

## **9. *Ecclesiastes* and the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*: Two Very Different But Not Altogether Dissimilar Voices from Antiquity: March 2-5**

In this essay was prompted in part by an excellent public lecture given by Dr Brad Inwood, a highly regarded classicist and an expert on Hellenistic philosophy, at the annual meeting of the Atlantic Classical Association held last October at Mount Allison University. Dr Inwood directed himself to Marcus Aurelius' life-philosophy as reflected upon in the *Meditations*, namely Stoicism: how consistent was it and what are the most striking characteristics of its two most significant components, namely its ethics and physics? The speaker focused and commented on a large number of passages which set forth Marcus Aurelius' views on these, but a summary of his paper is not necessary for the purpose of this essay. The most important upshot of his presentation was that it sent me back to the text of the *Meditations*, in both the original Greek and the 1873 translation by George Long which was set for the introductory philosophy course I had taken during my first undergraduate year at the University of Western Ontario many decades ago; since then I had not done anything with it by way of close reading.

As I reread what you might call the Roman emperor's philosophical and spiritual diary (its diary-like character is reflected by the title Marcus Aurelius gave to it, *Eis Heauton*, "To Himself," and much if not most of it must have been composed during the years he led the Roman legions in the hard-fought campaigns to stave off the threatening Germanic incursions into the Danubian lands of the Empire), I began to be struck by what I regarded as the spirit of resignation underlying the Stoic personal philosophy of rational deliberation and action, of the exercise of one's will under the full control of one's rational faculty participating in the "ruling power of the universe," that is, the godlike Reason which was equated, at least symbolically, with Zeus (for Marcus Aurelius, though, the supreme God and the lesser gods are very real and worthy of veneration). To a Stoic like Marcus Aurelius this is what makes a person truly free—free from the enslavement by the senses, appetites, and desires. The body in all its manifestations is ultimately and by itself worthless, for it is mortal, and only by virtue of his supra-physical rational faculty does man participate in the deathless power which governs the universe. Living according to Nature (a favourite Stoic phrase and injunction) means to live in harmony with that supreme power; it is not Nature of the body, but Nature of the rational principle directing it.

Marcus Aurelius is commonly regarded as the last (reigned 161-180) of the so-called Good Emperors who stayed well clear of naked despotism, working closely with their junior partner, the Senate, and ruling with moderation and benevolence. With the exception of Marcus Aurelius, the first four emperors, who had no natural sons, secured the succession through adoption, choosing someone of outstanding character and promise as their successor. Since he had a natural son, Commodus, Marcus Aurelius reverted to natural succession. The mentally unbalanced Commodus, however, was a disaster as a ruler and he was murdered in 192. Many an eminent historian, including Edward Gibbon in his magisterial *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, has viewed his reign as marking the beginning of the decline leading to the eventual fall of the classical Roman Empire. Commodus as well as his father, are vividly portrayed, albeit with

a lot of patent fictionalization, in the 1965 movie *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and the spectacularly successful *Gladiator* of the year 2000.

Marcus Aurelius' reign was not an untroubled one. As mentioned before, aggressive Germanic tribes were pressing in on the Danubian frontier and kept the emperor there away from Rome for years. A terrible plague swept the empire and killed millions. Marcus Aurelius does not seem to have been happy in his domestic life. Our written sources hint at the infidelity of Faustina, his wife, and the emperor must have increasingly suspected Commodus would not be a worthy successor. Finally, while he generally ruled with temperance and justice he would not abide the Christians, whom he regarded as deluded fanatics and subversives and he countenanced brutal persecutions of Christian communities in some parts of the empire.

In the opening entries of his *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius impressively records his indebtedness and gratitude to the many who shaped his character—members of his natural and adoptive families (by far the longest entry here commemorates his adoptive father, the emperor Antoninus Pius), friends, holders of positions of state, teachers, and philosopher, who thus fitted him, we might say in line with Plato's *Republic*, to become a philosopher-king. It is striking, though, that in his reflections the emperor speaks only as a private person and does not direct his thoughts specifically to his task as the ruler of the Roman Empire, that is, towards his subjects collectively, but considers only those (including the gods) who play a part in his daily life. If he had done so, the *Meditations* would surely have been one of the greatest political testaments from the ancient world. The following passage from book V well illustrates this private person's perspective (I am following Long's nineteenth-century translation, which brings out well the solemnity of Marcus Aurelius reflections):

*How hast thou behaved hitherto to the gods, thy parents, brethren, children, teachers, to those who looked after thy infancy, to thy friends, kinsfolk, to thy slaves? Consider if thou hast hitherto behaved to all in some way that this may be said of thee: Never hast wronged a man in deed or word.*

This focus strictly on himself as a private person and the humility by which it is marked comes through in one of the final entries in the last book (XII; I am again following Long's translation).

*How small a part of the boundless and unfathomable time is assigned to every man? For it is very soon swallowed up in the eternal. And how small a part of the whole substance? and how small a part of the universal soul? and on what a small clod of the whole earth thou creepest? Reflecting on all this consider nothing to be great, except to act as thy nature leads thee, and to endure what the common nature brings.*

This passage and many others like it speak, in my judgment, of a spirit of acceptance of one's place in the nature of things which is virtually synonymous with resignation: the bodily Marcus Aurelius just a “small clod” creeping the earth, although beyond this he can look upwards to the ruling power of Reason—that is, in the final

analysis, God—of which, yes, his reason-endowed mind is a minute part and into which, upon his death, it will be absorbed. I myself see no vista of joy in this worldview. It is in this spirit that Marcus Aurelius shows a commonality with the anonymous Hebrew author of the book of Ecclesiastes written several centuries earlier.

Many scholars believe that Ecclesiastes is one of the latest books written in the Old Testament (or the Hebrew Scriptures, as is the term often used today) and dates perhaps from the early Hellenistic era (the late fourth and the third century B.C.). The title “Ecclesiastes,” which is Greek and goes back to the Septuagint, is used also in English translations of the Bible. It literally means “speaker in the assembly,” and is still used in modern Greek and in Russian as well as in Latin and the Latin-derived (or so-called Romance) languages such as Italian, Spanish, and French. The Greek word translates the Hebrew *Koheleth* of the same meaning. With the exception of English, the translations in the Germanic languages such as Dutch, German, and Swedish render it as “Preacher” (e.g. “Prediker” in Dutch).

I have never heard a sermon delivered on Ecclesiastes, probably because its message and tone are so exceedingly sombre, so completely antithetical in spirit, it seems, to the message of the Christian Gospel. The “Speaker” is someone obviously well advanced in years, who claims he “ruled as king of Israel in Jerusalem” (chapter 1, the New English Bible translation) and now reflects on the meaning of his life. “I undertook great works”—and he goes through them. The speaker purports to be Solomon, but this is a literary fiction. His was a life of great material achievements, but he also sought knowledge and wisdom, so a comparison with Marcus Aurelius certainly suggests itself. But ‘Solomon’ has reaped only what seems like a totally pessimistic world view, already encapsulated in verses two, three, and four of chapter one: “Emptiness, emptiness, says the Speaker, emptiness, all is empty. What does man gain from all his labour and his toil here under the son? Generations come and generations go, while the earth endures forever.”

The bleakness is unrelenting. Human life is simply an unending, inevitable cycle of contraries in its events and actions, as is laid out in the well-known litany in chapter three: “a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to pull down and a time to build up, a time to weep and a time to laugh...” with nine more of such paired contraries to follow. The Speaker does not counsel despair, though, for he says in the same chapter: “I know that there is nothing good for man except to be happy and live the best he can while he is alive. Moreover, that a man should eat and drink and enjoy himself, in return for all his labours, is a gift of God.” God, then, is very much in the picture for humanity but God cannot be expected to deal with us as unfailingly as we would like; and so we are told in chapter four that injustice will often prevail: “I saw the tears of the oppressed and I saw there was no one to comfort them.”

There is a positive message in that the uncertainty and fragility which are man's lot are alleviated through companionship, such as with a son, brother, comrade or fellow-worker, as is said in the same chapter: “Two are better than one; they receive a

good reward for their toil, because if one falls, the other can help his companion up again... And if two lie side by side, they keep each other warm..." There is also the companionship provided by a woman and wife, as is underscored in chapter nine: "Enjoy life with a woman you love all the days of your allotted span under the sun, empty as they are"

Still, the bleakness of "empty as they are" is never completely dissipated: "time and chance govern all," as the Speaker sums up the course of man's life in chapter nine. Humans are enjoined by the Speaker to fear God and obey his commandments, but what can they expect to come of this? In chapter eight he says "There is an empty thing found on earth: when the just man gets what is due to the unjust, and the unjust what is due to the just." And this comes just after he says he knows that "it will be well with those who fear God: their fear of him ensures this, but it will not be well with a wicked man nor will he live long; the man who does not fear God is a mere shadow." We might interpret this to intimate there is an afterlife for man in which God will reward the just and punish the unjust. But previously, in chapter three (and later too) the Speaker throws doubt on this: "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward or whether the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth." The Hebrew word translated as "spirit" is *ruach*, which means literally "breath," that is, the breath of life that is infused by God into all living creatures. However, even in humans this *ruach* bears no personhood such as "spirit" does in more advanced Jewish thought and spirituality and in the Christian tradition. Thus, when the Speaker says towards the end in the final chapter, eleven, "...before the dust returns to the earth as it began and the spirit [*ruach*] returns to God who gave it," we should not imagine a sudden flash of optimism regarding man's destiny. The familiar, "Emptiness, emptiness, says the Speaker, all is empty" which immediately follows makes this perfectly clear.

The pessimism of Ecclesiastes regarding man's ultimate fate is absolute. The eloquent starkness of the language of this short text in the canonical Jewish scriptures cannot conceal this fact. The lines just quoted come at the end of the most moving and beautiful but also most sombre passages anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, starting with "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth..." and then almost immediately followed by a succession of vivid and poignant images cataloguing the decline, indeed the wasting away, of body and mind in old age.

It might be argued that the repeated "emptiness, all is emptiness" is a just assessment of a life without God and that as such Ecclesiastes does belong in the canonical scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, but the Speaker's awareness of God the creator and sustainer does not bring him any joy. The sun-lit perspective of ultimate hope and trust in God we do find elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures is not his.

I have called attention at the beginning to what I perceive as the basic joylessness informing the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and his austere Stoic call to a human personhood—manhood above all—which partakes of the Universal Reason or God. Ecclesiastes certainly is to be compared to the Roman emperor's philosophical and spiritual classic in this respect, although its pervasive sombreness far exceeds the

other's. Marcus Aurelius had at least the comfort of his conviction in his rationally constituted and willing self eventually, upon death, to be absorbed into the ruling power of the rationally ordered cosmos. However, there is no "surprise of joy" (to use C.S. Lewis's telling phrase) in both him and the anonymous Hebrew writing centuries earlier.