the reputation of doing good was not to be despised, and the fragrance of a good name was better than the odorous spike-nard or rose-essence of the king's luxurious banquets (Eccles. vii. 1). And he gained, as men always do gain by any acts of kindness which are not altogether part of the ostentatious or self-calculating egotism of the Pharisee, something more than enjoyment.

Sunt lachrymæ rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.

"We needs must weep for woe, and, being men,
Man's sorrows touch our hearts." VIRG. *Æn.* i. 462.

¹ Diog. Laert. X. i. p. 6.

The flood-gates of sympathy were opened. His self-love was expanding almost unconsciously into benevolence. He began to feel that altruism and not egotism was the true law of humanity. He was in this point—partly, perhaps, because here too the oracle in his inmost heart once more spoke out the secret of the wisdom of Israel, “Fear thou God”—wiser than his teachers (Eccles. v. 7).

A wealthy Jew with this turn for philosophizing was not likely to be overlooked by the lecturers and *littérateurs* of Alexandria. From the library of that city Koheleth passed to the Museum,¹ and was elected, or appointed by royal favour, a member of the august body who dined in its large hall at the public expense, and held their philosophical discussions afterwards. It was a high honour for a foreigner, almost as much so as for an Englishman to be elected to the Institute of France, or a Frenchman to a fellowship of the Royal Society. He became first a listener and then a sharer in those discussions, an *Ecclesiastes*, a debater, and not a preacher, as we count preaching, in that *Ecclesia*. Epicureans and Stoics, Platonists and Aristotelians met as in a Metaphysical Society, and discussed the nature of happiness and of the supreme good, of the constitution of man's being and of the soul's immortality, of free will and destiny. The result of such a whirl of words and conflict of opinions was somewhat bewildering. He was almost driven back upon the formula of the scepticism of Pyrrho, “Who knows?” (Eccles. iii. 21). It was to him what a superficial study of Hobbes and Shaftesbury, of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Kant and

¹ For the fullest account of the Museum accessible in English, see the article on Alexandria in Vol. lxxvi. of the *Quarterly Review*. It is, I believe, no secret, that it was written by the late Rev. William Sewell.

Schelling, of Bentham and Mill, of Comte and Herbert Spencer, have been to English students of successive generations. One thing, at least, was clear. He saw that here also the race was not to the swift, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding (Eccles. ix. 11). The charlatan too often took precedence of the true man; silent and thoughtful wisdom was out-talked by an eloquent declaimer (Eccles. ix. 15, 16). Here also, as in his life of revelry, there was much that could only be described as vanity and much "feeding upon wind."

So for a short time life passed on, looking brighter and more cheerful than it had done. There came before him the prospect, destined not to be realized, of the life of a happy home with wife and children round him (Eccles. ix. 7-9). But soon the evil days came in which there was no more any pleasure to be found (Eccles. xii. 1). The life of revelry and license had sapped his strength, and the strain of study and the excitement of debate had made demands upon his vital powers which they could not meet, and there crept over him the slow decay of a premature old age, of the paralysis which, while it leaves consciousness clear and the brain free to think and muse over many things, attacks first one organ of sense or action and then another. The stars were darkened and the clouds of dark thoughts returned after the rain of idle tears, and the keepers of the house trembled and the strong men bowed themselves. Sight failed, and he no longer saw the goodly face of nature or the comeliness of man or woman, could no longer listen with delight to the voice of the daughters of music (Eccles. xii. 2-4). Even the palate lost its wonted sense of flavour, and the choicest

dainties became distasteful, His voice passed into the feeble tones of age (Eccles. xii. 4). Sleep was more and more a stranger to his eyes, and his nights were passed, as it were, under the branches of the almond tree, the "early waking" tree that was the symbol of *insomnia* (Eccles. xii. 5; Jer. i. 11, 12). Remedies were applied by the king's physicians, but even the "caper-berry," the "sovereign'st thing on earth," or in the Alexandrian pharmacopœia, against that form of paralysis, was powerless to revive his exhausted energies. The remainder of his life—and it lasted for some six or seven years; enough time to make him feel that the days of darkness were indeed many (Eccles. xi. 8)—was one long struggle with disease. In the language of the Greek writers with whom he had become familiar, it was but a long *νοσοτροφία*, a *βίος ἀβίωτος*. His state, to continue the parallel already more than once suggested, was like that which made the last eight years of Heine's life a time of ceaseless suffering. It added to the pain and trouble which disease brought with it that he had no son to minister to his wants nor to inherit his estate. House and garden and lands, books and art-treasures, all that he had stored up, as for a palace of art and a lordly pleasure-house, would pass into the hands of a stranger (Eccles. iv. 8). It was a sore travail, harder than any pain of body, to think of that as the outcome of all his labours. It was in itself "vanity and an evil disease" (Eccles. vi. 2). And beyond this there lay a further trouble, growing out of the survival, or revival, of his old feelings as an Israelite, which neither Stoic apathy nor Epicurean serenity, though they would have smiled at it as a superstition, helped him to overcome. How was he to be buried? (Eccles. vi. 3). It was, of course,

out of the question that his corpse should be carried back to the land of his fathers and laid in their tomb in the valley of Jehosaphat. The patriotic zeal which had been roused by the struggle of the Maccabees against Antiochus Epiphanes would not have allowed the body of one who was suspected of apostasy to desecrate the holy city. And even in Alexandria itself the more rigorous Jews had been alienated by his Hellenizing tendencies. He could not expect that their mourners would attend his funeral, crying, after their manner, Ah, brother! or Ah, sister! Ah, Lord! and Ah, his glory! (Jer. xxii. 18). He had before him the prospect of being buried as with the burial of a dog.

And yet the days were not altogether evil. The friend whom he had found faithful, the one among a thousand, did not desert him, and came and ministered to his weakness, to raise up, as far as he had the power, the brother who had fallen (Eccles. iv. 10). It was a gain that he could no longer fill his belly with the husks that the swine did eat. Sensual pleasures and the fragments of a sensuous philosophy, the lower and the higher forms of popular Epicureanism, were alike unsatisfying, and the voice within once more spoke in clearer notes than ever, Fear thou God. With him, as with Heine (to refer once more to the Koheleth of our time), there was a religious reaction, a belief in a personal God, a personal immortality, as that to which men must come when they are "sick to death," a belief not unreal even though the habitual cynicism seemed to mock it in the very act of utterance.¹ It was not, indeed, like the cry of the prodigal, "I will arise and go to my father;" for that

¹ Stigand's *Life of Heine*, ii. pp. 363, 378.

thought of the Divine Fatherhood was as yet but dimly revealed to him; but the old familiar thought that God was his Creator, the Giver of life and breath and all things (Eccles. v. 19; xii. 1), returned in its fulness and power, and in his own experience he was finding out that his pleasant vices had been made whips to scourge him, and so he learnt that, though he could not fathom the mystery of his judgments, the Creator was also the Judge (Eccles. xi. 9). It was in this stage of mental and spiritual growth, of strength growing out of weakness, that he was led to become a writer, and to put on record the results of his experience. He still thought in the language of his fatherland, and therefore in that language he wrote.

A book written under such conditions was not likely to present the characteristics of a systematic treatise. It was, in part, like Pascal's *Pensées*, in part, like Heine's latest poems—the record of a conflict not yet over, though it was drawing near its close. The “Two Voices” of our own poet were there; or rather, the *three* voices of the pessimism of the satiated sensualist, and the wisdom, such as it was, of the Epicurean thinker, and the growing faith in God, were heard in strange alternation; now one, now another uttering itself, as in an inharmonious discord, to the very close of the book. Now his intellect questioned, now his faith affirmed, as Heine did, the continued existence of the spirit of man after death (Eccles. iii. 19; xii. 7). As conscious of that conflict, and feeling the vanity of fame, as Keats did, when he desired that his only epitaph might be, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water,” he shrank from writing in his own person, and chose as the title of his book that which

at once expressed its character and embodied the distinction which at one time he had prized so highly. As men have written under the names of Philalethes or Phileleutheros, as a great thinker of the last century, Edward Tucker, wrote his *Light of Nature Pursued*, under the pseudonym of Abraham Search, so he came before his readers as Koheleth, Ecclesiastes, the Debater. He was free in that character to utter varying and conflicting views. It is true he went a step further, and also came before them, as though the book recorded the experience of one greater than himself as the seeker after, and possessor of, wisdom. The son of David, king over Israel in Jerusalem, was speaking as through his lips (Eccles. i. 1, 12, 16). It was a trick, or rather a fashion, of authorship, such as was afterwards adopted in the *Wisdom of Solomon* by a man of purer life and higher aim, though less real inspiration, but not a fraud, and the fashion was a dominant one and deceived no one. The students of philosophy habitually conveyed their views in the shape of treatises by Aristotle, or letters or dialogues by Plato. There was scarcely a medical writer of eminence at Alexandria who had not published his views as to the treatment of disease under the name of Hippocrates.¹ Plato and Xenophon had each written an *Apologia* which was represented as coming from the lips of Socrates. The latter had also composed an ideal biography of Cyrus. And in this case Koheleth might well think that the analogy between his own experience and that of the sage of Israel was more than enough to justify the personation as a form of quasi-dramatic art. Both had gone through a like

¹ Sprengel, *Hist. de Medicine*, i. p. 430.

quest after the chief good, seeking first wisdom and then pleasure, and then the magnificence and the culture that comes from art, and then wisdom again. Both had found that all this was, in the end, unsatisfying. Might he not legitimately hold up the one experience embodied in the form of the other, and put on, for the nonce, the robes of Solomon, alike in his glorious apparel, and in the sackcloth and ashes, in which, as the legend ran, he had ended his days as a penitent. In his early youth Koheleth had gazed on the ideal picture of Solomon as a pattern which he strove to reproduce. The surroundings of his manhood, the palaces, and gardens, and groves, and museums, and libraries of the Ptolemies enabled him to picture what the monarch's kingly state had been. In his picture of the close of life, the subjective element, as was natural, predominated over the objective, and we have before us Koheleth himself, and not the Solomon of history.

The analysis of the book itself would occupy more space than I can now claim. It will be enough to note that from first to last it was, on the view now taken, intensely personal, furnishing nearly all the materials for a memoir; that its main drift and purpose, broken, indeed, by many side eddies, now of cynical bitterness, now of worldly wisdom, now of keen observation, was to warn those who were yet in search of the chief good against the shoals and rocks and quicksands on which he had well-nigh made utter shipwreck of his faith; that his desire was to deepen the fear of God in which he had at last found the anchor of his soul; that that fear had become more and more a reality as the shadows closed around him; that it had deepened

into the conviction that the Creator was also the Judge, and that the Judge of all the earth, sooner or later, would assuredly do right. The close of the book all but coincided with the close of life. He waited, if not with the full assurance of faith, yet with a calm trustfulness, for the hour when the few mourners should go about the street, and he should go to his eternal home (Eccles. xii. 6); when "the dust should return to the earth as it was, and the spirit should return to God who gave it" (Eccles. xii. 7). "Return to God"—that was his last word on the great problem, and that was at once his dread and his consolation.

So the life and the book ended; and it is not part of my present purpose to trace the after history of the latter. Not without reason was it brought by the grandson of Sirach, or some other seeker after truth, from Alexandria to Palestine, and translated by him into Greek.¹ Not without reason did he, or some later Rabbi, add the commendatory verses with which the book now closes, truly describing its effect as that of the goad that spurs on thought, of the nails that, once driven in, cannot easily be plucked out (Eccles. xii. 11). Not without reason did the wiser thinkers of the school of Hillel resist the narrow scruples of those of the school of Shammai when the question was debated whether the new unknown book should be admitted to a place side by side with all that was noblest and most precious in their literature,² and, in spite of seeming contradictions, and Epicurean or heretical tendencies, recognize that in this record of the struggle, the fall, the recovery of a child of Israel, a child of God, there was the narrative of a Divine education told with a

¹ Prologue to Ecclesiasticus.

² Ginsburg, *Introduction to Eccles.*

genius and power in which they were well content, as all true and reverential thinkers have been content since, to acknowledge a Divine inspiration.

E. H. PLUMPTRE.

[NOTE.—It may be well to state that the Essay which now appears in THE EXPOSITOR, by the kind permission of the Editor, forms part of a forthcoming Commentary on *Ecclesiastes* in the series of the *Cambridge School Bible*. To that Commentary I must refer the readers of these pages for the evidence that has led me to the conclusions which I have here endeavoured to set forth.]

THE VALUE OF THE PATRISTIC WRITINGS FOR
THE CRITICISM AND EXEGESIS OF THE BIBLE.

III.—EXEGESIS (*continued*).

THE influence of Origen was immense. He may, indeed, be said to have determined—in part directly, in part indirectly and mediately—the main current of patristic exegesis to the Reformation. It is true that, as we have seen, Origen himself rather summed up in his own person tendencies already existing than created those tendencies. But in his case the law of historical progress received a conspicuous illustration. The personal ascendancy and genius of the individual gave concentration and force to the spirit of the age. They helped to transmit it to posterity with accelerated rather than diminished power. The method of allegorical interpretation, instead of being frittered away in the works of smaller men and superseded by the first master-mind that was opposed to it, itself had possession of the master-mind of early Christianity, and through it dominated succeeding generations.

It will be enough to, notice a few of the greater