

It is interesting to discover
the surprising influence of the Book of Ecclesiastes
on Shakespeare's masterwork play.
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abridged account of a chapter in David Basch's
SHAKESPEARE'S JUDAICA AND DEVICES.

THE BIBLE ON STAGE

by David Basch

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Famous actor, Paul Muni, wrote of the experiences of his father, who had been dedicated to the ideal of creating a Yiddish theater. One day his father chanced to see a play in Yiddish in which the dispirited son of a great Rabbi had been called home from the Yeshiva (school of Judaic religious study) only to learn that his father was dead and his mother had swiftly remarried to his father's brother, who had now become the new dynastic Rabbinic leader.

Of course, unknown to Paul Muni's father, what he was watching was a Yiddish version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. So moved was he by the play that he blurted out, "*Now this is Yiddish theater!*" How right Muni's father was.

The more one analyzes Shakespeare's play, the more it becomes evident that it translates *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (*Kohelet*) into the play form. Among other things, *Ecclesiastes* is a reflection, a stream of conscious, by wise King Solomon, referred to as Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*). He meditates on the meaning of life and human affairs, including such things as the problem of confronting powerful, kingly authority. This reflective personality and his observation on how *over much* study leads to a "*vexation of spirit*" (*Eccl. 1:14*) is dramatized in Shakespeare's play through the character of the studious and jaded, royal Prince Hamlet. The events that befall Hamlet, with surprising regularity, parallel that mentioned in the words of Ecclesiastes.

Initially, the parallels must seem an amazing coincidence since scholars had long noted a number of previous versions of "revenge" plays in which are to be found various episodes that Shakespeare appears to have brought together in working out the version that is under his authorship as *Hamlet*. But now, as the parallels within it to the words of *Ecclesiastes* are recognized, it becomes evident that the poet must have seen in those earlier

episodes the raw material from which he could construct a play that presents dramatizations of the wisdom of this book of the *Bible*. A review of a number of these parallels throughout the play should make this case most evident.

For example, Hamlet's predicament in "rotten" Denmark — made rotten by the "*flies in the ointment*" of corruption (*Eccl. 10:1*) — is most disconcerting. As the play opens, Hamlet, already vexed and wearied by the sore travail of study in seeking out wisdom (*Eccl. 12:12*), has been made even more melancholy by the turn of events. His smooth uncle Claudius, at the sudden death of Hamlet's father, has taken over the Kingdom of Denmark, a usurpation made possible by the willing cooperation of Hamlet's queen mother, who marries the late king's brother. Thus, what should have been Hamlet's inheritance of kingship has been bypassed by his uncle. The unhappy prince finds that he can do nothing to ameliorate the outrages he feels have befallen him. As summed up in *Ecclesiastes 8:4*:

Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?

To Hamlet, the calamities of being robbed of his throne and the impropriety of his mother's hasty marriage to his father's brother, violations of traditional Danish protocols and decency, have shaken his world. Life for him has lost all meaning. Such a condition of the instability of expectations and the worthlessness of long accepted social ways in the new world that confronts Hamlet corresponds to the condition described in *Ecclesiastes 1:2* in the words, "*vanity of vanities; all is vanity*" (*hevel ha'valim ... ha'cal ho'vel*).

Here the Hebrew word "*hevel*," translated "*vanity*," literally means "*vapor*" — *the insubstantial vapor of breathe*. Shakespeare magnificently picks up this image to convey the condition of complete futility felt by Hamlet, in which the very excellent air that surrounds him under the "*golden fire*," the sun, has become poisonous — nothing but "*pestilent ... vapours*":

this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

So when a visitation of the ghost of Hamlet's father occurs that tells Hamlet of the treachery of his uncle's murder of his father and urges him to

act in vengeance, Hamlet finds he has to tread carefully and utter no word of rebellion lest the new, powerful king discover what he is about: "*Curse not the king, no not in thy thought;... for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter (Eccl. 10:20).*

Unlike the hero in earlier versions of revenge stories, Shakespeare's Hamlet, we learn, is righteously concerned that the ghost he saw was *a devil of his own imagination* that was tempting him to kill his uncle by assuming a "*pleasing shape*" — the shape he wishes to see as his murdering uncle. This is an amazing departure from the earlier stories. What other avenger needed more than the word of a ghostly figure to confirm self-serving suspicions?

Incidentally, this situation enacts a controversy discussed in the *Talmud* about whether it is permissible to decide a point of law through the aid of a heavenly being. The rabbis had concluded that all determinations of law must be arrived at right here on earth, unaided by any heavenly intercession. Hamlet, in this mode, seeks confirmation of the ghost's assertions, struggling mightily against committing a rash and unjust attack egged on by a possible false demon before he can prove his uncle's guilt right here on earth. This new Hamlet is a modern man with a great sense of justice and integrity.

Like Ecclesiastes-Solomon, who is a student of wisdom and who applies his heart "*to know the wickedness of folly, even ... madness*" (*Eccl. 7:25*), Hamlet, the university student of wisdom, also enacts these roles in the play, indulging in folly and even madness, feigning the latter, as did the *Bible's* David, to protect himself and to trip up the watchful King Claudius.

Hamlet finds as Ecclesiastes describes, "*more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets*" (*Eccl. 7:26*). This is borne out to a bitter Hamlet that finds that the women in his life have played just such roles. His mother had unwittingly served as a snare and temptation to his covetous uncle to commit murder. At the same time, Ophelia, Hamlet's young, impressionable girl friend, who, although having no devious heart, spies on him under the overwhelming pressure of her overbearing father, Polonius, the king's minister. But although she is a victim, Hamlet, consumed by his hurt, forgets his earlier feelings of love for her, treating her as an adversary. He thereby removes from himself the possibility of having the warm love of her companionship — "*..., if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?*" (*Eccl. 4:11*)

In another incident of the play, Hamlet has succeeded in publicly proving his uncle's guilt as a result of his uncle's shocked reaction to a play that Hamlet stages reenacting his father's murder. The revenge minded Hamlet then comes upon his uncle, but, finding him in prayer, does not kill him. This is *a fatal mistake and puzzling to Shakespearean commentators*. But, as is clearly expressed in the play, Hamlet, craving strict justice, feels that his now penitent uncle, were he to then die, would escape a due measure of punishment in the afterlife. This was a prayerful penitence for sins that had not been allowed to his murdered father. Hence, for the sake of a full, righteous retribution, Hamlet thinks it would be better to wait and kill his uncle at a time when he would be found immersed in some sinful act.

This penchant for perfect justice rather than being satisfied with carrying out a just, decisive, timely blow, albeit of lesser vengeful symmetry, is a grave error since it allows the King to survive and fatally turn the tables on him. Clearly, Hamlet had failed to heed the warning in *Ecclesiastes 7:16*:

*Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise:
why shouldest thou destroy thyself?*

Interestingly, this situation in the play offers insight on the observation in *Ecclesiastes 7:15* on why “*there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that prolongeth his life in his wickedness.*” We see in this episode of the play an example of this, made possible by the over righteousness of the good man, Hamlet, who because of this character flaw fails to act in a timely fashion against his evil uncle.

Another striking example of the enacting of the words of *Ecclesiastes* is the telltale scene in which Hamlet, in a mood of folly, jests with Polonius, pointing to a cloud that he first says resembles a camel and then a weasel — to each of which comparisons the servile Polonius agrees. This incident recalls the words of *Ecclesiastes*: “*He that regards the clouds shall not reap*” (*Eccl. 11:14*). In fact, the scene is a pointed comment on Hamlet's character as a man wise *over-much* in the certainty of his path, but who in reality has his head in the clouds, distracted from his serious purpose. It foreshadows the ending of the play, in which Hamlet *does not reap* — does not regain his throne.

For at the very end of the play, Fortinbras, the young “*unimproved*” warrior, earlier identified as a character that is yet untested, reaps the harvest of the throne. This occurs after the famous last scene, in which the righteous and the wicked — Hamlet, the Queen, King Claudius, and Ophelia's brother,

Laertes — meet their deaths. Truly "*there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked*" (*Eccl. 9:2*).

The punch line and irony of Shakespeare's play is the accession to the throne of Denmark by the "*unimproved*," untested, Fortinbras — his character also suggested by the allusion in his name to the inferior metal, "*brass*." Yet, when the warring sides have destroyed one another, it is he that has this great victory dumped into his lap. This circumstance of irony is aptly envisioned in *Ecclesiastes 2:19*, in which we are told that even a worthy, scrupulous king must eventually leave the scene and be succeeded by one whose worthiness is unknown:

Who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.

The vanity in the play reflects the vagaries of happenstance and purposelessness — *like the wind of vapor* — that greets the excessive devotion to the material life of unbridled ambition and struggle for power and wealth. For all this too must eventually pass away and may even be sped by personal failings, accidents, and errors that bring the careful plans of strivers to naught ("*the race is not to the swift, ... nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all*" — *Eccl. 9:11*).

Hamlet's personal conclusion in the play as he emerges from his melancholy is that "*the readiness is all*." Here he implies that it is the readiness to seize the opportunity as encountered in its time — "*in its season*" (*Eccl. 3:1*) — to fulfill the moral behests of heaven that is of the essence of virtue. This is akin to the readiness to do one's duty under the awe of heaven that is concluded as the "*final word*" in *Ecclesiastes 12:13*. Interestingly, this "*readiness*" can be summed up by the Hebrew word "*hi'ne'ni*" — "*Here I am (at your service)*" — spoken by Abraham and some of the Prophets to note the readiness to do God's will.

Alas for Hamlet, his readiness is applied in an injudicious manner as a result of "*a wise-over-much*" disposition. Hamlet, having judged from a fortuitous series of past events that have befallen him, presumes to know the unknowable ways of the Lord, trusting in an assumed continuing benign, heavenly intercession. He unwisely overrules the cautionary *advice* of his penurious friend Horatio — "*the poor man's wisdom is despised*" (*Eccl. 9:16*) — and consents to participate in what turns out to be a fatal dueling contest

proposed by Claudius, a trap in which he meets his end — “... *for man also 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 ...*” (Eccl. 9:12).

As it happens, so are Claudius and Learnes snared by this trap they had set for Hamlet and they too meet retribution — “*He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it;...*” (Eccl. 10:8).

Using the insights and paradigms of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, Shakespeare has written *a tragedy*, a woeful tale of Hamlet, a most admirable, good man — his goodness evidenced by his having won the steadfast love and loyalty of his discerning friend Horatio. But, tragically, Hamlet is a good man whose character failings bring him to self-destruction.

Finally, it is to be observed that among the many strictly non Biblical, Judaic touches in this play is the clear reference to the *Talmud's Pirke Avoth (The Ethics of the Fathers)* of a skull floating on the water (2.7). Like the sage, Hillel, in that reference, Hamlet also discovers a skull — the world famous skull associated with the line, “*Alas poor Yorick, I knew him Horatio*” (V.i...). Hamlet muses that perhaps this skull belonged to a politician who could “*circumvent G-d*” but, as happens in the graveyard scene, is then “*over reached*,” overruled, by the lowly grave digger who is observed to slam the skull to the earth. This is the same moral of “*measure for measure*” drawn by Hillel.

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