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**T H E E C C L E S I A S T E S**

**INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATION, COMMENT AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

**- SUMMERY OF THE THESIS FOR A DOCTOR'S DEGREE -**

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No book in the world has ever been so copied or has influenced human thinking in such a decisive manner as did the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> This observation can be partly applied to the Ecclesiastes, a short and remarkable didactic writing, only twelve chapter-long, portraying an priceless ring in the long chain of writings comprised in the Old Testament.

The book, which in Hebrew is entitled Qohelet (קֹהֵלֵת), occupies a leading role among the old testamentary poetic texts. It is one of the most instructive biblical writings serving as a guide for human conduct in life. If, according to its form, it belongs to the group of poetic books, according to its contents, it is best integrated in the didactic genre, being a collection of convictions or maxims, whose purpose is to instruct the readers in learning and practicing virtue.

The inspired character of this writing gives it an unmatched authority. We refer to its content as to a source of living water from which we continuously quench our thirst. He who holds the book in his hands cannot but feel trapped and troubled by what he reads. Some judgments seem to him curious, others make him think and most tempt him, lure him, wake him. The encompassed ideas are of great depth and the literary form – of a chosen beauty. Rightly, the author may be considered a spiritual harp, through the intercession of whom the Holy Spirit bestowed us the opportunity to listen to high thoughts and proverbs and alike unuttered sighs of the grieved, tried and tempted soul.<sup>2</sup>

The Ecclesiastes is an enigmatic writing, much commented and analysed. The richness of its content makes it enjoyable. It is not surprising that Schopenhauer assigns to its author the title of *brilliant philosopher*, while Taubert, Sawicki and other critics of modern pessimism refer to him as to one of their ancestors.<sup>3</sup> For, in a chosen form, rich in images and comparisons, vivid through expressions, full of sublime and varied thoughts, the wise perpetrator managed to expose a wisdom derived from life that includes a series of teachings and religious, moral and social rules. Founding his comparisons on known things, which he enwraps in a poetic form, the author gives birth to a concise but sententious, figurative and parabolic style, that gives his work a very special colouring. It is interesting to know the world view of a man who did not know what hunger, cold, contempt and evils of life are. On the contrary, as a wise king,

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<sup>1</sup> **Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Neaga**, *Ecclesiastul si pesimismul lui Eminescu*, în *Telegraful Român*, an 80, nr. 7-8, Sibiu, 1932, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> **Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan**, *Cărțile didactico-poetice*, Ed. Universității Lucian Blaga, Sibiu, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> **E. Podechard**, *L'Ecclesiaste*, Paris, Librairie Victor Lecoffre, J. Gabalda L'Editeur, 1912, p. 192

powerful and feared, he tried all sorts of cravings and treats, but did not lose contact with reality.<sup>4</sup> Sure, social and moral problems which demanded solution in the spirit of the Mosaic law were often brought before the wise monarch. The development of internal and external social life, due to expanded connections, could endanger the public and private morality, even the life of the state itself. It had to be pointed to the people that only by fair and honest work, by moderation in the accumulation of material wealth, by social relations based on justice and equality, as well as by constant practice of virtues, Man can preserve his dignity and accomplish his mission in the world. This is largely depicted in the Ecclesiastes, a book of moral synthesis that reflects the experience of centuries of generations of wise men, the synthesis of Jewish wisdom and the life of the people living under the direct influence of the Law of Moses. It is a testimony to how the high precepts of the Law were applied to life and experienced, so alongside other didactic books form the instructive literature of the chosen people literature. By didactic book in the Old Testament, we must understand the Mosaic Law applied to everyday life.

The message in the Ecclesiastes is still the current message of our time, simply because the existential problems posed by this book are essentially the same for all people. Nothing is new under the sun (1.9). And that practical wisdom of life that springs from fear of God and the preservation of His commandments (12:13), which the author wishes to convey to his benevolent reader, appears today, as then, as the believer's most valuable possession.<sup>5</sup> It directs and guides the activities of the human being, becoming a life skill due to which good shall be done and evil avoided.

We propose that, throughout this work, to pursue the identification and exposure of the meaning of the main statements in the sapient discourse, as well as to present the place of exegesis of this book in the whole of Old Testament theology. We have constantly used , with minimal exceptions, an expositive tone avoiding to enter directly into the issues that are still the subject of controversy amongst contemporary interpreters or historians. Throughout our text we have set out our attention ,above all, on the references of the Fathers of the Church so that we

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<sup>4</sup> **Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae Neaga**, *Dragostea de viață în cartea vechio-testamentară Ecclesiastul*, în Mitropolia Banatului, nr.7-9/ 1957, (53-58), p.53

<sup>5</sup> **Diac. Lect. M. Chialda**, *Învățăături moral-sociale în cărțile lui Solomon*, în Studii Teologice, Nr. 1-2, seria a II-a, ian.-febr., Anul VII, 1955, p.4.

may present the work more as a patristic commentary than as a basting, more or less critical, of the different views of opponents of authenticity. But this does not mean that the text itself does not contain references to secondary studies or opinions of modern exegetes. We discussed their views, we made some specifications related to our reporting to these judgments. Thus, in the introduction we sought to clarify issues related to the title of the book, its author, the time of composing, inspiration and canonicity, integrity and unity, form, language, content and division. In the first part of this paper, we made a translation of the content of the book from Hebrew into Romanian and, without claiming exhaustion of all meanings, we proceeded to an analysis of the content of Solomon's work. The third part consists in a sort of quintessence of the issues discussed in the first two parts, materialized in a theology and a critical analysis of the book. We believe that each of these chapters and subchapters of the work may provide some openings for further research and subsequent separate studies.

To achieve the translation of the contents of the book from Hebrew into Romanian we made use of *Biblia Hebraica*, edited by Rudolf Kittel, P. Kahle Textum Masoreticum Curavit, Württembergische Bibelanstalt Stuttgart, 1937.

Next, we draw the main ideas fulfilling an important part in understanding the subject matter of this paper.

### **The title of the book.**

Ecclesiastes is the title given to the book by St. Jerome, who translated the Scriptures in the Latin Vulgate.<sup>6</sup> This title represents a Latinized version of Greek Εκκλησιαστικῆς (Ekklesiastis), the word by which the writing is individualized in the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible in Greek. In turn, the term Εκκλησιαστικῆς, that refers to one who meets an assembly (ecclesia)<sup>7</sup>, is the exponent of the Hebrew participle תְּהִלָּה (gathering crowd, community, human group).

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<sup>6</sup> **E. Phillipe**, *Ecclesiaste (Le livre de...)* art. în *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, public par F. Vigouroux, tome deuxième, deuxième partie, Paris, Libraire Letouzey et Ane, 1926, col. 1533.

<sup>7</sup> See **Pr. Prof. Vladimir Prelipcean, Pr. Prof. Nicolae Neaga, Pr. Prof. Gheorhe Barna, Pr. Prof. Mircea Chialda**, *Studiul Vechiului Testament pentru Facultățile de Teologie*, Ediția a III-a, îngrijită de Pr. Conf. Dr. Ioan Chirilă, Ed. Renașterea, Cluj Napoca, 2003, p. 311. **The Septuagint (LXX)** has translated in an exact manner the

## The author.

In the header, the Hebrew writing is designated by an odd word, composed of four letters - קהלל (QHLL) - which, taken in themselves, remain up to now unintelligible; according to the rule, vowels are missing and it is likely that the author wanted us to read Qohelet. This is the name of the character which throughout the book has a leading role. . We realize quickly that QHLL is only a password for indicating the author. There are examples of other fictive names in sapiential books under which someone hides his true mark of identity.<sup>8</sup>

The name of Qohelet, from which the homonymous writing has its title in the Masoretic tradition, is a typical case of pseudonymous epigraphy The author, who now calls himself "the son of David" (1:1) and "the king of Israel in Jerusalem" (1:12) speaks to the readers in the first person making such revelations through an extensive biographical statement, reported regularly to previous historical sources. He reveals that the King was a powerful, rich ,founder of great things, ‘joueur’ dedicated to women, wine, wisdom, proverbs and a scientist, curious in all natural things. "Since, except for Avesalom and Adonijah, two of David's sons, who tried to usurp their father's throne without managing to see their dream fulfilled, however, it was only Solomon who succeeded David and made a glorious era of his more than 37 years of reign as the king of Jerusalem, the book being attributed to him, and Qohelet was considered to be a pseudonym for it."<sup>9</sup>

## The time of composition.

The issue concerning the time when the Ecclesiastes was written is closely related to that of its author/ authorship. Around both many and countless speculations have been made. Although most exegetes have considered the reign of king Solomon (970-930 BC) as the period of accomplishment of this exceptional biblical and literary work, in recent times voices emerged who , abandoning the traditional view of the Synagogue and of the Church ,deny the book its old

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Hebrew קהלת (qohelet) by **Εκκλησιαστής** (Ekklesiastis)- a word by which Aristotles defines the citizens of Athens, those who participate in a gathering – **Εκκλησία** – and who decided on matters of peace, war, laws etc. See also **Pr. Prof. Ioan Popescu Mălăești**, *Ecclesiastul*, în *Studii Teologice*, anul IV, 1933, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> **Ioan Vasile Botiza**, *Introducere în studiul Sfintei Scripturi*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Cluj Napoca, 2005, p. 319.

<sup>9</sup> **Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan**, *Ecclesiastul – de la pesimism și fatalitate, la credință și responsabilitate*, în volumul *Cărțile didactico-poetice*, Ed. Universității ”Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2001, p. 95.

origin in the age of Solomon. Much less could be claimed, by the challengers of the authenticity of this paper, the fact that it was collected and fixed in writing by another author of the tenth century BC, because up to Herod the Great (37 - 4 BC), have been proposed, in turn, about all possible ages.

Compared to a time so long, of approximately nine centuries, it is necessary to try an approach to the historical truth. However, it should be noted that issues related to the composition of a biblical work can be discussed with all freedom, especially when not dogmas.

### **Inspiration and canonicity of the writing.**

Much more important than the authenticity theme is that of the inspiration and the canonicity of the Ecclesiastes. The Church continually supported and strongly upheld this. We can say that the permanent presence of the book across the canon of the Old Testament brings the proof of certainty itself which the Jews and the Christians have had with regard to its inspired character. The alleged differences that have emerged over time, which questioned the inspiration of the writing, suggesting its exclusion from the canon on the pretext that it contains internal disagreements and some of the doctrines might be inconsistent with the biblical spirit, (4.2, 7.3, 8.15; 9.4, 12.2) were very isolated and clear-cut attitudes have been taken against them by the Synagogue, the Synod of Jamnia (AD 90 year), and but also by the Church during the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553 AD).

### **The integrity (unity) of the text**

The Book of the Ecclesiastes. The so called differences between parts of the book can be explained by the way in which the book has been written. We do not have to see the Ecclesiastes as a systematic book, written by a plan, but more like a corpus of thoughts, which have been put in written text at shorter or longer periods of time which reveal the preoccupations and the strugglings of different worlds in their different contexts.<sup>10</sup> It appears to be very natural at first to see the writing full of oppositions and disagreements, containing problems and

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<sup>10</sup> Pr. Prof. Vladimir Prelipcean, Pr. Prof. Nicolae Neaga, Pr. Prof. Gheorghe Barna, Pr. Prof. Mircea Chialda., *op.cit.*, p. 315.

unargued statements. In it the exact feelings and experiences of a troubled soul are being revealed. Only when you go through it more than once can you realize how well underlain are its statements and so called contradictions. Because the very intention of the wise king was that to gather problems, without offering any solutions to them. He only put them in one book. This negative work does not seem to be without any use. Although we do not find specific clarification for individual problems, for example which is the of riches, wisdom and other things such as these, Solomon did not let treated them pending in the air, but on the contrary he built connections between them and found their true meaning in the whole of human life and its activities, which God is in control of. Stating that God shall judge all human acts, whether good or bad (12, 4), the author tells the reader, with no doubt, about the responsibility which he has before God, concerning all that he has done on earth. This, proves in Ecclesiastes a unity both of thoughts and ideas.

Sometimes, Solomon gives the impression that he writes without being conscious of this, here and there presenting a parable in which we find a great amount of ideas that torment him or a classical *masal*.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes we are obliged to admit that there are parts of the writing, in which the profundity of the thought, but of the feeling also, gave very beautiful and compact passages. Many times, going through the book, you find yourself captured, struggling and tormented by it. It places in your mind traces which are hard to erase. And you find almost impossible to stop and try to capture its roots and directions and give them life. It seems as if they had run away. It seems that the author wanted to fascinate the readers, to catch their thoughts, to torment their soul, to give them teachings. And if that were true, we have to admit that he has succeeded.

### **The contents and the division of the book.**

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<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew *Masal* has the meaning of didactic, sententious, gnomic teaching.

There is an understanding between the interpreters concerning the division of the book. There are some who divide the book into two<sup>12</sup>, three<sup>13</sup>, four parts<sup>14</sup>, some going even further dividing it into seven or thirty parts. It is a fact that in the modern Bibles The Ecclesiastes is divided into twelve parts<sup>15</sup>. D. Barthelemy the one who studied the ancient traditions of the division of the Torah, showed the connection between these chapters and their liturgical meaning in the Synagogue.<sup>16</sup> “*Midraş Rabbah la cartea Qohelet* divides it into four sections, the border between sections 1 and 2 being less obvious than that between the following, but it seems to be after the 3, 12; the second section begins at the 3, 12; the third at 7, 1; the fourth at 9, 7. Indicated only in The Midras, these divisions are not explained and they come without a doubt from older traditions.<sup>17</sup> The Saint Gregory of Nissey, in his eight homilies to The Ecclesiastes suggests that we are dealing with a complete work, as he refers to section **I, 1 – III, 12-13**, as to a first part of the book. Some time later, Isodad from Merv<sup>18</sup>, whose interpretation is in great part due to the one of Theodor of Mopsuestia, suggests at the beginning of his commentary to The Ecclesiastes a division into three parts, without showing them exactly.

The judgments which have approved the plan and the contents of the book, formulated by some of the recent commentators of the Bible, and which have been submitted to a lot of discussions, are different as to underline the weight of the content of the process of determination

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<sup>12</sup> **Gail Nord Paulson**, "The Use of Qoheleth in Bonhoeffer's Ethics." *Word & World*, (Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998) - reviewed by Dan Fredericks, 18 Sum 1998, p 307-313; **Johannes Henricus van der Palm**, *Ecclesiastes philologica et critice illustratus*, **Martin A Shields**,., *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* - reviewed by Harold C. Washington, *Review of Biblical Literature*, Eisenbrauns, 2006

<sup>13</sup> **Elias Bickerman**, *Four strange books of the Bible :Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther*, Schocken Books, New York, 1967; **F. Hitzig**, *Der Prediger Salomo's. Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 7*. Leipzig, 1847

<sup>14</sup> **K. A. Farmer**, *Who Knows What Is Good: A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. International Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, **J. G. Vaihinger**, "Plan and Structure of the Book of Ecclesiastes." *Methodist Review* 31 JI, 1849, p 417-429

<sup>15</sup> **W. Konrad**, "Homiletische Reflexion Und Predigt Zu Koh 1,1-12,14: Predigt: Dreierkonferenz Fur Zwei." In *Steht Nicht Geschrieben?: Studien zur Bibel und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte: Festschrift fur Georg Schmuttermayr*, edited by **J. Fruhwald-Konig**, **F. R. Prostmeier** and **R. Zwick**, 441-455. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> **G. Dorival, O. Munnich (Ed.)**, *Selon Lex LXX. Hommage à Marguerite Harl*, Paris, 1995, p. 27-52.

<sup>17</sup> **Septuaginta 4/1**. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Ecleeziastul, Cântarea Cântărilor, Colegiul Noua Europă, Polirom, Iași, 2006, p. 511.

<sup>18</sup> **Van Den Eynde**, *Commentaire D'iso'dad De Merv Sur L'ancien Testament. III, Livre de Session*, Version Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 230, SS 97, Louvain, 1963.



of the units of meaning inside this text.<sup>19</sup> Generally, the suggestions to divide the book into two or three parts were among the most accepted by the interpreters.

### **Theological and social aspects of the book.**

As we could see, the strong point of the book is not constituted from a theological perspective. We do not read the book as a theological discourse, in its true meaning. On the contrary, its judgments have as specificity and novelty the realistic evaluation of life. Qohelet approaches the problem of the justice of The Old Testament which he questions, but he does not abridges it of those elements which have a clear theological perspective, as it is the teaching that God created the world and that he controls it without cease.<sup>20</sup>

The writing applies to the old-testament writing a certain perspective. In connection with God and the world, it is brought in the forefront of the history of human kind the concept of vanity (הַבָּל), through which the inconsistency of thing is revealed. When man starts to guide himself after false and uncertain criteria, then the whole universe of his interpretations becomes inconsistent. Without God and without a religious perspective of the universe and the existence, everything that the man believes about himself, about the world and the purpose of life becomes vapour, breath, change and unsteadiness. He cannot trust any of his judgements or in the values that he can built. Because, the way in which the human being thinks reality, sees it and contemplates about it, is vanity, and it is based on exterior realities, the visible side of things.

As in the other didactical and poetical book, in The Ecclesiastes also the image of God seems to be alive and enigmatic, and the relationship which the Divinity has with the creature show to be based on the feeling of fear. Very clearly the distance between Creator and creature is being expressed in the fifth chapter of the book-`God is in heaven, and you on earth` (5, 1). Beyond the cosmogony and the Hebrew expression under the sun (תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם – 1,3; 1,9; 1,14;

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<sup>19</sup> *Septuaginta, op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> **Oswald Chambers**, *Umbra mâinii Lui*, Traducere de Daniek Tomuleț, Ed. Cartea Creștină, Oradea, 1996, p. 22, în **Petre Seemen**, *Sensul vieții și al suferinței, Comentariu la Ecclesiast și Iov*, p. 30.

2,11; 2,17; 2,18; 2,19; 2,20; 2,22; 3,16; 4,1; 4,3; 4,7; 4,15; 5,12; 5,17; 6,1; 6,12; 8,9; 8,15; 9,3; 9,6; 9,9; 9,11; 9,13), it suggests a clear difference between heaven and earth. But most of all, it is the contradictory character of the godly gifts which adds a severe tone to this fear of God. The Divinity is often the subject of the verb `to give`-but what does it give and to whom? In 2, 26 it refers to the right retribution, which make the distinction between the righteous man and the sinner, to the first God gives wisdom and to the second struggling. However, in the second chapter, the wise author makes the following statement: `I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it`. The use and the suffering seem to be mingled, in strange way, in the `part` which God decides for man, and this puts into crisis the ideal of wisdom and the value of existence (4, 2-3; 6,3). Nevertheless, this feeling grows in the human soul because of him impossibility to understand God`s greatness. Even though God set in the mind of the man event the thought of forever, still the being cannot understand the secret behind His existence. That is why, man is in a terrible torment, and he is always searching. God himself decided such a destiny, so that man would torment without cease (3, 10), and His purpose was that he would fear His face (3, 14).<sup>21</sup>

From a general perspective, the moral of The Ecclesiastes is a religious one, with the norms of behavior of the people connected with their leaders, their fellows and their families. By using short and expressive judgments, but also by using short advices, the enriching of the reader in his virtues was the target, and by showing the sins and their consequences a fair social balance was searched.

### **Critical considerations**

Due to the fact that Ecclesiastes proclames the desperation which he experiences, when he meditates upon the purpose of his existence now almost to an end, but also as a consequence of those observations and judgments, which at a first reading would seem unfounded or contrary to the logic of the text, some interpreters believed that they have the right to accuse the author of this book, step by step, of certain errors of doctrine: pessimism, fatalism, epicurianism, skepticism and other errors concerning the human soul.

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<sup>21</sup> Pr. Prof. Univ. Dr. Dumitru Abrudan, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

It is true, only leafing the pages of The Ecclesiastes, that some passages isolated could indicate a truth in the above mentioned. However, the careful going through the book, will always lead the reader to the understanding of the fact that the judgments formulated by the critics are without fundament. The fragments which give different tones to the Biblical text target only the negative aspect of things, from the point of view of the creatures in relation with their Creator. The author expresses only what he has observed. What found as negative, he could not present as positive. Therefore he tells the truth. And telling the truth is not: pessimism, fatalism, Epicureanism, skepticism.

Although it reveals many of the struggling of the epoch in which it was written, The Book of Ecclesiastes imposes itself with a remarkable authority to any reader. The message is only at present, because the existential problems of the book are in fact the same for everyone: is there happiness? What does it consist of? Where can we search for it? Which is its value? Can man bring any contribution to the increase of the state of satisfaction of his fellow? Trying to offer an answer to all these concerning, the wise author rambles into a sea of sublime thoughts, without any doubt. At times he seems pessimistic, at other he enjoys life, he offers to the universal culture a realistic critic of the values which lack in consistency, but a non-destructive judgement, which surprisingly, encourages us to have hope and sends us to The New Covenant, in which we have the fulfillment of all our desires.