

"WHO CAN MAKE STRAIGHT WHAT GOD HAS MADE CROOKED?"

Ecclesiastes 7.13

2888

4.25.98

"HUMAN GENETIC ENHANCEMENT" \*

The opening event (4.23.98) of the 1998 Ecumenical Roundtable on Science, Technology & the Church in the U.S. and Canada--Presentations by members of the Ecumenical Working Group on Faith & Genetics + Dr. Stuart Newman, developmental biologist, New York Medical College, Valhalla, NY--in Boston's Episcopal Cathedral. The thoughtful papers are obtainable from Barbara Smith-Moran, 978.369.1464.

\* Defined by the Working Group as "the use of genetic engineering to produce or enhance a human characteristic above and beyond that which would prevent or alleviate a generally recognized genetic disease."

GENERAL COMMENTS: (1) The year-long Working Group had twice as many members as those who read papers, half of whom were UCC (whom afterward I complimented for the biblical-theological content of their papers--an emphasis many would not expect of UCCers). (2) My plenary comments were (a) that the panel's tone was "Luddite fear" of, & warnings against, HGE (human genetic enhancement), with no note of Christian hope transcending the problem & prospect of HGE; (b) that in the group's most recent minutes, I noted that three scriptures--Heb.3, Eccle.7.13, & Gn.2--were suggested for further reflection (the middle one is this Thinksheet's second line); (c) that God may call us to make straight what he's made crooked (so we should not too quickly rule out HGE); (d) that I'd like to hear any subsequent reflections of the Working Group on Eccl.7.13. Only one speaker responded, & he only to comment that he'd picked up the quote from some other program.

AIM: While I appreciated the calm, competent cautions of the speakers vis-a-vis HGE, this Thinksheet is mainly my own reflection on the intriguing saying from Qohelet(Sayings-Assembler)-Ecclesiastes.

1 Q. exercises the hermeneutics of suspicion on his religiomoral heritage, orthodox Judaism (of the 2nd c. BC/BCE?). All his efforts to construct a rational theology-&-ethics hit dead ends, so intellectually he falls into pessimism & emotionally into depression. The panel had a touch of both, & mustered no vigorous rejoinder when a floor-speaker said that HGE is inevitable (implying that the Working Group was not being realistic in refusing this as the baseline for their deliberations).

2 But--as was true of this Christian panel--Q. holds to theism, not surrendering faith in God even though his life experiences/observations tempt him to. The theology he's left with is not the Bible's God-in-action-in-nature-&-history but little more than his ghost, a deistic divinity. It happened to Darwin, & through Darwin it's happened to millions, including millions in churches. When liberal Christians rise to the boldness of speaking of God-in-action, they fear being pegged as fundamentalists in doctrine & bigots in public opinions ("tolerance" at the moment being the general society's weightiest word in the virtues-values lexicon).

3 The § in which our proverb appears, Eccl.7.1-14, is a catena of wisdom axioms possibly written by Q. but probably only "assembled" by him ("Q." being on the root of the Heb. wd. for "assembly" [of people or things]). The cantus firmus is that while God's works are unalterable by us, we do have elbow room to make choices, & wisdom aims to instruct us as to which choices are (a continuity word in the §) "better." The very fact of his writing to instruct us implies a degree of freedom in humanity vis-a-vis deity & all of life....The Working Group's existence presumes humanity's freedom/responsibility/accountability vis-a-vis HGE: the ab/use of science.

4 How did this skeptic make it into the canon? We could ask the same about Job. But both end with orthodox Jewish affirmations, perhaps added to broaden readership (a redactorial touch) or possibly even indicative of the original author's pull-out from the dumps of depression & despair, a retro-conversional experiencing recovering the tradition & earlier personal experience thereof, without entire loss of the somber notes later disappointing experiences added to the lilting melody of younger years. Inclining to the latter view vis-a-vis these two wisdom works, I must remark that an early firm grounding in one's faith provides a freedom for later unorthodox explorations without complete loss of one's footing on life's mountain: saints wandering off into wild speculations do not cease to be saints. They may even insult God without blaspheming--for God receives their unorthodox statements as proofs of love & prayers of longing as long as they continue to speak to & about God.

5 And he does indeed continue to speak of God, even to call attention to God: "Think about what God has done. How can any human being straighten what God has bent?" (My rendering of the simple, straightforward Hebrew of Eccl.7.13.) Next verse: "You never know what's going to happen next," so take life as it comes: "God sends both happiness and trouble."....Get the picture? A strong men bends an iron bar, which then he hands to a small child, who--needing no urging--tries to bend the bar back straight, a hopeless endeavor. The bar was **meant** to be straight (in manufacture), & now (by the blacksmith's intention, on his project) is **meant** to be crooked. It was not more meant to be straight than it is now meant *not* to be so.

6 But the problem with this harmonious-equational-equanimous life-view (& take on our text) is that humanity persistently exercises a preferential option for straightness against crookedness/bentness (Jesus' "straight is the path" & Gerald Manley Hopkins' "the bent world" & the prophets' preparation for Messiah as straightening & leveling "the highway for the King"). God is said to prefer straightness, as in Paul Claudel's metaphor reification: "God writes straight with crooked lines."

7 The pondering of proverbs (which are "given by God," 12.11) is the Philosopher's primary practice of piety (TEV renders Q. as "Philosopher") under/in/from God. This warns us not to solve the puzzle of 7.13 too easily, by one take on it (eg, §5). His book is a slice of his piety, (1) "studying proverbs and honestly testing their truth" & "keeping on teaching the people what he knew" (12.9). "The Philosopher tried to find comforting words, but the words he wrote were honest" (12.10), in verisimilitude with life's sourness as well as its sweetness, life's impenetrabilities as well as its clarities....What can we know of his intended audience? That they were more inclined to read (12.12) than to look, to observe life honestly & dispassionately (in this author's theistic-Stoic manner). And of his (or the redactor's) message? "Have reverence for God and obey his commands, because this is all that man was created for. God is going to judge everything we do..., even things done in secret" (12.13f). Any suggestion of human survival of death? Possibly in this judgment teaching, but improbable: "It's all useless" (12.8). Yet "the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us" (previous verse).

8 The OT's wisdom literature (mainly Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) melds piety (God-orientation, unexplicit in S. of Ss.) with tradition-appreciative-&-critical reason, with the double motive of divine honor & human illumination. This springs from, & effects, the polar moods of acceptance (**stasis**, as in the context of 7.13) & discontent, intellectual-spiritual disquietude (which leads to, & is the spirit of, **science**--which studies both regularities (life's directive evidences) & anomalies (life's random evidences, unpredictables, un/towardnesses [good/evil "fate," "luck"], "chance" happenings). (On the latter, think of recent chaos-&-catastrophe theories.) ....Have I not rather more sketched the task of the theologian (who's set to honor God) than of the philosopher (who's set to honor truth or knowledge)? So let's call Q. the Theologian, who's "wisdom" is God-serving while truth-seeking (& is even God himself: "Christ, the wisdom of God" (1Cor.1.24). Which is a good place (1) to admire OT wisdom & (2) to observe that it's without benefit of the Jesus story of piety, suffering, death, & resurrection....without benefit of Christian experience. (That is why we should [1] persist in "Old Testament" literature to be viewed through the lens of the later Christ-event, & [2] resist calling this literature the "Hebrew Bible," which invites the reader to interpret it *only* without the later light on God's power, purpose, & wisdom.)

9 That God is moral (good, in our judgment) is of less concern to the biblical mind than that he is just (righteous in his own eyes--as Lincoln's "The Almighty has his own purposes"); & that he rules without remainder (even "I bring both blessing and disaster," Is.45.7) is even more fundamental than that he is righteous. In all circumstances, accordingly, he's to be trusted, obeyed, loved (this last, the baseline of the Ten Words [or Commands, or Commandments]). Letting Scripture interpret scriptures, I studied, to illumine Eccl.7.13, numerous passages, including 1.15 ("You can't straighten out what's crooked [implying you wish you could, because in your eyes what's crooked shouldn't be]; you can't count what's not there [implying you wish you had some particular pile to count].") Acceptance, submission, quietism: Don't

sweat it, don't think you can change life. Take everything in life *as from the hand of God*, the Giver of life (5.18, 8.15, 12.7), even though his control is so remote it seems to you that the universe is governed by chance (3.9, 9.2-3, 11-12). Theistic determinism is to be preferred to atheism (the latter, a Greek option this Jew is rejecting), as is Stoic cyclicalism (1.2-9: "It's useless....What's happened before will happen again"--a Jew's despair because the line leading to God's denouement has "bent" itself into a circle of infinite repetition). Moral retribution, a Jewish theodic necessity, is (1) a faith unsupportable by observed facts (6.6-8, 8.10, 14, 9.2) & (2) a fact of faith (the book's last verse--an inconsistency either in the book's textual history or, I think more probably, in the author's soul, not having worked out to smoothness the Jewish/Greek culture-clash). While there seems to be no hope of a life after death (3.19-20, 9.5-6, 11.8), but foregleams of survival faith in the return of breath to God, it's Giver (12.7), & as an implicate of divine retribution (on both of which, see §7 [above]). Best he can come up with for life-advice is moderation (7.16-17) & catch-as-you-can life-enjoyment (2.24-25, 3.12-13, 22, 5.18-20, 8.15, 9.7-10, 11.8). People? He doesn't believe in them. They're all morally imperfect (7.20; 9.3: "their minds are full of evil and madness," but it's "wrong" that they're all mortal). He could "respect" only 1 man in 1,000, & "not one woman" (7.28: he must've had a bad run of women, or not been good woman material, probably the latter). Always coming up with the worst scenarios, he's perpetually in a thorny thicket of difficulties to belief in God; but he redesigns, instead of rejecting, the deity (which is what some theistic gender feminists do, to my great distress). But he has a keen sense of beauty: chap.12 is perhaps the most beautiful piece of ancient Hebrew literature, sheer vowel music.

10 When it comes to making a single sense of the totality of life & the universe ("all things"), things are tough all over, in all traditions-philosophies-theologies. What both reason & fellow-feelings rule out are (1) despair of making even enough sense to make life worth living (Eccl.'s temptation), & (2) arrogance in one's truth-claiming over against all other truth-claims (the temptations of all fundamentalisms of the right & left). Persons of the latter extreme would do well to ponder Eccl.'s courageous facing of life's tragic nature (whatever theodic account may be given of every human being's experiences of darkness, the crooked where we expected the straight, God as [apparent] enemy where we expected his support as friend). "A wise person thinks about death" (7.4), & doesn't overworry about not being able to see the big picture, including the future (3.9-15), which it wouldn't profit us to know, since we can't change what God has predestined (1.15, again; 3.15; 6.10; & our 7.13). With prudence & common sense, make the best of God's distribution of the moment, whether prosperity or adversity....Additional passages to illumine this an essential dimension of biblical theology: Job 9.12, 11.10, 12.14, 34.29; Is.14.27....God is the great reality, the world is the great disappointment (so, weariness of life, pessimistic outlook, romantic discontent--all of which one German wd. conveys: Weltschmerz).... To continue the passages in this mode: Is.43.13, 46.10-11; Dan.4.35; Ro.9.15, 19.

11 As Eccl. is a product of the Kulturkampf, culture-clash, between Hebraism & Hellenism, this 1998 Ecumenical Roundtable on Science, Technology & the Church (forum on HGE) faces the present religion/science (rather, philosophy of religion / philosophy of science) culture-clash. God or man is the primary actor in the world--which? (My Wall St. seatmate on the commuter train into Manhattan one day last week was shocked when I said that he was equally "watched" at his home & office computers: he'd said it would be illegal for him to do business at home, because "there I couldn't be watched," as the law requires.) Each Weltbild (world-picture, paradigm) has its own (Peter Berger's phrase) "plausibility structure," & that of science's evolutionary naturalism (with its sociopolitical spinoff of social, or vulgar, Darwinism) assumes that survival is the ultimate value & fear of nonsurvival the strongest negative motivator--both of which are rejected by biblical religion's paradigm (way of seeing, & living in, the world).

12 Now reread this Thinksheet's first line. KungFuTzu was right: the power to define is the power to control. Further, words' meanings are paradigmatically contextual: eg, in the Darwinian context, "selection" (in "natural selection") is a metaphor, there being no cosmic Selector; but in the biblical context, "selection" means

primarily something God does (creation, election, call, judgment). Eccl. operates within the latter paradigm & therefore--despite his spleen, bile, sourness--is (in the biblical view) in a position superior to that of the former paradigm (which falls into the foil of Ps.14 & 53)....If what we trust to make sense is (as Americans are taught in the public schools) godless (specifically, absent the biblical God), definitions of such words as "life," "death," "disease," "pain," "suffering," & "disability" will be godless, god-less, without God, who's thus *by assumption* peripheral or absent. And since this marginalizing or excluding of God results in God-amnesia, in Scripture the root sin, the biblical thinker must see the atheist as a sinful thinker in need of confrontation, repentance, & the faith to enter the true paradigm. (Yes, the faithful will speak of "true/false" as well as of "right/wrong," both sets embarrassing in the present "tolerant" atmosphere of relativism & pluralism.)

13 I'm not being as "judgmental" as you may think. I make generous allowances for crypto-God-honorers, & I'm wary of God-talkers who in my judgment fail to honor God with their lives & the general tenor of their thinking. To complexify matters further, often I can't accept inferences God-believers draw from their God-belief (as their use of the divine sanction reflects God-assumptions, a God-picture, I cannot accept). Eg, I cannot accept the special pleading that our particular species, as made "in the image of God," is not to be genetically tampered with though all other species of fauna & flora may be: Enlightenment thinking has made man not separate enough from God & too separate from nature. (I believe the dyads "God/man" & "man/nature" will survive inclusive language.)

14 The Fall factor: why should we not try to make straight what God-in-nature has unfortunately made crooked? As I said in the plenary, "If we make more crooked what God-in-nature has already made crooked, have we nevertheless not done right in joining the cosmic club, where things are tough all over?" (Exegetical note: This lifts the 7.13 axiom out of its context [as is proper, for it's a bead strung on his string of similar axioms], & opposes his cosmic-historical pessimistic determinism, which would make experimental science impossible.) In the plenary, a pediatrician adduced the fact that 60-80% of zygotes/concepti are aborted by God-in-nature: if most "human beings" are thus mistakes, should we not, with reverence, have the courage to make some mistakes of our own? Some unintended consequences, yes; but we will not, cannot, significantly alter human nature on planet earth....The panel well expressed many proper cautions, perhaps sufficient to achieve (for the present & at least near future) a legal ban on human genetic enhancement.

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