

## A BUDDHIST IN JEWRY.

PARALLELS TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOTAMA IN THE BOOK  
OF ECCLESIASTES.

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FROM the days of Fathers Huc and Gabet, the many curious resemblances between Christianity and Buddhism have been a subject of lively speculation and attempted explanation. The parallels between these two religions have been found more in ethics and episode than in philosophy. So eminent an authority as Dr. Rhys Davids discredits the probability of any historical connection between them, in their earlier expressions, at least, and ascribes their coincidences to a similarity of the conditions from which they arose.

To the Hebrew Book of Ecclesiastes the teachings of Buddha present a deeper than superficial likeness. An attempt to seek out and set in order the proverbs of the Preacher so as to adapt them to the systematic elaboration of Gotama's doctrines, is well worth the trouble, for the student finds a surprising harmony in the life philosophy of this Semite and Aryan. Historical kinship would doubtless be an idle speculation; at any rate it is unnecessary to consider here.

When Buddha came and when Koheleth addressed his hearers, their respective nations were undergoing a somewhat analogous spiritual experience. The ancient, simple, and joyous faiths had been overwhelmed by advancing civilization and buried in burdensome ritual. The fruit of the tree of knowledge had been plucked but the fruit of the tree of life had not fallen. It was in either case an age of spiritual adolescence, which gave rise to mistrust and unsatisfied longings. At such a period the Enlightened One shone upon the Far East. In the Near East was enkindled many a provisional prophetic candle, of which the Preacher's, if not the brightest, burned with unsurpassed vehemence. Meanwhile the

world awaited the dawn of the Sun of Righteousness, which would know neither Far nor Near.

Unusual difficulty attends any exposition of Ecclesiastes, because theories of its date, authorship and meaning are as numerous and different as theorists. For purposes of comparison with Buddhist doctrine the work may be taken as it stands. This policy is favored by the fact that the present purpose is rather exegetical than textually critical, and also by the special employment that will be made of the various parts of the book. So far as pertinent, they may be selected, classified, and so co-ordinated as to show a new and particular unity.

At the very outset of his discourse Koheleth lays the foundation of Buddhist cosmic philosophy—*Impermanence*. ...Vanity of vanities, all is vanity—the profitlessness of labor, the passing of the generations, the circuit of the sun, the whirling of the winds, the return of the rivers. Old is new and new is old and there is no remembrance of former things. What is vanity but the instability of nature, whose flux and cycle the aspirant to the Paths must view with unobscured eyes? Through growth and decay, through production and dissolution, through becoming but not remaining, upon what transitory aggregate, upon what thing of name and form, can man seize as truly of value? In those who have felt this truth, whether Aryan or Hebrew, it is not strange that we detect some trains of thought leading far into modern scientific apprehension.

For Koheleth as for the Tathagata, the poignant fact in impermanence was its application to mankind. Fool and wise will be alike forgotten. There is no end of all the people that have been. Man spendeth his life as a shadow; none hath power to retain the spirit in the day of death, and there is no discharge from that war.

Buddha, however, predicated transiency not only of the body, but of the soul. He taught that the personality to be borne in a future birth is to be a result of previous character, and in that sense only is there a surviving identity. Thus, opposing the animistic creed of the Brahmans, he maintained that the psychical properties, like the physical, are evanescent, and that no conscious spirit or self is carried to the further shore of death. In eschatology, then, his teaching marked a destructive epoch, while Koheleth if representing the probable trend of Jewish belief, must have been constructive. That is no reason why their opposite tendencies might not find a meeting place. The Preacher's actual views have been interpreted anywhere from bald materialism to a lively faith in immortality. Concerning them it is necessary to speak with great reserve.

The Old Testament is, to a remarkable extent, engrossed with temporal affairs. It is astonishing that so earnest and theistic a religion as that of the Hebrews should have been taken so little apparent account of transmundane things. Aside even from the element of divine revelation, their capacity and opportunity for receiving ideas of another life must make us hesitate in construing their early silence as ignorance or indifference. Their literature is best regarded, however, as showing a growth of belief in immortality, which by the beginning of the Christian Era had become quite well defined. The light did not come steadily but by flashes, which, even in single books, are beheld alternating with intervals of seeming darkness.

If the task were merely one of picking out texts irrespective of context or real significance, the Buddhist negations could readily be paralleled. The Preacher's self-communings suggest many gloomy pictures—the equal fate of righteous and wicked; the hopelessness and oblivion of the dead; the failure of their love and hatred and envy, their knowledge and wisdom; and their portion with the beasts. It is quite evident, however, that these are not his best and true opinions. He is proposing a variety of doubtful hypotheses in the development of his argument. While it is difficult to judge how far his early observations describe his final sentiments, and how far otherwise, the conclusion of the book indicates that he held a firm belief in a surviving spirit. Even his query, "Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?" betrays the existence of an animistic conception, which later is positively expressed when he predicts the return of the soul to God who gave it. Moreover, "God shall bring every secret work into judgment, whether it be good or whether it be evil," a result unfulfilled in this life, any critics to the contrary notwithstanding.

Koheleth, therefore, has expressed from his heart the extreme Buddhist conception of the spirit, but has been able to rise above it. Yet his practical estimate of the relative position of the present and future life has much in common with the Tathagata's. For while he sees light through the clouds, the clouds still chiefly obscure his sky. Or rather, his conception reaches to Sheol, but hardly to a resurrection therefrom. To him the existence of the discarnate soul, though actual, seems to be vague and filmy—no substantial continuation of this life as a state of activity and interest—nothing comparable to Christian immortality. Perhaps he really had no expectation of work or device or knowledge in the grave whither he

was to go. To him the present life was still the field of any happiness that might be found. So, in announcing its vain and transitory nature, the main consolations of existence were impugned, and if ultimately the path to peace was discovered, that peace was pre-eminently temporal. As a moral argument, then, his position accords with Gotama's. And notably, while both lack the Christian incentive of a glorious immortality, Preacher and Sage agree—each after his own fashion—in the expectancy of post-mortem retribution.

We shall now attempt to trace the argument of the four noble truths into which the Dhamma is crystalized.

First. *All stages of life are painful; individuality involves suffering.* Gotama taught that the evil in life outweighs the good, which is pure pessimism and in these modern days of riotous optimism, rank heresy. Koheleth's heart had drunken in the world-pain to its dregs. Predisposed, perhaps, to esteem life's happiness above its suffering, so long as it lasts, the thought of its ephemeral nature embitters his every experience. Almost despairing, he still refuses to abandon hope, and finds a place for chastened, wholesome enjoyment as the gift of God to the righteous. But it is the misery, rather than the way of escape, which chiefly colors his writings to the reader.

Considering the oppressions that are done under the sun and the comfortlessness of the oppressed, Koheleth praises the dead more than the living; while better than both is he that hath never been to behold the evil that is done. "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof."

Compare the celebrated stanza of the Bhagavat:

"How transient are all component things!  
Growth is their nature and decay;  
They are produced, they are dissolved again,  
And then is best, when they have sunk to rest."

It was no superficial judgment of Gotama that closely related suffering with individuality, no commonplace observation that all men meet trouble. The higher and more personal an organism, whether physical or psychical, the more numerous become its opportunities for pain and the more acute its sensitiveness. Through the whole gamut of experience Koheleth understood this truth and at its highest pitch voiced it when he said: "In much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

Second. *The origin of suffering is in craving thirst, which*

*causes reincarnation.* It is passion, greed, ambition, etc. Setting aside the mystical doctrine of the force Kamma, leading to re-births, the second noble truth follows logically and practically from the first. If individuality entails suffering, the more we selfishly stimulate and exercise the various qualities of our personality, the more bitterness we shall lay up for ourselves.

Koheleth assumed to be one who had tasted the pleasures and activities of life both low and high, both foolish and wise, and had found them alike Dead Sea fruit. Far keener is his anguish than that of the mediocre man. Impersonating a king of his national Golden Age, he catalogues the wealth of his accumulated possessions—his houses and gardens and orchards, his trees and pools of water, his servants and maidens, his great and small cattle, his men-singers and women-singers, and musical instruments and all delights of the sons of men. Looking on them all they are but vanity and a striving after wind.

One is here reminded of the sutta of the Great King of Glory, with his palaces and lotos ponds, palm trees of gems and precious metals, servants and wives, horses and elephants, and networks of sweet-sounding bells. Nor should it be overlooked that this great king, also, set his heart to know wisdom and instructed in righteousness the rival monarchs of the East. His life is made to teach the lesson that it is meet to be weary of, it is meet to be estranged from, it is meet to be set quite free from the bondage of all component things.

Koheleth continues his trials through many experiences. The tests described in Chapter II have been classified by Professor Moulton substantially thus: (1) Pleasure and folly, which prove illusory; (2) Wisdom itself, which is better, but futile; (3) Labor (production as distinguished from consumption) to the fruit of which a fool may succeed; (4) Appreciation of the process, whether of pleasure-seeking or labor, as differentiated from the results, which appreciation is the gift of God and not in the seeker's power. So the range of aspirations, low and high, ends in a striving after wind. It is fair to note, however, that the divine blessing of appreciation is attributed to the righteous man, thus anticipating the conclusion of the book.

From the tenth verse of the fifth chapter to the end of the sixth, we have what Professor Moulton has set apart as an essay on the "Vanity of Desire," thus unintentionally falling into line with the Buddhist classification. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase. The abun-

dance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep. The appetite is not filled by labor, neither (as is elsewhere remarked) the eye satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing. Vain is the wandering of desire, vain not only but hurtful, and who knoweth what is good for a man in his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow?

Third. *To get rid of the suffering we must get rid of the craving.* Gotama lays this down explicitly and Koheleth through his advocacy of a life of chastened equanimity. So far as this Buddhist doctrine refers to the destruction of Kamma it has no counterpart in the Jewish book. But the mundane and practical side of the Dhamma, if not paramount, was strongly emphasized. Tranquilization of the mind in this life is prominent in the aspirations of the Samana. The detailed means of purification, by which craving is to be destroyed, are reserved for the fourth noble truth, but it may be appropriate here to discuss the generalization thereof called the Middle Way. Such a life of moderation Buddha and Koheleth both recommended, differing, however in the severity of their judgment. It would be held by the American type of Christian that in endeavoring to steer between the Scylla of worldly voluptuousness and the Charybdis of Brahmanical self-torture, Gotama scraped his paint on the Charybdis side; for today asceticism is the worst of vices, though from the beginning it was not so. Koheleth was no such anchorite when he advised: "Be not righteous overmuch, nor overmuch wise, neither be overmuch wicked, nor foolish." Or again: "Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full with travail." Further he proclaims:

"It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better."

How suggestive is this of the Buddhist theory that benefit may be derived from meditation on the corruption of the body, which disillusionizes the mind and disgusts it with that which should be eschewed!

Some of Koheleth's precepts have, on the other hand, been pronounced Epicurean. "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink they wine with a merry heart," he says, "for God accepteth thy works." The pleasure he advocates is not riotous living, but the sober happiness which is possible for one who has found peace. The Buddhist disciples who had entered the paths to Nibbana experienced raptures of joy, but theirs was chiefly spiritual. Nevertheless their outward life was none of the saddest, being tranquil,

free from want and gladdened by communion with an expansive nature. To them, as to others, the light was sweet and it was a pleasant thing to behold the sun. Bhagavat himself frequently expressed delight in those things which had been made beautiful in their time. "How pleasant, Ananda," said he, "is Râjagaha . . . How pleasant the Sattapanni Cave on the slope of Mount Vebhâra . . . How pleasant the squirrels' feeding ground in the Bambu Grove; how pleasant Jivaka's Mango Grove; how pleasant the Deer Forest at Maddakukki!"

Fourth. *The way which leads to the destruction of suffering, the noble Eight-fold Path.* "Right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right contemplation," says Buddha. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter," echoes Koheleth, "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. . . . Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth."

It was an unknown God whom Gotama unknowingly feared, but few that have had a more perfect knowledge have served him so well. Koheleth's conception of the divine commandments, to judge not only from the aphorisms in his book, but from his presumptive opinions as a Hebrew, substantially agreed with the Eight-fold Path.

Several other ideas embodied in the Book of Ecclesiastes are eminently Buddhistic. The conviction of inexorable cause and effect so firmly ingrained in Gotama's philosophy is shared by the Preacher. "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby." "If the clouds be full of rain they empty themselves upon the earth. . . . Where the tree falleth there it shall lie." "That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be numbered." Even more than secondary causes, however, Koheleth emphasized the First Cause, for instance: "I know that whatsoever God doeth it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it that men should fear before him." If there is any such conception as this in Buddhism it is implied rather than expressed.

Hopeless bewilderment before certain mysteries of being was confessed by the Preacher, who disclaims attempt to explain the nature of the spirit or the growth of the embryo; as by the Enlightened Sage, who deprecates questioning about the past, present, or future existence of the ego (*Sabbâsava Sutta*).

The sex whose "heart is snares and nets" were regarded by Koheleth with suspicion akin to that of Gotama, who, though he allowed them a place coördinate with that of the brethren, enjoined that it should be far enough away.

It is interesting to note the importance attached both by the Semite and Aryan to an apprehension of truth. The title-word of the "Wisdom" literature, among which Ecclesiastes belongs, is reiterated in its chapters too frequently to need special citation; nor does anyone acquainted with Buddhism require proof of the stress laid therein upon enlightenment, riddance from illusion, and a grasp of right views as prerequisites to all attainment in the Paths. Moreover, the special Biblical significance of Wisdom, as an interpretation of the whole, accords strikingly with the mind of the Tathagata.

That twentieth century Occidental clinging to existence and consciousness as indefeasibly good in themselves, that intense individualism which leads men to say that they would prefer the tortures of hell forever to extinction, was cherished by neither of these two prophets of the remote and proximate Orient. "Better," cries the Preacher, "than the long-lived man whose soul is not filled with good, and who hath no burial, is an untimely birth: *for this hath more rest than the other.*"

In concluding the subject it is impossible to forbear allusion to the suggestiveness of that verse in which the dust is predicated as returning to earth, as it was, but the spirit to God, who gave it. Some have found therein a hint of a Nirvâna, of a reabsorption of the soul in its native essence, by analogy to the reversion of the dust to its primal substance. This tends, of course, to establish a relation rather with Brahmanism than with Buddhism. Those who are seeking in the Bible for glimpses of an ultimate Unity of all things may find a grander, if somewhat uncertain, ground for their speculations in I Cor., xv, 24-28, and possibly in I Tim, vi, 16.

The present analysis of the Book of Ecclesiastes has been made with no pretension of completeness, or of following the lines that should guide its study independently of Indian dogma. It is not surprising to trace moral analogies. Morals are a finite science; in ethical expression all high religions—since they approximate, theoretically, at least, to the same ideal—are much alike. To discover as many points of contact between the theories of life underlying morals as apparently are found in the respective philosophies of Koheleth and Gotama, is a matter of rarer occurrence.

It is on the divine side, and in those considerations which transcend both morality and philosophy that we see the sharpest dis-



inction between different faiths; that we trace the workings of an Almighty purpose, which forbids coördination; and that we find an explanation of the relative weakness of some of these religions for abiding good. Theism, indeed, mainly differentiates Ecclesiastes from the Dhamma, while recognition of man's inherent helplessness and the remedial relation of its founder to this deficiency, separates Christianity from them both.