

REFLECTIONS ON OLD AGE FROM ECCLESIASTES

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Reflections on old age from Ecclesiastes

The Patriarchs of the Old Testament lived to a ripe old age. Abraham lived to 175 years while Noah survived to 950 years of age. In the Hebrew tradition the scriptures are divided into three collections, of differing sacred importance. The most holy works are the Books of Moses followed by the prophetic books; the third group is the Hagiographia which includes texts such as Psalms, the Songs of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. In the authorised King James version of Ecclesiastes one finds some of the most famous passages in English literature: *What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever (Ecc 1:3-4); To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; (Ecc 3:1-2).*

The final chapter is a figurative expression of the infirmities of old age. It opens with an exhortation to the young to remain faithful, before the approach of frailty and decay. This is followed by allusions to the physical and mental decline seen in the elderly and the dark clouds of impending death.

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain. (Ecc 12:1-2)

A sense of pessimism pervades the world of Ecclesiastes; old age is accompanied by loss of former powers and faculties. In addition to depression there is physical frailty: the trembling found in patients with senile tremor, Parkinson's disease; the stooped posture in those with osteoporosis or akinetic disorders; the loss of teeth and poor vision.

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and

those that look out of the windows be darkened, (Ecc 12:3)

The biological features of depression include early morning waking and loss of interest in surroundings. The excerpt continues with a reminder of the deterioration in hearing and visual impairment.

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; (Ecc 12:4)

Faced with loss of independence and deprived of one's former place in society, old people may lose self-confidence; anxiety disorders and sexual dysfunction are more common. The almond tree is commonly interpreted as the change in hair colour to grey or white.

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. (Ecc 12:5-6)

The silver cord is a poetic metaphor for the spinal cord, the broken golden bowl represents deterioration of the brain and the water image are references to incontinence and drooling. Other commentators interpret the cord image as loosening of the unseen bind that fastens body and soul together in life and the broken bowls and pitchers as the draining of the waters of life. The Preacher concludes:

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (Ecc 12:7)

Traditionally the book has been attributed to Solomon but there are passages in which the narrator speaks as a subject. It is characterised by different moods which has led commentators to speculate that it is the work of more than one author. Biblical texts commonly emphasise the distinction between right and wrong; punishment of the wicked and salvation for the virtuous.

Ecclesiastes is marked by the absence of divine intervention: *Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity. (Ecc 12:8)*

Ageing is an universal experience and two thousand years ago the special problems of the elderly had already been documented: *and there is no new thing under the sun. (Ecc 12:9)*

References

1. Wiseman DI. Medicine in the Old Testament World. In: Palmer P (editor). *Medicine and the Bible*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press; 1986:13-42.
2. De Hamel C. The Book. *A history of the Bible*. London: Phaidon Press; 2001:40-63.
3. Rowley HH. Introduction to the Old Testament. In: Rowley HH (editor). *A companion to the Bible*. London: Morrison and Gibbs; 1963:27-70. ■

ANNOUNCEMENT

It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Geriatric Society of India is organizing an

International Conference on Geriatrics and Gerontology
on
27th & 28th November 2004
at
Hotel Ashok, New Delhi.

The number of Elderly in India has crossed 90 Million mark (9% of the population) and this number is steadily rising; thanks to the rise in life expectancy. The country is gearing up to meet with health and medical needs of this mammoth number. The Pharma industry as well as other industries, which make implants and gadgets for elderly are also gearing up.

It has therefore been planned to organize a broad based conference which could cover the update in Geriatrics, the updating of Family Physicians and Nurses involved in Geriatric Care as well as to interact with Pharma and Medical Industry which makes various products for Elderly.

May I take the pleasure of inviting you in this conference to interact with clinicians in India and also to explore the Pharma and Medical Market which is gearing up to meet the needs of 90 Million Elderly. You may participate in this Scientific Deliberations as well as trade conference which is planned with above conference.

This will also be an opportunity to visit India in a pleasant weather and friendly atmosphere.

Thanking you

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