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THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

BY

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THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes has difficulties which have puzzled both the expositor and the reader. We do not mean the question of authorship so much as the contents. It has been branded as pessimism, and not a few have declared that it is unworthy of the Holy Spirit and should never have been added to the other books of the Bible. In spite of all these perplexities connected with the book and hasty judgments, it has a definite place in the organism of the Holy Scriptures, and without this book the revelation of God would be incomplete.

The title the book bears in our English translation comes from the Septuagint, and is an attempted translation of the Hebrew word "Kohleth", which Luther in the German version translated with "Preacher" (Prediger); it is thus translated in the King James version in the opening verse of the book--"The words of the preacher." But the Hebrew word Kohleth can hardly mean preacher. It is derived from the verb "kahal" which means "to gather" or "assemble." The word "kahal" has been translated "congregation," or as the Greek of the Septuagint translates it "ecclesia." Kohleth is feminine, evidently a word specially provided, and it has been suggested that this was done to correspond to "wisdom" in Proverbs, which is also the feminine gender (Prov. 1:20). Perhaps the word "debater" comes nearest to the meaning of the original. The word Kohleth is found nowhere else in the Bible; but in Ecclesiastes it occurs seven times, three times in the beginning, once in the middle and three times at the end of the book.

The Authorship and Date

Both Jewish and Christian tradition ascribe this book to King Solomon. The book itself does not leave us in doubt about it. Chapter 1:12-16 is conclusive. If this is disputed, as it is almost universally among rationalistic critics, and also by some who are not rationalists, we may well ask the question, Who wrote Ecclesiastes? The higher critic is unable to give a satisfactory answer. They give the date of the book and its composition about 250-235 B.C. The book itself shows that this is impossible, for the author of it lived at a time when Israel had reached the zenith of prosperity and glory. That time was during Solomon's reign. If Solomon was not the author, then another person living during the reign of Solomon must have written the book. But everything shows that only Solomon could have been the author fit and fitted to write this book.

As already stated Jewish teachers and Christian teachers give decisive testimony for the Solomonic authorship. In a Jewish commentary of Ecclesiastes (Midrash Koheleth) which was written almost 1,200 years ago, a large number of learned and ancient rabbis bear witness to the fact that Solomon is the author. The Targum, or paraphrase, on this book, composed in the sixth century A.D., with many other Jewish commentators, speaks of Solomon as the writer of Ecclesiastes. Equally uniform is the testimony of the teachers of the early church. The critics fully acknowledge this consensus of Jewish and Christian opinion and they have an explanation for it. They say these scholars and commentators "wanted the faculty of historical criticism, one might almost say, of intellectual discernment of the meaning and drift of a book or individual passages,... and that they had no material for forming that opinion other than those which are in our hands at the present time" (Dr. E.H. Plumbtree in The Cambridge Bible). We shall see what the "intellectual discernment" is, of which critics constantly boast, and we shall find that it is but another term for "infidelity."

It was Luther, the great German reformer who, as far as we know, began first to cast doubt upon this book. In his "Table Talks" he said; "Solomon did not write the book himself, but it was composed by Sirach in the time of the Maccabees. It is, as it were, a Talmud put together out of many books, probably from the library of Ptolemy Euergetes, King of Egypt." He was followed by Grotius in 1644 who also denied that Solomon is the author. "From that time onward," says a critic, "the stream of objections to the Solomonic authorship has flowed with an ever increasing volume." No doubt it is still flowing, and that stream carries those who trust themselves to it farther and farther away from childlike trust in God's Holy Word.

Some of the Objections of Critics

The main objection is on linguistic lines. Hebraeists have pointed out that there are several scores of words and forms in Ecclesiastes which are found only in the post-exilic books and literature; some they claim originated even later. Professor Delitzsch makes the bold statement, "If Ecclesiastes is of Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language." And another scholar states, "We could as easily believe that Chaucer is the author of Rasselas as that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes." But not so hasty, gentlemen! There is another side to this question of the foreign words in this book, which, after all

your objections, still is believed to be Solomon's. Your objection on these linguistic peculiarities is really an evidence for the Solomonic authorship of this book. The words which are Aramaic (and Aramaic belongs to the same branch of language as the Hebrew Semitic) have been proven by other scholars to be in common use among the nearby nations who used the Chaldean language. Solomon was a scholar himself. No doubt all the available literature of that age and of the surrounding nations was at his disposal, and he was familiar with it. It is said of him, "His wisdom excelled the children of the East country and all the wisdom of Egypt, for he was wiser than all men." That Solomon used Aramaic words is perfectly logical; but it would have been strange if such words had been absent from this book, with its peculiar character and message. That Solomon's foreign diplomacy, as well as marriages with foreigners also made him familiar with Aramaic words and sayings is quite possible. Then we might add that no unimpeachable proof has ever been given that the Aramaic words and forms used by Solomon were of later date at all. At any rate objections to the date and authorship of a Bible book on purely philological evidence suits those perfectly who approach the Word of God as they approach any other literary production.

Another objection is made on account of the statement in chapter 1:12, "I, the preacher, was king over Israel." It seems almost childish that these scholars raise such a point; it shows the weakness of their case. They declare that the writer of the book says, "I, the preacher, was king over Israel," and that this could not have been written by Solomon, who never ceased to be king. This objection is foolish. It is not at all the question of the fact that the writer of the book reigned as king, but rather what was his position at the time when he wrote the book?

Another objection is the absence of the name of Jehovah in this book. It has been said, "A book coming from the Son of David was hardly likely to be characterized, as this is, by the omission of the name Jehovah." This objection springs from the deplorable ignorance of the critics concerning the message and purpose of this book. The omission of the name of Jehovah and the use of the name of God as Elohim exclusively is a mark of the genuineness of the book. We shall refer to this later when we touch on the character and message of Ecclesiastes.

We mention but one more of the objections. They say "That the book presents many striking parallelisms with that of Malachi, which is confessedly later than the exile and written under the Persian monarchy, probably 390 B.C."

This studied objection can readily be answered by anybody. In fact we have seen no valid objection whatever. Every one can be satisfactorily answered. A mature scholar, Dean Milman, wrote many years ago: "I am well aware that the general voice of German criticism assigns a later date than that of Solomon to this book. But I am not convinced by any arguments from internal evidence which I have read."

The Message of Ecclesiastes

No other book in the whole Bible is so perplexing, if not confirming to the average reader as is Ecclesiastes. It is a book filled with hopelessness and despair, depicting the difficulties and disappointments of life, and the hollowness of temporal things; at the

same time it seemingly sanctions a conduct which clashes with the standards of holy living as revealed in other portions of the Scriptures. The utter absence of any praise, or expression of joy and peace, as it is in the group of other books to which Ecclesiastes belongs (Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Solomon's Song) is another striking characteristic.

The problem is solved in the very beginning of the book itself. In the first verse we are introduced to the illustrious author of the book, who calls himself "Koheleth," and "the son of David, King in Jerusalem." This ought to settle the question for ever. If another man wrote as the critics maintain centuries later and assumed that he is "the son of David and King of Jerusalem," he was a fraud. But why does Solomon write? What is the theme he follows? What is the object of his debate or discourse? The next two verses give the answer to these questions and the solution of the problem. Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth; vanity of vanities--all is vanity. "What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" Here are two words which arrest our attention. The first one is "vanity," used five times in the second verse. It occurs many times throughout the book and is frequently connected with "vexation of spirit" (literally, pursuit of the wind). The word "vanity" means that which soon vanishes, nothingness. It is used for the first time by Eve when she had her second son, whom she called "Abel." So the great king, the wisest of men in his discourse in which he seeks and searches out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven (verse 13), and in all his searching independent of Jehovah's revelation, he discovers that all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

The second word which we notice is "under the sun." This expression is found twenty-nine times in this book. Now that which is "under the sun" is on the earth. There is, of course, something which is above the sun, that is heaven, the heavenly things. Ecclesiastes then is occupied with earthly things, with what man does apart from God, that is the natural man. The book describes the things under the sun, shows that all what man does, his pursuits, his labors, whatever undertaken and all that is connected with it, is nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit, ever unsatisfying and filled with sorrow and perplexity. The writer makes it clear that in all his searching and description of the things under the sun he does not depend on divine revelation, on that which is above the sun, but he reacheth his results through the light which nature gives; his resources are within himself. This is confirmed by the phrase, "I communed with my own heart," which occurs seven times in the book. The book of Ecclesiastes is therefore the book of the natural man apart from divine revelation. This is the reason why the name Jehovah (God's name as He enters in covenant relation with man) is omitted and the name of God is only expressed by Elohim, that is His Name as Creator. It shows what the natural man is, the life he lives, and the world in which he lives with its fleeting vanities. Ecclesiastes is embodied in the Holy Scriptures for one purpose, to show to the natural man the hollowness and vanity of all that is under the sun, and to convince him thereby to seek and find that which is better, that which is above the sun.

"it is the experience of a man who--retaining his wisdom, that he may judge of all--makes trial of everything under the sun that should be supposed capable of rendering men happy, through the enjoyment of everything that human capacity can entertain as a means of joy. The

effect of this trial was the discovery that all is vanity and vexation of spirit; that every effort to be happy in possessing the earth, in whatever way it may be, ends in nothing. There is a canker worn at the root. The greater the capacity of enjoyment, the deeper and wider is the experience of disappointment and vexation of spirit. Pleasure does not satisfy, and even the idea of securing happiness in this world by an unusual degree of righteousness cannot be realised. Evil is there, and the government of God in such a world as this is not in exercise to secure happiness to man here below--a happiness drawn from things below and resting on their stability" (Synopsis of the Bible).

Natural men, and even infidels, have put a kind of a seal upon the character of the book. The French infidel Renan praised it as being the only charming book that a Jew had ever written, a book, he added, that touched our grief at every point, while he saw in the writer one who ever posed but was always natural and simple. Frederick the Great, equally infidel, regarded it as the most valuable book in the whole Bible.

Revelation and Inspiration

In the study of this book the important distinction between what is "revelation" and what is "inspiration" must not be overlooked. What Solomon sought out, the conclusions he reached, the things he found as he communed with his own heart, all is recorded in this book by divine inspiration. But this inspired record is not revelation in the sense, for instance, as the Epistle to the Ephesians. It is not divine revelation for man to be guided by. It is not revelation concerning that which is above the sun, nor the future. We mention this because those who hold the evil doctrines of soul-sleep and also annihilation turn to Ecclesiastes and quote (9:5, 10) as being "the word and revelation of God" when it is not.

The book too directs to Christ. There is that which is above the sun, that which is not vanishing, but abiding. The old creation demands a new creation and that has been made possible in Christ.

The Division of Ecclesiastes

It has been charged "that the book is very far removed from the character of a systematic treatise and therefore does not readily admit of a formal analysis." This verdict is far from being right. The analysis and division of the book depends on the right viewpoint concerning the contents of it. As we have stated in our introduction Ecclesiastes is the book of the natural man searching out the things under the sun and the conclusions he reached. The division of the book should be made with this theme in mind.

After reading the book carefully a number of times one finds that there are two main parts. The first six chapters form the first part and the remaining six chapters constitute the second part. In the first part the search of the wise man brings out the fact what the chief good is not, how all things under the sun are vanity and vexation of spirit. In the second part the search leads to certain conclusions. The chief good is sought for in wise conduct but in all we are still on the ground of the natural man.

PART I. CHAPTERS 1-6

1. THE PROLOGUE AND THE SEARCH BEGUN: (1-2)
2. THE RESULTS OF THE SEARCH: (3-4)
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1. THE GOOD ADVICE OF THE NATURAL MAN, DISCOURAGEMENT AND FAILURE: (7-9:12)
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Analysis and Annotations

PART I. CHAPTERS 1-6

1. The Prologue and the Search Begun

CHAPTER 1

1. The introduction and prologue (1:1-11)
2. The seeker; his method and the results (1:12-18)

Verses 1-11. In the general introduction we have already referred to the opening verses as giving the information who the author is and what is the object of his treatise. So sure is the critical school that Solomon is not the king mentioned that one says "the fact that Solomon is not the author, but is introduced in a literary figure, has become such an axiom of the present day interpretation of the book, that no extended argument to prove it is necessary." Still another makes the following remarks as to the date of the book: "I shall presume that we have in this book, a late, perhaps the very latest, portion of the Old Testament canon; and that the book was written, not in the palmy days of the empire of Solomon, but at a time when the Jewish people, once so full of aspirations to universal empire, always so intolerant of foreign supremacy, was lying beneath the yoke of Persian or Syrian or Egyptian kings; when the Holy Land had become a province, ruled by some Eastern satrap, and suffering from the rapacity and corruption inherent at all times in such government" (Dean Bradley). Such presumptions spring from ignorance about the message of the book. We shall find in the text the above assertions refuted and a confirmation likewise of the Solomonic authorship.

"Before following the Preacher in his great quest it should be noted that he is to be viewed as a man who himself belongs under the sun. Whether the word Koheleth is rendered "preacher," "debater," or "assembler," or "one of an Assembly," the whole tenor of the teaching proves it is wisdom from under the sun, natural wisdom, that is speaking. The wisest of men undertakes to observe and experiment with life under the sun, in order to find out for all men the outcome of all his searchings, and then rehearses all to an assembly of his fellows. He is not supposed to know any divinely-revealed wisdom, or to have heard of a righteousness of faith, or of divine mercy, or of forgiveness of sins. He is to make answer as a natural man to whom is given the resources and

helps common to natural men, only he is wiser and richer than they, and so must bring the final answer for all. And also he is a Hebrew and knows of one living and true God. When he says "thou," in advice or warning, it is not so much to some disciple or "son" he is speaking as to himself, or he is then assuming a high ground, far above "the maddening crowd," but it is soon apparent how, in these most exalted frames of the pious and philosophic mind, he is still only a natural man, for he is found, soon after, in the depth of despair uttering his disgust and hate of life and exclaiming: "The whole is vapor and a chasing of the wind." That "thou" is, after all a sign that he is talking to himself, telling what he and all men under the sun ought to do, but utterly fail to do.

Not only does he pronounce the verdict of "vanity" for all, but he resorts to the same passing mirthful enjoyment he commends to all; but he would do it all before God. He is indeed wiser and more serious than other men, only to become more perplexed and sorrowful than they.

On him hangs more heavily than on other men

... the burden of the mystery
... the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world.

He, if any, can say, "I know there is nothing better for them." He is king and can lay the whole world under contribution to furnish the means for answer. "What can the man do who cometh after the king?"

He repeatedly says, "I have seen all the works that are done," all the "oppressions", and "all the labor that I have labored at." And so he is to speak for the world, for the race, for man, for high, for low, wise and foolish, rich and poor, in hut and hall, living and dying. And he speaks as before God. He, of all men, feels a strange fear, seeing that somehow man's imperfect vain life under the sun is mysteriously related to and controlled by the unalterable purpose and work of God. (W.J. Erdman, Ecclesiastes.)

The first note as to vanity is found in verses 4-11. There is a law of repetition, or circle-movement. It works in the sphere of nature as well as in human life. Generation follows generation; the sun has his circle; the winds too have their currents in which they blow from north to south and south to north; the waters also are subject to the same law. History repeats itself, for the thing that has been, is that which shall be and that which is done is that which shall be done. There is then, no new thing under the sun; nothing is new, all is repetition, a monotonous unchangeableness. Man is in the midst of it; he too is subject to this law. Everything then under the sun is restless, unstable (except the earth itself, which abideth forever: verse 4) hollow and empty, therefore all is vanity. Here is a picture of unrest, weariness, if not melancholy and despair.

Verses 12-18. On the critical objection that Solomon is meant in verse 12 see the general introduction. The great king, filled with wisdom and learning, rich and prosperous as none ever was before him in Jerusalem, nor after him, gives his heart to search out everything that is done under heaven. When he says: "I communed with mine own heart," he

states the method of his search. He does it by meditation and not through revelation. He searches not in the light which comes from above, but that which comes from nature and by observation. He tells us a little more of himself. "Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem; yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." Is this language not sufficient to establish beyond the shadow of the doubt that Solomon speaks? And if not Solomon, who was it who dared to write these words? And what are the given results by the great and wise king of Jerusalem? The result is twofold. "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold all is vanity and vexation of spirit"--the pursuit of the wind, that is chasing air-bubbles. And another conclusion: "For in much wisdom is much grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (verse 18). What a verdict from such a man as Solomon was. He had all things man can enjoy; all pleasures and honors; great possessions, chariots, horses, palaces and a large estate and he exclaims "nothing but travail!" "Nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit!" It all leaves me empty; it does not satisfy.

But he had given himself to wisdom. He possessed unusual wisdom. The king was what we would term today a great scientist. He excelled in wisdom all the children of the East country. Proverbial in his days was "the wisdom of Egypt"; yet his wisdom was greater. His fame was in all nations round about. Philosophy and poetry were his great achievements. "And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall; he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things and of fishes" (1 Kings 4:29, etc.). He was a great botanist, an ornithologist and zoologist. He traced God's wonders in nature, that which the natural man can so easily do. But what about all this wisdom? Did it satisfy his soul? We listen to his answer: "I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit." The more knowledge the more sorrow. Alas! how trite it all is!

But is there something else which satisfies? Is there a higher wisdom and knowledge? There is, but in the book of the natural man it is unrevealed. That which satisfies, which is not vanity and vexation of spirit, is that which is above the sun, and not under it. From above the sun He came, who is the wisdom of God, the son of God. He has come and gone, but brought to the poor thirsting and hungry heart of man the true knowledge. He who died for our sins and is now back above the sun, is He "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2). That which alone can satisfy is Christ.

CHAPTER 2

The Results of the Search and Different Vanities

1. His personal experience (2:1-11)
2. Various vanities and a conclusion (2:12-26)

Verses 1-11. Here we find first of all the king's personal experience. He experimented, so to speak, with that which is the possession of the natural man, a fallen nature. In that nature are found three things: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. We can trace these three things in the opening verses. The lust of the flesh in verses 1-3; the lust of the eyes in verses 4-6, and the pride of life in verses 7-8. He said in his heart, Go to now, I will

prove thee: that is, I will try now to satisfy thee, that is myself, my heart. He said to himself, "enjoy pleasure." He laughed and had mirth; he tried wine, laid hold on folly. Then he made great works, built houses, planted vineyards, laid out beautiful oriental gardens with fruit trees, all kinds of shrubbery, with pools of water, springs and waterfalls--all so pleasing to the eye--the lust of the eyes. To all this he added servants and maidens, with great possessions. He gathered silver and gold and treasures such which only kings could obtain, gifts, probably from other monarchs, perhaps those which the Queen of Sheba brought. He also paid attention to music, had men singers, women singers, and an orchestra. Then, self-satisfied, he leans back and says, "So I was great and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me" (verse 9). Who can doubt even for a moment that all this could mean any other person but Solomon; none but he could speak thus. But to make sure, he did not leave a single desire unsatisfied, for "whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy." Well, he had tried everything, every pleasure, everything that is beautiful to the eye; he was surrounded with every comfort, had all honor and glory, was wealthy and esteemed. Does he then sing and in a blessed peace of mind is he content and satisfied? Far from it. "Then--then"--when he had done all these things and had every desire fulfilled--"then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit; and there was no profit under the sun." It is a groan instead of a song. But that sounds pessimistic. It is the pessimism into which sin has put man. Whatever man does and seeks in satisfying that old nature, whatever his pursuits, his labors and his achievements in life, if it is that and nothing else, in the end it is nothing but vanity and a chasing of the wind.

Thank God! there is One who can still the hunger and thirst of the soul, who graciously invites, "if any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink."

Verses 12-26. He now turns in search for happiness in another direction. The old, old question, "Is life worth living?" after all he had stated must be answered negatively--if all is vanity and vexation of spirit and there is no profit under the sun, in anything that man enjoys, labors for and obtains, then life is not worth living. He had been disappointed in his search, but now he turns to something more ideal and not materialistic as the former things. "Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness." He turns philosopher, but it is of no avail, for it leads in the same road and ends with the same groan--vanity and vexation of spirit. While wisdom is superior to folly as far as light is superior to darkness, yet wisdom cannot help man, cannot give him peace nor give him happiness. There is one event which happens to the wise men and to the fool: that event is death. As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth unto me. What then was the good that I was more wise? He at once concludes "this also is vanity." Death, according to the conception of the natural man, apart from revelation, plunges the wise man and the fool into oblivion, "there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten and how dieth the wise man as the fool?" (verse 16) Such is the reasoning of the natural man. By revelation we know that there is remembrance. But it leads Koheleth, the King, almost to despair. He hates life. If the pursuit of pleasures, the lust of eyes and the pride of life left me

empty, and were found out to be nothing but vexation of spirit, so that life is not worth living, equally so, he finds out, that wisdom in itself and its possession brings the same results--vanity of spirit--I hated life! Then he speaks of labor done. He has labored to leave it all to the one who comes after him, and he may be a fool and not a wise man. Or he may have labored wisely and it is left all to one who never did anything, a sluggard. All he brands as vanity and ends by saying, "For what hath a man of all his labors, and of the vexation of his heart wherein he hath labored under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief, yea his heart taketh no rest in the night. This is also vanity."

The conclusion reached is that, apart from God, man has no capacity to enjoy his labor. Verse 25 has been metrically rendered as follows:

The good is not in man that he should eat and drink
And find his soul's enjoyment in his toil;
This, too, I saw is only from the hands of God.

2. Further Results of the Search

CHAPTER 3

1. The times of man under the sun (3:1-11)
2. When then is the good? (3:12-15)
3. Concerning judgment and the future (3:16-22)

Verses 1-11. There is a time for everything. Twenty-eight "times" are mentioned, beginning with the time of birth and ending with the time for peace. Everything has a fixed time: Life-death; seeding-harvesting; killing-healing; breaking-down building-up; weeping-laughing; mourning-dancing, etc. These are the times of the entire race; that is what human life is. All moves and changes; all appears unto him profitless. "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth? What is the gain of it, to be born and to die, to plant and to pull up, to weep and to laugh, to mourn and to dance, to get and to lose, to love and to hate?" But he advanced a step. He recognizeth that all this travail must be of God, who has produced these never ceasing changes, so that men's hearts might be exercised thereby. "I have seen the travail which God has given to the sons of men to be exercised in it." Yeah, there is something which is in man. "God hath set the world in their heart," the correct rendering is, "God hath set eternity in their heart" (verse 11). Man has the sense of the infinite in his heart.

All that time offers, all these changes cannot satisfy, nor can man with eternity in his heart find out the truth about it by himself. He may feel but cannot understand.

Verses 12-15. What then is the good? To what can man in such condition, with such constant changes, and with an unsatisfied feeling of the infinite in his heart resort to? The searcher gives his results. Let man rejoice and do good in his life. Let him eat and drink and enjoy the food of all his labor. But let him also do so fearing God in view of God's judgment, for "God requireth that which is past." This is about as far as the natural man can see.

Verses 16-22. The thought of judgment expressed in verse 15 is now more fully taken up. It seems as if a ray of light now breaks in. There must be from the side of God's judgment. Under the sun he saw in the place of judgment wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there also. Then he said in his heart, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked." He draws the conclusion that the present injustice must be dealt with by God. But here he stops short. He may surmise, but certainly he has not. Instead of advancing in his searchings as a natural man he comes back to his old wail of vanity. "I said in mine heart, it is because of the sons of men that God may prove them, and that they may see they themselves are but as beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; and man hath no pre-eminence above the beasts: for all is vanity." It shows that as far as life beyond the present is concerned all is darkness for man. He may have "eternity set in his heart", but he has no light. Death comes alike to man and beast; they die and are gone, hence the conclusion, "man hath no pre-eminence above the beast." But man has, as the revelation of God teacheth. But here we do not listen to God's revelation but to the searchings and observations of man only. The natural man knows, "all" men and beasts "go to one place, all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." Then there is just a faint suggestion of something which might be beyond the grave. The correct rendering of verse 21 is, "who knoweth whether the spirit of man goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth?" Man and beast share the same being, draw breath in the same way, spring from the dust, return to the dust, but who can give assurance that the spirit of man really goeth upward? Who knoweth if this is really true. Who has come back and told us the truth about it? Who knoweth? Such is still the cry of the natural man with all his boasted discoveries and research. Finally he reacheth the same goal as Koheleth--all is vanity. Oh! blessed truth as given by revelation and above all in the person of our Lord and His precious gospel! Man indeed has the pre-eminence and is not like the beast that perisheth. Redeemed by Him who became man, to die for our sins, not only the spirit of the redeemed goeth upward but in its time the body will leave the dust and be changed like unto the glorious body of Him, who as glorified man sits at the right hand of God.

Returning to the wise king with his search, in view of all this, which he has brought forth in this chapter he gives his counsel as to what man is to do under these harassing circumstances. "Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better than that a man (the natural man) should rejoice in his own works, for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?" (See also 6:12).

CHAPTER 4

Observations of Different Wrongs

1. Concerning oppressions (4:1-3)
2. Concerning envy of fools and the rich (4:4-7)
3. Concerning the miser (4:8-12)
4. Concerning popularity (4:13-16)

Verses 1-3. He observes that the world is filled with oppressions. This connects with the statement made in the previous chapter, (verse

16). Criticism declares in connection with this passage that it could not have been written by Solomon, nor does it, they claim, describe the conditions of the people Israel during the reign of the king. One commentator asks, "Can this bitter experience be drawn, I asked in passing, from the golden day of Solomon, from the high noon of Hebrew prosperity, as sketched in the book of Kings?" They apply it to the days of the Ptolemies. But Solomon does not say that the oppressions were in Jerusalem at all. He says that he saw "all the oppressions that are done under the sun." As the great king was in touch with other nations he knew what oppression, poverty, tears and sorrow are in the world, and that the oppressed, the grief stricken, the downtrodden, have no comforter. It is so still, "under the sun." Oppression and all that goes with it is still the history of part of the race and will be as long as sin reigns. Injustice and unredressed wrongs have been the order for almost six thousand years. So deep is his sorrow over these conditions that he declares it would have been better for both the living and the dead if they had never existed at all.

Verses 4-7. In continuing his observations he mentions the successful man, the man who has made life worth living. But success breeds envy. It makes his life bitter. Instead of being loved the successful man is hated; what else then is it but vanity and vexation of spirit! But now another extreme. It is the sluggard, the lazy man, the fool who eats his own flesh. But here is the best human wisdom can suggest. Avoiding both extremes, he declares, "Better is a handful with quietness, than two handfuls with labor and vexation of spirit."

Verses 7-12. Another vanity is observed. Some are misers, heaping up riches and treasures untold. He has no relations, no children, no brother, even companionship and friendship are unknown to him. He lives his solitary life. His ambition is to labor and gather riches, but his eyes are never satisfied with riches; he wants more and more all the time. This also is vanity and is a sore travail.

Verses 13-16. Popularity is another vanity and vexation of spirit. No lot is abiding. Upon the throne sits an old and foolish king. He is dethroned and is replaced by a youth out of prison.

3. Exhortations on Different Vanities

CHAPTER 5

1. Concerning worship and vows (5:1-7)
2. Concerning extortions (5:8-9)
3. The vanities of wealth (5:10-17)
4. The conclusion (5:18-20)

Verses 1-7. The writer, King Solomon, seems to have been exhausted in his descriptions as to the things under the sun. He pauseth and turns to something different. He meditates on worship, that man aims to get in touch with the unseen God. "He seems to turn to himself again and communes with his heart on the loftier heights of what proves to be, after all, but natural religiousness, and what cannot save him from the depths of unbelief, ignorance and despair, in which he is soon hopelessly floundering. Mindful of man's jaunty liberalism and enslaving superstitions, rash vows and wordy prayers, shallow reverence and dreamy

worship--dreamy and unreal because full of entreating vanities and worldly business, the speaker earnestly exhorts the multitude going to the house of God to have few words and slow and solemn steps in their worship and vows; but even then he does so like a natural man himself, knowing only of a God far away, who is looking upon the sinful on earth with cold judicial eye, ready to destroy the work of man in wrath." (W.J. Erdman, Ecclesiastes)

The natural man may fear God, fear Him with a slavish fear, make an attempt to worship Him and do something, yet he does not know God nor can he know Him by himself. Christendom, even today, bears witness to the worship of the natural man. Yet this natural religion, which recognizeth the existence of a Creator, speaks of Him as the All-wise, the Omnipotent and the Eternal, makes an attempt to worship in a house by ceremonies and ritual, or that which takes on a more liberal form, does not meet the needs of man. God is still in heaven and man on earth (verse 2), and a vast distance between--an unbridged gulf. To bring man to God, to give him peace and assurance, to deliver him from fear, revelation is needed that which is "above the sun." The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only provision.

Verses 8-9. Once more he calls attention to oppression, the extortions so common "under the sun," and he shows that One higher than they will some day judge them, for He has regard for the poor and the oppressed.

Verses 10-17. He speaks now of wealth and of earthly prosperity. Silver does not satisfy, nor is he that loveth abundance satisfied with the increase. It is vanity. Earthly happiness in the things under the sun is a vain hope. The reasons why riches, and what goes along with them, cannot give true enjoyment have been searched out by the wise king and the results of his observations are given in these verses. "As he came forth from his mother's womb naked so shall he go again as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor, which he may carry away in his hand ... and what profit hath he that he laboreth for the wind?" (See 1 Timothy 6:7).

Verses 18-20. What then has he seen and learned in observing all these vanities? He draws the conclusion that it is good and comely for one to eat and to drink, and then to enjoy to fullest extent the good which he has obtained all the days of his life, the life and length of days given him by the Creator. And if God has given him riches and wealth and the capacity to enjoy it, then he ought to take his portion and rejoice in his labor. Such a spirit of enjoyment will make him forget the evil in his day; it will carry him over the disagreeable things of life. "For he shall not much remember the days of his life, because God answereth him in the joy of his heart." The latter phrase means that God Himself corresponds to his joy, for real enjoyment is a God-acknowledging spirit.

CHAPTER 6

Disheartening Contradictions

1. Riches--Inability to enjoy them (6:1-2)
2. Having All--Yet no fill of the soul (6:3-9)
3. The sad ending wail (6:10-12)

Verses 1-2. The first evil the wise searcher sees as a discouraging contradiction is, that God giveth a man riches, wealth, and honor so that he does not lack in anything whatever. But God does not give him the power to enjoy it, a stranger instead eats thereof. This makes impossible what he stated in the closing verses of the preceding chapter. The cherished desires of man have found no fulfilment. And if he has seen this evil, so do we still see it also. Where then is "the good and comely" of chapter 5:18? This is vanity and it is an evil disease, he confesseth.

Verses 3-9. But here is more of life's bitterness. If one should beget a hundred children and live to a very ripe old age, so old he becomes that it seems as if there is to be no burial for him at all, yet his soul is not filled with good--what then? "I say that an untimely birth is better than he, for it cometh in vanity and departeth in darkness, and the name thereof is covered with darkness; moreover it has not seen the sun nor known it; this hath rest rather than the other: yea, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet enjoy no good; do not all go to one place?" It is a sad, sorrowful picture, yet every word of it is true as to man's existence. With all his long life and all it brings, riches and power, his soul has not the fill it needs, that which satisfies. His life ends at last and then there is the one place--the region of the unknown, the Sheol, where they all go. And about that one place there is no light; it is felt existence after death but of what nature? All is darkness! Better, far better off, is the untimely birth.

In verse 7 he comes back again to the labor that man does. It is for the mouth, yet it does not satisfy--the appetite is not filled. The hunger returns, and man must labor to satisfy it and yet it is never filled. The fool and the wise make the same experience. The wise has no advantage over the fool; and the poor man who has something to eat in sight is far better off than the rich, whose desires wander, seeking that which gratifies. Vanity and vexation of spirit! We may all sum it up in a brief sentence: Man under the sun, whatever he does, all his labors, all his riches, all his seeking for good, all his achievements cannot satisfy him, it cannot give that which the soul of man craves and needs. Nor can it ever be discovered by the searcher, the wise man, the philosopher, the scientist. What man needs is not anything "under the sun" but that which is "from above the sun."

Verses 10-13. Who knoweth what is good for man in this life that is--what is it that can satisfy the heart and soul of man? He spendeth all the days of his vain life as a shadow. For who can tell a man who shall be after him under the sun? It is the wail of darkness and despair. Who knoweth? Not the natural man. But the question which man cannot answer, God has graciously, blessedly and eternally answered in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. With Peter we too cry out, "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6:68)

PART II. CHAPTERS 7-12

1. The Good Advice of the Natural Man, Discouragement and Failure

CHAPTER 7

1. The better things (7:1-14)
2. The anomalies (7:15-18)
3. The strength of wisdom, yet none perfect (7:19-22)
4. The worst thing he found (7:23-29)

Verses 1-14. All had been tested by the royal searcher; all was found out to be vanity and vexation of spirit. Darkness, discouragement, uncertainty and despair were the results. The good, that which is right and comely for men, supposedly, found had also turned unto vapor, empty and hollow like the rest. He starts now in a new direction; he turns moralist and philosophizeth on the better things. He climbs high with his reason and deductions. He had come to the conclusion that life is not worth living. Having riches, possession of everything, were found out nothing but vanity. Perhaps being good, having the better things morally, and doing good, will satisfy the heart in "which is set eternity," the soul of man, And so he makes his observations in seven comparisons.

A good name better than precious ointment;
the day of death better than the day of birth;
the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting;
sorrow is better than laughter,
the rebuke of the wise better than the songs of fools;
the end of a thing better than the beginning;
the patient in spirit better than the proud in spirit.

He has used his highest power of reasoning in reaching these conclusions, similar to the conclusion of other wise men, moralists and philosophers among the pagans. The different "sacred writings" of other nations, the Greek, Roman, Persian, Hindu, Chinese, etc., poetry and ethics as well as philosophies of all these nations give a definite proof that Ecclesiastes is the book of the natural man, that reason speaks and not revelation. For these "sacred writings" and philosophies are on the same line as our book. But does this satisfy? Can man thereby attain perfection? His heart has passions which man cannot control. Oppression makes a wise man mad (verse 7); anger is in his bosom (verse 9). Again he mentions wisdom. It is a good thing, just as good as an inheritance; it profits to see the sun, but not above the sun. Wisdom and wealth are both good as a defense; both give life, animate the person who possesses them, give a certain amount of enjoyment. But can both wisdom and wealth give a solution to man's problem? Who can make that straight which God hath made crooked? His ways are mysterious, unsolvable as far as man is concerned; man cannot solve the providential dealings of God. Prosperity is followed by adversity and adversity by prosperity; He sets one over against the other. But who by his reason, by his wisdom, can find out what God will do in the future, what His dealings will be? In the very reading of all these statements one feels like walking in a dense fog. Some statements are beclouded so that it is difficult to ascertain the correct meaning that the searcher is really aiming at. Perhaps this is the case to teach the lesson how man, with his finite reason searching for light, apart from revelation, wanders in darkness and ends in confusion.

Verses 15-18. Prosperity and adversity, controlled by a higher power; how are they meted out? No one knows when they come; they come to the righteous and to the wicked. He has seen the righteous perish in his righteousness and the wicked prolongs his days in his wickedness. How

does the natural man, the philosopher, meet this difficulty? He answereth it by what is called "common sense." "Be not righteous overmuch, neither make thyself overwise; why should thou destroy thyself?" Do not overdo it, strike a happy medium; avoid any kind of excess; be not too self-righteous for you might become puffed up and then you destroy yourself. Here is more "common sense" of the natural man. Be not overmuch wicked, neither be thou foolish; why shouldst thou die before thy time? Enjoy yourself, but avoid too much wickedness; have a good time but avoid excesses. Not too much righteousness and not too much wickedness; just a happy middle way; such a way, thinks the natural man, is not compatible with the fear of God.

Verses 19-22. Wisdom is strength. He had tried wisdom; he tells us what he proved by wisdom. But the wise man makes a wise confession: "I said I will be wise; but it was far from me." He owns his ignorance. Everything has left him unsatisfied. He cannot find out by wisdom that which is far off and exceeding deep. All is imperfection. "There is not a just man on the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (verse 20).

Verses 23-29. Again he applies his heart to know, to search and to go to the root of the matter--to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness. And what does he find? "I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands." He speaks here as a Hebrew with the knowledge at least of what happened to man. God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions. And woman was deceived by the serpent and her heart is often a snare and a net and her hands drag down into the vile things of the flesh. Here, at least, is an acknowledgement that sin is in the world and has corrupted the old creation, but what about the remedy? He knows nothing of that, for the new creation which lifts man out of the condition where sin has put him is the subject of the revelation of God.

CHAPTER 8

1. Prudence before kings (8:1-10)
2. Of the righteous and the wicked (8:11-13)
3. The conclusion (8:14-17)

Verses 1-10. What else had he seen? What were his further discoveries? He is still ardent in praising wisdom, though he had confessed "that it was far from him." Wisdom makes the face to shine and the boldness of the face becomes changed. He cautions as to the governmental powers in the world, urges prudence and submission. He is a keen observer. But nothing can deliver from the power of the grave. The tyrannic ruler ruleth over another to his own hurt, but the power of the tyrant does not deliver him from the power of the grave and he is soon forgotten.

Verses 11-13. But here is a true statement, which the natural man discovers by observation, for instance, in reading the pages of history. "Because sentence against an evil work is not speedily executed, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." Evil will be punished; man knows that by experience. And he knows "that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before Him. But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days which are as a shadow, because he feareth not God." But what about his former saying, "Be not righteous overmuch--be not overmuch wicked?" He

is in perplexity. But his reason, which has approved of "fearing God," by which he knows that it shall be well on earth with the righteous, is now staggered, when he sees just men unto whom it happeneth according to the work of the wicked, and wicked men to whom it happeneth according to the work of the righteous. Nothing but contradictions! Like a shipwrecked man who strikes out amidst the raging waves to reach the land, and is constantly thrown back by the waves he tries to master, with all his wisdom, his searching, his conclusions and nice sayings, he is thrown back, and once more he cries his "vanity."

Verses 15-17. He is at the end of his wit. He moralized, spoke of things better; made his observations and gave exhortations; a measure of light he has to judge certain things, but the darkness is too overwhelming. His boasted wisdom has left him stranded completely. What then shall he say? In spite of the higher tone he assumed, he is back at his old conclusion, only more emphatic than before: "Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry; for that shall abide with him of his labor the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun." Enjoy life! There is no better thing! Thank God through revelation we know "the better part," that which satisfies and which abides. Then comes the confession of utter helplessness in verse 17. A man, the natural man, cannot find out, he is not able to find out anything.

CHAPTER 9

1. The common fate (9:1-6)
2. Make the best of life (9:7-10)
3. The great uncertainty (9:11-12)

Verses 1-6. Here is another conclusion. The righteous and the wise with their works are in the hands of God. One event is in store for all, for the righteous, the wicked, the good, the clean, the unclean, the one who sacrificeth and the one who sacrificeth not--the grave is the one common goal. In that goal there is the end of all human toil and ambition. But even with this knowledge that all go one way, and the certainty of it, man does not reckon with it at all; "the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live." They live on with madness in the heart; then comes death. Surely reason, dark reason, says "a living dog is better than a dead lion"; the dead lion has nothing left of all his majestic awe, but if man is alive, though he be as a dog, it is the better thing. Surely everything here is pessimism gone to seed. And what in this darkening perplexity does the searcher have to say about the dead? "The dead know not anything, neither have they any more reward; for the memory of them is forgotten" (verse 5). And again, "There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave (Sheol) whither thou goest." But is this the truth? Is this a doctrine of the faith delivered unto the saints? Is this the revelation of God? A thousand times, No! It is the verdict which the natural man, pagan or infidel philosopher, pronounceth. But revelation, the life and immortality brought to light by the gospel, tells us something entirely different. Yet these sentences penned when the searcher finds himself in the most despairing condition, are used by men and women, who claim to be Christians, to prove the abominable doctrines of "soul-sleep," that after death the soul plunges into a state of unconsciousness, and that the wicked are annihilated. Christian doctrine? NO! but paganism, and a denial of the revelation from above

the sun.

Verses 7-10. Therefore, because "death ends it all," that unbelievable conclusion of the natural man, make the best of life. Feast well and enjoy your wine, be sure and let the wine of earthly joys make your heart merry. Dress spotlessly in the heights of fashion; be well groomed; put ointment on your head. Have a good time with your wife; enter into everything energetically--for a little while longer and you reach the common fate. Is this also "revelation" for faith to follow, or is there something better from above the sun? The New Testament answers blessedly this question.

Verses 11-12. He returns-to speak another word. Even this is not satisfying. A man knoweth not his time, "As the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them."

2. Praise of Wisdom and Philosophy, the Final Word and the Great Conclusion

CHAPTER 9:13-18

Before he had declared that wisdom is strength. He comes back to this statement and gives an illustration of it. He is in a calmer mood, but what does his meditation amount to? Only to show that this also is vanity.

CHAPTER 10

This chapter contains a series of proverbs, expressing the wisdom and prudence of the natural man. Here are a number of observations and all show that there is a practical value in wisdom and that it has certain advantages. These maxims are of a different kind than the proverbs in the preceding book. There we are face to face with the wisdom which is from above, here it is the wisdom of man. The name of the Lord is not mentioned once, Similar philosophic utterances can be traced in the literature of other ancient nations. They need no detailed annotations.

CHAPTER 11

1. Proverbs concerning man's work (11:1-6)
2. The vanity of life (11:7-10)

Verses 1-6. These continued proverbs concern the work of man and begin with exhortations to charity and are followed by the wise acknowledgement that no one knows the works of God, who is the maker of all. All this knowledge is within the compass of the natural man.

Verses 7-10. After these philosophic proverbs he comes back to his former finding--vanity. So to speak he sums up life in one verse, "Truly the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." It is a great thing to have life. A different strain from his despondency, when life seemed not worth living. Alas! there is another "but." "But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that

cometh is vanity." Yes, let him enjoy himself in the present, but there is "a dead fly in the ointment" (10:1). There is looming up the dark future; days of darkness are coming for him--it is the grave, and human reason, philosophy, science nor anything else can bring light into this baffling darkness. "All that cometh is vanity!" Thank God, through revelation we know that those who believe His revelation, and believe on Him, whom God has sent, who is the propitiation for our sins, who conquered death and the grave--for such, "all that cometh is glory!"

Is it sarcasm that follows? He calls upon the young man to rejoice in his youth. Have a good time! Walk in the ways of thine heart, that heart out of which nothing but evil can come, and in the sight, not of the all-seeing eye of God, but of thine eyes. Do as you like! Follow my previous advice--be not righteous overmuch; be not too wicked; follow the middle road and enjoy yourself. Then comes a weighty sentence, "but know thou that for all these things God shall bring thee to judgment." But is not this revelation? Can the reason of man discover that such will be the case? Reason does know the law in nature "that whatsoever a man sows that he shall also reap." Reason beholds this law working not only in nature, which teaches man many things, but also in history, so that the philosopher can say, "the history of the world is the judgment of the world."

CHAPTER 12

1. Youth and old age (12:1-8)
2. The concluding epilogue (12:9-14)

Verses 1-8. Childhood and youth are vanity! That is the concluding sentence of the previous chapter. The vanities of life, the doom and darkness of the grave are uppermost in his mind, and the final word he speaks, ere he closeth with his epilogue, is the same with which he began his search, the search which brought out so many things, yet nothing in reality--as in the beginning of the book, so now he cries out, "Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity" (verse 8). He has come back in all his reasoning to the place from which he started.

Once more he speaks of youth and exhorts, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." This advice is given in connection with the thought expressed in chapter 11:9, "God will bring thee into judgment." Yet the natural man cannot obey this command. He then points to that which is inevitable. The balmy days of youth and energy will be followed by years in which man says, "I have no pleasure in them, the days of old age. Then death stalks in and the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit to God who gave it (verse 7). The description of the approach of old age is extremely beautiful. Clouds begin to cast a shadow over the spirit; sorrows multiply, one comes after the other as "clouds return after rain." The keepers of the house (the hands) tremble with weakness, and the strong men (the knees) become feeble. But a few of the grinders (the teeth) are left and those that look out of the windows (the eyes) are darkened. Then the doors are shut in the streets, the ears become dull and can no longer hear the familiar sound of the grinding at the mill; he is troubled with sleeplessness and no longer enjoys pleasure. He is troubled with fears. His hair becomes snow-white like the almond tree in bloom and the least thing becomes a heavy burden; the appetite is gone. Age has come and man is ready to go to his

"age-long home." The silver cord is snapped (the spinal column), the gold bowl is broken (the brain), the pitcher is broken at the fountain (the heart), and the wheel broken at the cistern (the blood and its circulation). But if he speaks of an age-long home, what is that home? And he speaks now of the spirit returning to God, but what does it mean? There is no answer, no light on these questions, for the natural man, even at his best, and in highest wisdom, cannot find the truth for himself about that "home" nor what it means--the spirit return to God. And thus he ends, "All is vanity."

But if we turn to the gospel, the gospel of God, the gospel of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel which is from above the sun, which reaches down to lost man under the sun, that blessed gospel lifts man higher and higher, till redeemed, saved by grace, washed in the blood of the Lamb, he reaches the place above the sun, the Father's house with its many mansions, the eternal home of the saints of God.

Verses 9-14. The final great conclusion remains. He reaches the high-water mark of his reasoning wisdom. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work unto judgment with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil." This is great wisdom, but does it help man? Does it bring comfort to his soul? Does it carry with it that which satisfies his heart? God is in heaven and man on the earth, he said before. There is an immeasurable distance between. And this masterly conclusion of the royal searcher still leaves God and man apart, with not even the faintest glimmer of light. Man is a sinner; how can his sins be forgiven? How can man, with a sinful heart, "obey commandments"? What about that judgment of every hidden thing? Alas! no answer; and man, struggling man, lost, sinful man, face to face with that which the highest natural wisdom can produce, must quake and tremble.

Hence Ecclesiastes is the way-preparer for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like every other Old Testament book it points and leads to Christ, in whom all problems are solved, all questions answered, in whom the old creation ends and the new begins.

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