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FROM VANITY TO GRAVITY: PREACHING ECCLESIASTES
IN BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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FROM VANITY TO GRAVITY: PREACHING ECCLESIASTES
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For Ashley, Elaina, and Adelynn. Together, may we grow in the grace and knowledge of
our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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PREFACE

I love biblical theology. For years, the desire to study it at a deeper level felt like a distant dream. In his great mercy, the Lord opened the door for me to attend The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where some of the best practitioners of biblical theology currently teach. I am forever grateful for their investment in my life. I can already see a profound improvement in my preaching and devotional reading and look forward to more growth.

Finishing a project of this size is no small feat and impossible without the prayer and support of others. I would first like to thank my wife, Ashley. Without your willingness to let me be away to study and to take on extra responsibilities with our girls throughout this program, I would never have been able to finish. I love you and hope that my time spent in the program will enrich our lives and ministry together for years to come.

I would like to thank the saints at Ephesus Baptist Church. Your support and encouragement throughout this process has been invaluable. Thank you for taking a chance on me as your pastor all those years ago. Thank you for your role in molding me into the pastor that I am now. May God continue to bless our congregation.

I would like to thank the professors who taught the seminars throughout my studies. I especially would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. James Hamilton, whose passion for the Bible is contagious. His comments on my chapters helped me think more deeply and clearly. My hope is that this project will reflect the wisdom I have learned from him, while acknowledging that any shortcomings are my own. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Kaspars Ozolins. His insights greatly improved the final form of this project.

I am thankful for the faithful pastors in my cohort, especially Foster Toft, Brett McDonald, Landon Byrd, and Doug Ponder. Our conversations have served to sharpen my thinking as well as deepen my love for the Bible. I am grateful for their friendship and the shared passion for serving the church.

Finally, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I stand amazed that he would give his life for me—even me. May the glory of his name spread through the entire earth, as the waters cover the sea. I hope this project can help to spread the knowledge of his great name in some measure.

Nathan Cobb

South Hill, Virginia

May 2023

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Before I began seminary, an experienced, well-meaning pastor asked me what I most looked forward to in my studies. I responded that I hoped to focus on biblical languages as well as on how to put the whole Bible together in preaching. After listening to my rationale, he suggested that studying topics like the languages was fine, but what people really need is something practical. I respected him, but his comments suggested that he believed studying Scripture was somehow at odds with relating to people's practical needs.

This pastor's approach to ministry differs significantly from the historic pastor-theologian model.¹ Michael Lawrence, writing in defense of the pastor-theologian model, suggests "You will not be a very good theologian, which means you will not be a very good pastor, if you do not learn how to do biblical theology."² My pastor friend apparently failed to understand, or at least articulate, that good theology grounds ministry. My aim in what follows is to demonstrate how biblical theology shapes preaching. I will then apply those principles to preaching the book of Ecclesiastes.

Defining Biblical Theology

Biblical Theology is a multifaceted discipline in the academic world, with varying approaches among different schools of thought. As a result, scholarly literature on biblical theology reveals a frustrating number of understandings of what it aims to do.

¹ For a recent treatment of the pastor-theologian model, see Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

² Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.

As Klink and Lockett note, there are at least five types of biblical theology, each with its own presuppositions and theological commitments.³

Among most evangelicals, however, biblical theology primarily considers the task of understanding the progress of redemption and the unfolding of God's plan across the ages.⁴ Expanding on this idea, James Hamilton's definition focuses not only on unfolding revelation, but also on how biblical authors interpret other Scriptures.⁵

Brian Rosner offers an understanding that encapsulates the above ideas and expands on them. He says,

Biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole and, to achieve this, it must work with the mutual interaction of the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of the various corpora, and with the inter-relationships of these within the whole canon of Scripture. [Biblical theology interprets Scripture] in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus.⁶

This definition covers several different aspects of biblical theology. First, biblical theology is interpretation in and for the church. Biblical theologians read the Bible as Christian Scripture for the benefit of helping the church know and worship the one true God. Biblical theology is not mere academic inquiry, but theology for God's people.⁷ Indeed, as Rosner says, "For biblical theology, the primary goal of exegesis is

³ Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 25 "This book is not an answer to the problem of defining biblical theology; rather, it is the initiation of a dialogue that hopes to clarify the notion of biblical theology and to encourage its practice in the life of both the academy and the church."

⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2000), 45, and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 5 are two examples.

⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 16.

⁶ Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology" in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000), 3, 10.

⁷ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 46.

not objectivity but to hear Scripture as the word of God.”⁸ Good biblical theology prevents interpretation from becoming dispassionate analysis. It helps readers see why it matters for them.

Second, this definition maintains that after exegetical analysis, synthesis is possible. Rather than viewing the Scriptures as disjointed compositions that may or may not relate to one another, they are a consistent and coherent work.

Third, describing biblical theology this way means approaching the task by believing God authored Scripture, governs and cares for his world, and this God defines reality.

Fourth, biblical theology maintains that every part of Scripture ultimately points to the person and work of Jesus Christ. This presupposition is not fundamentally different from what is meant by reading the Bible as Christian Scripture, given statements like those Luke 24:27, 44 and John 5:46. If Christ says the Scriptures are about him, Christians are required to read the Scriptures and attempt to understand how this is so.

Rosner’s approach sees the Bible as “a unified and coherent whole, with a progressively unfolding plot that culminates in Jesus Christ.”⁹ Biblical theology then is the task of interpreting each part of the Bible in light of the whole, understanding how the individual passages, as well as the overall framework, centers on Jesus Christ.

The Tasks of Biblical Theology

Reading the Bible biblically-theologically is demanding.¹⁰ Doing so involves detailed analysis of the biblical texts on multiple levels. The tasks of biblical theology are like a woven tapestry.

⁸ Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” 5.

⁹ Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel Emadi, “Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 13.

¹⁰ Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” 3, says it is arguably the most demanding type of study.

First, a tapestry consists of individual, colored threads. These threads also have qualities such as texture, length, thickness, and consistency. Each thread represents an individual text. Faithful study of Scripture requires analysis at the level of language, figures of speech, historical context, literary composition, and so forth. Yet, as important as each thread is, it does not tell the whole story.

Second, the threads in a tapestry are near other threads. They relate to one another and work together to produce something in that portion of the picture. Studying the Bible must take into consideration the broader context of a given book, author, section of the canon, genre, and even in which Testament the text is found. Interpreters must also connect the themes of a given passage to other places where that theme is treated. The nearby threads of the tapestry show the importance of understanding nearby passages and themes of a given text.

Third, all the threads in a tapestry contribute to the overall picture. The absence of any thread mars the completed work. What each thread or section contributes on its own is clearly important, and is valuable by itself. However, a bigger picture emerges when it is all put together.

Biblical-theological interpretation studies a text at each of these levels. It demands careful attention to the details and the ability to relate those details to the grand narrative of Scripture. As interpreters read each text on its own terms, they get its unique contribution to the overall storyline. By remembering the overall storyline, they stay within biblically defined guardrails to ensure the text in question is being read along the lines God intended.

Purpose of Biblical Theology

Biblical theology serves as a bridge between the all fields of theological

study.¹¹ But it is much more. Good biblical theology is the foundation for living life wisely in the world God has created. For pastors, biblical theology should anchor preaching, counseling, evangelism, spiritual formation, discipleship, and leading.

Most importantly, biblical theology is necessary for knowledge of God. While Jesus was on the road to Emmaus with two of his disciples, Luke 24:27 says, “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”¹² This verse not only justifies preaching Christ from all the Scriptures: it necessitates doing so. He is the interpretive key to it all. As John 1:18 indicates, Christ has made God known. As the climax of God’s self-revelation Jesus Christ shows us all we need to know about God and the work of redemption. Biblical theology allows us to understand every Scripture in light of its fulfillment in Christ thereby helping us know God as he has revealed himself in his word.

Preaching and Biblical Theology

Biblical theology also grounds healthy preaching. As Peter Adam helpfully summarizes, preaching and biblical theology are inseparable because “God has spoken, It is written, and Preach the word.”¹³ Undergirding preaching is the conviction that God has revealed himself in Scripture across various redemptive-historical epochs that culminate in Christ. Biblical theology, therefore, should shape how preachers understand the theological significance of every passage. As Gerhard Ebeling notes “Theology without proclamation is empty, proclamation without theology is blind.”¹⁴ Theology is not its own

¹¹ D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 103. Also, Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” 3.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *English Standard Version*.

¹³ Peter Adam, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000), 104.

¹⁴ Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation: Dialogue with Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 20, quoted in Peter Adam, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” 105. Much of the following is adapted from Adam’s article.

end and preaching which is not informed by theology is destructive. Both need each other.

Biblical theology benefits preaching in a number of ways. First, it helps preachers preach texts in their immediate context. The “immediate theological horizon” of a text includes its literary, theological, and historical setting.¹⁵ Second, biblical theology enables preachers to relate a passage to its context in Old or New Testament theology. Finally, preachers must consider a text within the context of progressive revelation. This task includes setting the text in each period of salvation history as well as in the scope of the whole Bible.

The last step is necessary to see another benefit of biblical theology for preaching: application. Application is often a struggle because of the gap in time between the text and the current situation. Rather than immediately making a direct and practical reference, interpreters must consider the text in its own biblical and theological setting.¹⁶ Only then can preachers connect a text’s significance to the life of believers. The text is ancient, but also current because God has spoken “in these last days” in Christ (Heb 1:2). Preachers can only apply a text to the present situation by first seeing how Jesus Christ fulfills it.

In taking these steps to apply biblical theology to preaching, preachers will preach the Word of God on its own terms. Again, Adam says “We can use biblical theology to preach the whole Christ and the whole gospel from the whole Bible. We may then dare to say with the apostle Paul: ‘I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God’” (Acts 20:27).¹⁷

¹⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979), 88.

¹⁶ Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 89. He emphasizes this can only be done as a second step. If done well, the Christian can see the significance of a text “to us upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

¹⁷ Adam, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” 111.

In this project I aim to apply these principles to preaching several themes in the book of Ecclesiastes. Doing so will require a detailed analysis of the book as well as understanding its place in the context of the whole canon.

Ecclesiastes in Canonical Context

Ecclesiastes is in the section of the Old Testament called the Writings. A number of these books are sometimes classified as wisdom literature. In Hebrew, the core meaning of the word often translated as wisdom is “skill.”¹⁸ Exodus 36:1, for example, describes Bezalel, Oholiab, and others as those with “skill” and intelligence for working in the construction of the sanctuary. The word translated “skill” is the Hebrew word for wisdom.¹⁹ It follows then that wisdom literature is meant to guide the people of God in how to live skillfully in the world God has made.

Due to the nature of wisdom literature, these books do not advance the storyline of Scripture. They assume it.²⁰ Therefore, wisdom literature must be understood in light of the Bible’s metanarrative and according to canonical context.

Wisdom literature assumes God is the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. Wisdom assumes God created man and woman in his image as the pinnacle of his creation. He then placed them in the garden to keep and cultivate it. God gave a word that they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The man and woman had to choose between knowing good and evil by experiencing the evil of disobedience or by experiencing the goodness of trusting what God said. They chose to follow the

¹⁸ Gerald H. Wilson, “חכמה,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:130–34.

¹⁹ חכמה

²⁰ There is debate regarding how wisdom literature fits within the biblical storyline. Stephen Dempster proposes that the Writings structurally mirror the Prophets. The Former Prophets begin with story and the Latter Prophets end the section with poetry. The Writings begin with poetry and end with narrative. Poetic books like Ecclesiastes function as theological commentary on unfolding events in the storyline. See Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 191.

temptation of the serpent and disobey. They preferred the alternative to what God told them plainly. Through this disobedience sin entered the world and death through sin. Moreover, going forward sin would always hinder understanding the word of God and rightly discerning his will.

Yet, God was not content to abandon his very good creation. He sent prophets, priests, scribes, and sages to preach, teach, pray, and write his words for his people whom he called to salvation. He sent his Holy Spirit to enlighten the minds of his people. Amazingly, he sent his Son to become one of his people. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of wisdom and the one to whom all wisdom literature points (Lk 24:27, 44). As our wisdom he is the manifestation of God's plan for salvation.²¹ Working from this presupposition allows Christians to read the wisdom texts in light of God's climactic revelation in Christ. The task of biblical theology in reading wisdom literature is to understand the language, motifs, themes, and threads that tie the whole Bible together in order to read those texts on their own terms.²²

Wisdom literature assumes that if God made this world, oversees and sustains it, and calls a people out of it to serve him, he is then able to give wisdom to those people as they seek to navigate the contours of life in the world. Due to the nature of wisdom literature, the message that it preaches is timeless and universal, enlightening all who would hear its call and submit to it.

The book of Ecclesiastes is difficult, but glorious. Scholars have taken many interpretive, even contradictory, approaches to understanding the message of this enigmatic book. I aim to show in this project that Ecclesiastes assumes the storyline of Scripture. Eden is lost, but creation is still good. If read with sensitivity to the entire

²¹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 79.

²² Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology*, 12, 15–16.

canon, Ecclesiastes will prove to be a masterful work for teaching the people of God how to approach this life.

Literature on the Book of Ecclesiastes

The following is a brief survey of the literature that will most heavily inform this project. Other sources will be consulted as necessary, but below are the primary ones that will aid best in a thematic-canonical exposition of Ecclesiastes. These resources are divided into three categories. First, are commentaries. Commentaries give detailed discussions of language, structure, background, history of interpretation, and theology of the book. Each of the works listed are scholarly works. Yet, some will be more technical than others. Second, are theological works which will help with overviews of Ecclesiastes, its placement in the canon, and its function in biblical theology. Third, are monographs. Works of this type focus specifically on the book of Ecclesiastes or themes within it.

Commentaries

The best place to begin textual analysis is commentaries. One standard, influential work is by Craig Bartholomew.²³ Bartholomew writes from an evangelical perspective and is concerned to show the theological implications of Ecclesiastes for the church today. Another standard evangelical work is by Tremper Longman.²⁴ Longman is a skilled philologist whose work is also valuable for the study of typology in the book. Two other evangelical volumes of note are by Iain Provan²⁵ and Daniel Fredericks.²⁶

²³ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

²⁴ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁵ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

²⁶ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

Two more commentaries that are not by evangelicals but offer excellent insights are the works by Michael Fox²⁷ and Choon-Leong Seow.²⁸ Fox is a well-regarded authority on wisdom literature and an expert in the history of Jewish interpretation. Seow's work stands out because of its careful exegesis and summary of other scholarship.

Theological Works

I will use two types of theological works in this project. The first type is those that analyze theology book-by-book. Works of this nature analyze each book on its own and then how it ties in to the overall theological landscape of the Bible. Paul House, in his *Old Testament Theology*, essentially views God as the theological center of the Bible. Each book is about the God who is or accomplishes something. In Ecclesiastes, he is the God who defines meaningful life. House discusses each section of the book, showing how it contributes to the understanding of God, and at each point gives a canonical synthesis of the content with the rest of the Bible.²⁹

James Hamilton has written a book-by-book discussion of the whole Bible in *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*.³⁰ In it, he describes the contribution of Ecclesiastes to what he believes is the central theme of the Bible: God glorifying himself by showing mercy to his people through judging his enemies. Another helpful survey of Ecclesiastes is found in Tom Schreiner's *The King in His Beauty*.³¹ In it he sets

²⁷ Michael Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

²⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

²⁹ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998).

³⁰ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

³¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

Ecclesiastes in the broader context of Hebrew wisdom literature and makes brief connections to the New Testament.

The second type of theological work is special studies pertaining to wisdom literature. Two will be used in this project. The first is by Barry Webb in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series.³² Webb gives an interpretation of the Old Testament books simply known as “the Scrolls.” Ecclesiastes is one of those books. Webb analyzes Ecclesiastes, sets it in its wider Old Testament context, and then ties it to the New Testament. The second work is also part of the New Studies in Biblical Theology series: *Finding Favour in God’s Sight: A Theology of Wisdom Literature* by Richard Belcher.³³ His book includes discussions of key issues related to the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, its theology, purpose, and relation to the New Testament.

Monographs

Three monographs will heavily inform this project. First is *Recovering Eden* by Zack Eswine in the Gospel According to the Old Testament series.³⁴ The second source is *Living Life Backward* by David Gibson.³⁵ Finally, I will use *Remember Death* by Matthew McCullough.³⁶ All three are semi-scholarly works written from a pastoral perspective. As such, they will be helpful in applying the texts to those in the church.

³² Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000).

³³ Richard P. Belcher, *Finding Favour in God’s Sight: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

³⁴ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014).

³⁵ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

³⁶ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

Local Context

Only the gospel of Jesus Christ gives meaning to life. The message of Christ crucified and raised again is the message of salvation the church is to proclaim to all people. However, the cross is more than simply a message of eternal salvation. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are what gives meaning to every aspect of human experience. God became a man in the person of Jesus. The God who created human experience participated in it through his Son. The incarnation of Jesus validates the goodness of creation and humanity as the pinnacle of it. Because of this, humanity is able to look to Christ to take their cues for life. We also look to his work on the cross to give significance to all this life has to offer.

I will preach this series of sermons on Ecclesiastes at Ephesus Baptist Church in South Hill, Virginia. Southside Virginia is mostly rural. There are small towns separated by long stretches of fields. Most people in the area identify as Christian. If they do not attend a church, they at least have some connection to a local congregation. Like many places across the country, there is a shrinking cultural Christianity. The idea of going to church is still considered respectable. A consistent follow-through is harder to find.

Ephesus has been a fixture in the community since 1876. Over the last twenty years, attendance has slowly declined. Yet, there are many faithful people still serving. The majority of the congregation is retired. However, in the last two years, several younger families have joined, and others who had left the church have returned, leading to a more multi-generational setting. Those who worship at Ephesus on Sunday mornings cover the spectrum of the age range with the youngest being seventeen months old and the oldest being ninety-nine years.

Ephesus also provides an opportunity for a unique kind of ministry. We have a family life center and for a while, people rarely used it. We opened it to the community and on Wednesday nights have a group of unchurched young men come to play

basketball and take part in a Bible study. The age range for this group is fourteen to twenty-three on average, although a few older gentlemen participate as well. The contrast between the audiences in the sanctuary on Sunday and the family life center on Wednesday could not be starker. At least that is true on the surface. In getting to know both groups, I have discovered that they have many of the same concerns and desires in life. While their concerns and desires may be expressed differently, they are fundamentally the same.

I chose the book of Ecclesiastes because, as difficult as it can be at times, it addresses the whole range of human experience regardless of age, income level, ethnicity, religious sensibility, or almost any other factor. If Qoheleth struggles with experiences and pursuits that are common to all people, there must be a common answer to what gives meaning to those experiences and pursuits. I want to preach sermons that will speak to those in both settings. By approaching Ecclesiastes in a thematic-canonical way, it will show how the gospel is the reality that gives meaning to all of life.

Biblical Texts

Throughout this project, I will argue that Ecclesiastes is an extended meditation on the realities of living in a world where Eden is lost. Qoheleth is caught between a worldview shaped by Genesis 1–2 and his observations of a post-Genesis 3 world. Ecclesiastes is his meditation on that tension.

Qoheleth concludes that everything is vanity.³⁷ Yet, he also has positive things to say. For example, in 2:18–19, he considers his toil to be vanity. In 2:24, there is nothing better than to find enjoyment in toil, and this is from the hand of God. Some see a contradiction here, but there is a better answer. For example, work is work. It is vanity in one verse and to be enjoyed as coming from God in another. This tension means that

³⁷ I am assuming that Solomon is Qoheleth.

work is not intrinsically valuable. Something moves work from the category of vanity to the category of meaningful. In Ecclesiastes, it is the “under the sun” perspective that makes work vanity; it is the “from God” perspective that gives it weightiness. In the sermon series below, I will show that Qoheleth wants his readers to understand that everything is הֶבֶל outside of Eden because of sin. Yet, what God calls good in the early chapters of Genesis remains good. Read canonically, Christians should understand that every aspect of life moves into the category of having eternal value because of the gospel.

Sermon 1: The End from the Beginning

The first sermon will cover the prologue (1:1–11) and the epilogue (12:9–14) of Ecclesiastes together. Most authors want readers to read more than just the beginning and the end of their work—Qoheleth is no different. Yet, there are clues in the body of the book that validate approaching the text already knowing the conclusion. For example, in 2:1, Qoheleth addresses the pursuit of pleasure. Before stating how he did this or how he knows, he says that it is vanity. Readers know the end before they are taken on the journey to discovery. Qoheleth appears to believe that giving away the conclusion before discussing the details of how he reaches that conclusion is a valid pedagogical technique.

If readers follow this pattern, then the epilogue demands to be read in concert with the prologue. Approaching the text this way *may* diminish the effects of the literary foil that a straightforward reading would produce. Yet, it is knowing the end that allows for a truly Christian approach to all the topics Qoheleth covers. It is better to know the end so life can be lived well as soon as possible. Knowing the end from the beginning helps readers make sense of how all areas of life move from vanity to meaningful.

Sermon 2: The Pursuit of Pleasure

The second sermon will focus on the pursuit of pleasure, most fully expressed in 2:1–11. Qoheleth begins the description of his journey to find meaning through pleasure with the conclusion of vanity in 2:1. He knows this because all that he pursued

left him empty. He sought meaning in jokes, alcohol, art, construction, gardening, digging pools, buying servants, stockpiling flocks and herds, acquiring large amounts of money, music, sex, wisdom, living without restraints on behavior, and work (2:2–8). He describes all of this in the first eleven verses of chapter 2. Yet “under the sun,” it is all vanity.

Everything Qoheleth pursued is what people have always pursued. In fact, the average person in America today has access to luxuries Solomon could never have imagined.³⁸ Even so, such exorbitance still leaves everyone as empty as it left Solomon.

In the same chapter, readers encounter the first of what is often called the *carpe diem* passages.³⁹ Ecclesiastes 2:24 encourages readers to find enjoyment in eating, drinking, and work. Instead of seeing this as a contradiction, readers should recognize that Qoheleth is speaking from a different perspective. The pursuit of pleasure “under the sun” may not satisfy. But if people understand that God is the one who provides good gifts to be enjoyed, they will not expect those gifts to give ultimate satisfaction. The value of these pursuits is not final, but Christians are free to enjoy them “from God” in Christ.

Sermon 3: The Pursuit of Industry

In the third sermon, I will describe Qoheleth’s theology of work. The primary passages will be 2:18–23, 3:9–15, and 4:4–12. In 2:18–19, Qoheleth determines that all work done under the sun is vanity. By 2:22–23, he is left to ask what anyone has to show for their work—only sorrow, vexation, and restless nights. In 4:4 he even observes that envy of neighbors is what motivates hard work and acquiring skill to be successful.

At this point, readers are left to ponder why work produces these kinds of consequences in people. Matthew McCullough argues that “we want our lives to make a

³⁸ See the discussion in McCullough, *Remember Death*, 90–94.

³⁹ See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 23, 80–81, 150–152.

mark. We want to accomplish things that matter. We want to do something that lasts.”⁴⁰ People stress themselves out in pursuit of leaving a mark, but it does not produce the desired result “because nothing we do can change the fact that we will die, and eventually the best we can accomplish will collapse like an elaborate sandcastle in the rising tide.”⁴¹ Trying to find ultimate meaning in work will inevitably leave everyone who tries to find it there empty.

For Christians however, empty work is not the end of the matter. McCullough believes that Paul has the perspective of Ecclesiastes in mind when he writes 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 12–19, Paul concludes that if Christ is not raised, everything is vanity. In verse 20, he changes his tone because Christ has—in fact—been raised. What follows is a lengthy discussion of the resurrection and its implications for believers. In the last verse of the chapter, Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your *labor* is not in vain” (v. 58).⁴² Every tiny speck of work that a Christian does moves from vanity to meaningful because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Sermon 4: The Pursuit of Wisdom

The fourth sermon will focus on the vanity of pursuing wisdom in 1:12–18, 2:12–17, 7:1–29, and 9:11–16. Like pleasure and work, the pursuit of wisdom is common to all people. It is true that what is considered wise varies from person to person, but whatever it is, it is worth pursuing. Qoheleth concludes that pursuing wisdom is vanity like everything else. In 1:18, he even concludes that much wisdom leads to much vexation, and an increase in knowledge causes an increase in sorrow. On the heels of the prologue, the pursuit of wisdom appears pointless because of the nature of the created

⁴⁰ McCullough, *Remember Death*, 97.

⁴¹ McCullough, *Remember Death*, 97–98.

⁴² 1 Cor 15:58. I owe this insight to McCullough, *Remember Death*, 111–12 (emphasis mine).

order. Times fade from memory (1:4), everything is tired (v. 7), everything is old (vv. 9–10), and people are personally limited (vv. 12–17).⁴³

Yet there are verses like 2:13 that claim there is more gain in wisdom than in folly. Qoheleth at least implies that wisdom has some value. In 9:13, he prepares to describe an example of wisdom that seems great to him. Apparently, Qoheleth does not view wisdom as being entirely vanity. Once again, what makes wisdom meaningless is the “under the sun” perspective, as seen in 1:14. Apart “from God,” no pursuit of knowledge makes final sense. It will not satisfy. It will not prevent death. Yet Christ has been made wisdom for Christians. He is the embodiment of the wisdom from above that is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere (Jas 3:17). In him, pursuing and living by wisdom *does* have value. Again, that value only becomes evident in light of the gospel.

Sermon 5: The Pursuit of Wealth

The fifth sermon will cover the pursuit of wealth from 4:7–12, 5:10–20, and 6:1–12. All people long for financial security. Many times, this longing surpasses security and turns into a desire for riches. Qoheleth acquired riches beyond all his contemporaries and predecessors. If anyone could say from experience that riches satisfy, it was him. Yet he comes to a different conclusion. Ecclesiastes speaks extensively to the issue of wealth and its transience. For example, in 4:7–8, a person works tirelessly, depriving himself of pleasure in order to acquire riches that do not satisfy and are not enjoyed. In 5:13, riches are grasped to the point of hurting the owner. In 6:1–2, a man may have wealth, possessions, and honor; he may lack nothing he desires; yet, God does not allow him to enjoy what he has. All of these examples are הֶבֶל.

The reason why is found in 5:10–11. Money does not satisfy those who love it.

⁴³ Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 48–56.

Verse 11 says, “When goods increase, they increase who eat them.” In his experience, Qoheleth has learned that “perceived needs will always rise to meet your resources. Consumption always keeps pace with stock, so you never feel like you’ve arrived.”⁴⁴

In the hearts of fallen people, too much is never enough. Wealth may be strong enough to be a master according to Matthew 6:24. Wealth may cause sorrow at the prospect of losing it in a passage like Matthew 19:22. Yet it cannot save or satisfy. When treating wealth as having the status of “god” people will never understand or utilize it according to its purpose. Whenever wealth or even financial security comes, it is a gift from God. People should enjoy it as such. It is another good gift of God that takes its place only when viewed in light of the gospel.

Sermon 6: The Inner Longing for Justice

In the sixth sermon, I will look at Qoheleth’s inner longing for justice from 3:16–22, 5:1–7, 8:1–17, and 10:1–20. In election years, this nation hears voices from potential political leaders promising better jobs, healthcare, education, and a host of other things all in the name of justice and equality. They claim that the other side has not, will not, or cannot deliver, so all should vote for their party and all will be perfect. So the promise goes. All people want justice, even if the definition of what is just changes from person to person or group to group. At the very least, the call and desire for justice points to an inner longing all people have for vindication and righteousness.

Qoheleth has observed that the desire for justice in this life is often unmet. In 3:16, he sees that even in the place of justice there is wickedness. Ecclesiastes 8:14 speaks of how sometimes the righteous get the rewards of the wicked and vice versa. This is vanity. A particular challenge for him is found in comparing 5:1–7 with 8:10–11. Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 encourages readers to worship God and cautions them to approach

⁴⁴ McCullough, *Remember Death*, 96.

doing so with wisdom. Yet, in 8:10 the wicked go to the holy place, apparently to be seen by others to portray themselves as “good people.” They receive praise. Qoheleth sees it as vanity that the wicked get away with such things. He even understands that they will continue to succeed in their deceit because they are not instantly punished for their transgressions in verse 11.

The answer to this thorny issue is found in 8:12–13. Qoheleth discerns that it will be well for those who fear God, but not for those who do not fear him. He knows there is a judgment waiting for all people. Those who get away with the worst atrocities, or even those who play religious games and appear to be “good people” will have their day in court. One day Christ, the true Judge, will carry out justice when he sets all things right in his kingdom.

Sermon 7: Rejoice and Remember

The final sermon will cover the text prior to the epilogue. Ecclesiastes has one final *carpe diem* passage in 11:7–12:8. Many of the themes of Ecclesiastes are assumed in these verses. Vanity, struggles, judgment, vexation, and pain are all mentioned again. Yet, Qoheleth takes a positive stance in his instruction. He encourages his readers with two commands: rejoice and remember.

Young people should rejoice in their youth. They are to take advantage of all that God has given and celebrate the good things of this life while they are still able. They are also to remember their Creator. This means to remember not only who made creation, but that it was made good and not evil. It means finding their place in it and not demanding more than is their right.⁴⁵ Given the plethora of eschatological, Day of the LORD imagery in 12:2–7, this passage is about coming to grips with the inevitability of death and embracing it. Living in light of the end, that is, knowing the end from the

⁴⁵ Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 140.

beginning, is the key to living life well.

Christians are called to rejoice and remember. When remembering who God is and who they are in relation to him, they can stop placing ultimate value on all that is vanity and start enjoying good gifts from God for what they are. Rejoicing and remembering by knowing the end from the beginning is the way to estimate rightly who people are in relation to God and the key to fearing and worshiping the Creator of the world.

CHAPTER 2

THE END FROM THE BEGINNING

Kids often do not appreciate the wisdom of their parents until they reach adulthood. Once they reach adulthood, they think back on the lessons their parents taught them. For the first time, those lessons make sense. Often, the realization that their parents did grasp how life works leads to the sentiment that they wished they had recognized along the way what they finally understand now. They wish they could have realized the final outcome of following their parents' advice so they would have better perceived how to live. The biblical authors knew this tendency very well. Therefore, they consistently point readers to the final outcome of the faith for those who believe. For the biblical authors, knowing the assured ending is what makes sense out of the journey.¹

Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to interpret. As Addison Wright reminds readers, it is full of “riddles” such as the title of Qoheleth, date and place of writing, language, unity, structure, genre, message, background, and even whether it belongs in the canon.² Despite these difficulties, Ecclesiastes is firmly fixed in the canon of Scripture.³ Difficulty is no excuse for neglect and therefore it deserves careful attention.

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 158–9. Bauckham says, “In this prophetic process of confronting the present with God’s final purpose for history there is the implicit recognition that the End of history bears a unique relationship to the whole of history. It is not just the last thing to happen, coming after the penultimate historical event. It is the point at which the truth of all history comes to light.” See also Kent E. Brower, “Eschatology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 464.

² Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 313.

³ For a description of the process of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible and a defense of Ecclesiastes’ place in it, see Roger T. Beckwith, “Formation of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 39–86.

A wealth of wisdom comes from the Spirit-inspired words of Qoheleth, albeit in a form that is uncomfortable at times. Unearthing this wisdom requires biblical-theological reflection in order to understand the message Qoheleth preaches.

Good biblical theology must interpret any individual text in light of the whole testimony of Scripture.⁴ Any exercise in biblical theology will eventually get to the consummation of all things when God will forever dwell among his people (Rev 21:3). Ecclesiastes does treat eschatological concerns, though not in as much detail as many other biblical books. Ecclesiastes also does not permit readers to skip to the end too quickly. It is a slow meditation on living in a world where Eden has been lost. While readers do eventually arrive where the Bible's metanarrative takes them, Ecclesiastes forces them to slow down and recognize that even though the New Jerusalem is coming, they may continue to live outside of Eden for a while.

As Qoheleth offers his recollections, observations, and analysis of life experience, his readers are helped if they know the end from the beginning. He gives clues along the way that he believes revealing the final outcome up front is a valid pedagogical technique. For example, in 12:8 he concludes that everything is vanity.⁵ By the time readers arrive at this statement, there is no surprise. He already gave the same assessment in 1:2.⁶ In 1:12–18 he expresses his intention to pursue wisdom and his success in surpassing all others in it. Before chronicling any steps taken towards wisdom, he concludes in 1:14 that everything is vanity. In 2:1, Qoheleth outlines his pursuit of

⁴ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 58–60

⁵ I will explore the term **הַבָּל** and a specific nuance I believe the word carries below. I will use the word “vanity” in my discussion, reflecting the decision of the translation committee for the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁶ Tremper Longman does not believe Qoheleth's words begin in verse 2. If not, 1:2 would be the assessment of the “frame narrator.” Either way, affirming the unity of the book requires that a consistent theology exists throughout. Ecclesiastes 1:2 is Qoheleth's conclusion and necessary to state at the beginning. See Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 58–59.

pleasure. He states that it is vanity before recounting the journey. Also, in 11:9 he directs his counsel toward a “young man” and “youth.” Evidently, he wants his wisdom to resonate in a young heart. He desires to set his student on a true path from an early age. Knowing the end from the beginning is the best way to do that.

If readers follow this pattern, then they must read the epilogue in concert with the prologue. Approaching the book this way may diminish the effects of the literary foil that a straightforward reading would produce. However, knowing the final outcome of life enables a truly Christian approach to all of the topics Qoheleth covers. People are better served knowing the end so they can live life well now. Knowing the end from the beginning helps readers understand the book of Ecclesiastes.

Need

The book of Ecclesiastes describes a quest for wisdom. Qoheleth takes readers on his journey to understand everything that is done under heaven. The avenues he took and the places he looked for understanding and meaning are common to all people throughout history. He desires to save people the heartache and frustration he experienced by showing them from his journey the conclusion he reached. Part of Qoheleth’s intention is to instruct young people (11:9; 12:12), indicating the need to learn his lessons well from an early age. If people desire to thrive in the good world that God has made, they must understand Qoheleth’s perspective and interpret their lives in light of the conclusions he reaches.

Main Point

Qoheleth teaches that knowing the end from the beginning frees people to live their lives wisely now. The conclusions in the epilogue must inform the interpretation of the rest of Ecclesiastes. Fearing God, obeying his commandments, and remembering that there will be a judgment helps people interpret experience in light of revelation, not mere observation.

Preview

My approach to reading the prologue and epilogue together will be arranged as follows:

1. Superscription (1:1)
2. The Value of Qoheleth's Wisdom (12:9–11)
3. The End of the Matter (12:12–14)
4. The Pervasiveness of לְבַקֵּשׁ (1:2)
5. The Fundamental Problem (1:3)
6. Endless Cycles and Forgotten Innovation (1:4–11)

Context

Ecclesiastes belongs to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The traditional view is that Solomon wrote it near the end of his life. There remains some debate about where Qoheleth's words actually begin. Regardless of the position taken on that issue, 1:2–11 serve as an introduction to Qoheleth's thought. The epilogue (12:9–14) is an assessment offered by a different voice, another sage in Israel.⁷ Together, both passages instruct readers how to understand the wisdom of Qoheleth.

Exposition

The prologue introduces Qoheleth and his thought. The epilogue assesses the value of his wisdom. The conclusions in the epilogue must inform the interpretation of Qoheleth's wisdom.

Superscription (1:1)

Ecclesiastes begins by declaring that what follows are the words of Qoheleth. “Qoheleth” is a word that by itself is shrouded in mystery. It is a feminine participle,

⁷ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 244.

though often joined to masculine forms of verbs.⁸ The only clues to unlocking the identity of Qoheleth are the self-descriptions given in a few verses. Ecclesiastes 1:1 says that he is the son of David, king in Jerusalem. In 1:12, Qoheleth speaks, identifying himself as one who has been king over Israel in Jerusalem. In 2:9, Qoheleth says he has surpassed all who were before him in Jerusalem. These details are the primary reasons people have traditionally believed that Solomon is the author.

Many modern scholars deny Solomonic authorship.⁹ They believe the traditional view is inadequate. However, there are many intertextual reasons to consider that Solomon could be the author. Daniel Fredericks has strongly argued for Solomonic authorship by comparing the language of Ecclesiastes with verbal and conceptual parallels in the books of Proverbs, Song of Songs, and the Solomonic history in other parts of the Old Testament.¹⁰ Furthermore, the language, which many scholars argue precludes Solomon as author, can be understood as much older than often assumed. In fact, if the language is more of a vernacular dialect than a formal one, there is no reason to believe it could not come from Solomon's time.¹¹

One major argument that some use to deny that Ecclesiastes belongs to

⁸ See Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 1, and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 103. However, Choon-Leong Seow argues that the form is not feminine. Rather, it is a masculine name with a feminine ending. See Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 96 for a defense and several biblical examples.

⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 46 says "Very few scholars nowadays defend Solomonic authorship, and most regard Ecclesiastes as written by an unknown Jew around the late third century BC."

¹⁰ Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 31–36.

¹¹ Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 32. Fredericks is sometimes accused of allowing his evangelical commitments to influence his conclusions too strongly (Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 14). Yet, I wonder if those who are committed to non-Solomonic authorship do the same thing. Franz Delitzsch, a strongly conservative commentator in the nineteenth century, argued against Solomonic authorship, famously saying that "if the book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language." See Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 637. He is often quoted by those who deny Solomonic authorship (e.g., Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 46, 53) as an authority while they too quickly dismiss arguments to the contrary.

Solomon is the use of the third person in 1:1; 7:27; and 12:8–10. They argue that it would be strange for Solomon to refer to himself this way. They believe using the third person would make perfect sense however, if some later author was simply attempting to cast himself as Solomon in order to communicate his message.¹² The third person intrusion would serve as a reminder that the historical Solomon is not really the author. This conclusion is unnecessary.

Most likely, the historical Solomon is Qoheleth.¹³ The wisdom of Ecclesiastes belongs to Solomon, the son of David. However, the words may not have come directly from his pen. Iain Provan, who does not believe Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, nonetheless offers a helpful analogy from the New Testament that illustrates how the content can still belong to Solomon. Provan points out that in John's Gospel, Jesus is the central and dominant "I" speaker. When John refers to Jesus, he uses "he." The content of the quotes come from Jesus, yet that does not require the claim that Jesus wrote John's Gospel.¹⁴

It is not uncommon in the Bible to see someone's words written by another person. Proverbs 25:1 says "These also are the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied." Solomon's words are preserved in the text, though written down by others. Recognizing that the substance belongs to Solomon, though perhaps penned by another author, allows readers to account for the switches between first and third person, as well as maintain Solomonic "authorship."¹⁵

¹² Longman describes Ecclesiastes as "framed wisdom autobiography" by comparing the work to several ancient Akkadian texts. He believes the similarities warrant the conclusion that Ecclesiastes is rooted in the author's experience, but this author is someone other than Solomon simply portraying himself as Solomon. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 17–20.

¹³ Following the lead of David Gibson, I use Qoheleth instead of the name Solomon because doing so is in keeping with Ecclesiastes' own self-presentation. Only I transliterate Qoheleth where he prefers to translate it as "the Preacher." See David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 163n1.

¹⁴ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 26.

¹⁵ Even someone like Fredericks, who strongly maintains Solomonic authorship, recognizes a different voice in the epilogue. See Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 244. If we affirm

The voice that speaks in the third person believed that Solomon's words were too important to go unpreserved. This new voice also belonged to a sage who is obeying Deuteronomy 6:7 and 17:20. Like Solomon in Proverbs 3:1, he teaches his son the way of wisdom found in the Scriptures.¹⁶ His work as a wise man is to preserve the wisdom of the wisest man Israel had ever known.

A final word is in order about the superscription. In introducing Ecclesiastes, the words are attributed to the son of David. The significance of the phrase "Son of David" emerges when readers interpret Ecclesiastes in its broader canonical context. In the tripartite arrangement of the Old Testament (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) there is a sequence to the story of the Bible. The primary history begins in the Torah and continues through the Former Prophets (Genesis–Kings). It covers from creation to exile. The Latter Prophets through the first section of the Writings (Isaiah–Ecclesiastes) serve as poetic commentary on the primary history.¹⁷ Ecclesiastes functions canonically as a commentary on exilic conditions. Israel's exile from the land, however, was only another stage in the exile from Eden.¹⁸ A return to the place where God dwells with his people remains the greatest need.

Ecclesiastes is filled with allusions to the early chapters of Genesis.¹⁹ In its own way, it points readers to the answer to the sin that caused alienation from God in the beginning. In commenting on the role of Ecclesiastes in the canon, Stephen Dempster

Solomon as the source of Ecclesiastes, but consider the possibility of a different compiler/composer, the intrusion of this second voice at the end is expected. It also resembles other patterns in Scripture of a person writing the words of another (e.g., Jeremiah 45:1).

¹⁶ James M. Hamilton Jr., "That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord," *Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (2010): 15.

¹⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 41.

¹⁸ Iain Duguid, "Exile," in Alexander et al., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 475–78.

¹⁹ David M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–8.

says, “the way out of this riddled existence is not agnosticism, skepticism, or trying to acquire a forbidden wisdom (cf. Gen 3); it is through the fear of the Lord.”²⁰ Solomon is moving readers to the fear of the Lord because “the way out of the death of exile, where wisdom seems lost, is given through the line of David.”²¹ Following the guidance of the son of David is the way out of death and back to God. This title prepares people for a future Son of David who would lead his people out of exile and death and bring them back to God. “Son of David” is “the mantle that God’s promise would in time place upon Jesus.”²² In this way, Qoheleth and his wisdom function typologically to point forward to Christ.²³

The Value of Qoheleth’s Wisdom (12:9–11)

Having established Solomon as the source of Ecclesiastes, it is appropriate turn to the end of the book. In the epilogue a different voice speaks. Here, like in 1:2 and 7:27, Qoheleth is referred to in the third person. Now, an assessment of his words appears. Some scholars believe the narrator is distancing himself from Qoheleth’s views.²⁴ Their position rests on a foundation largely supported by two details. First, they believe that when verse 10 says Qoheleth sought to find words of delight, the narrator is implying that

²⁰ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 207.

²¹ Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 207.

²² Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 3.

²³ Francis Foulkes, “The Acts of God: A Study of the Basis of Typology in the Old Testament,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 342–71. Foulkes argues that the Old Testament authors believed that God’s acts could be and were repeated, and that when God acts in the future he will do so in a greater way. Correspondence and escalation are both needed for typology. Jesus is the Son of David who is greater than Solomon (Matt 12:42).

²⁴ E.g., Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 83; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 284.

he failed.²⁵ This view is unlikely given the affirmation of Qoheleth's wisdom and the care he takes in arranging his material in verse 9. The general view of wise words in verse 11 would also preclude the idea that Qoheleth failed.

The second detail is the warning in verse 12 to beware of anything beyond these. The word "these" has no referent, so it is assumed it must mean that Qoheleth's wisdom is what goes beyond what the narrator's son should learn. It is just as likely that "these" refers to all of 12:9–11 and would include Ecclesiastes within the corpus of the wisdom literature available.²⁶

Far from distancing himself, the narrator takes a positive view towards Qoheleth. He offers his analysis in three areas. First, he assesses Qoheleth's character in verse 9. Qoheleth is wise, a capable teacher, studious, judicious, thorough, and careful. His gathering, arranging, and dispensing of information is not haphazard. By describing him this way, the narrator lets readers know the kind of person who would write a book like Ecclesiastes. Knowing this conclusion from the beginning creates confidence that taking the journey with Qoheleth will lead to truth.

Second, the narrator gives his perspective on the book of Ecclesiastes itself. Verse 10 says that Qoheleth sought to find words of delight and truth. It is certainly possible that he means all of Solomon's wisdom. Ecclesiastes is part of Solomon's work. Therefore, in the immediate context, there is no reason he cannot mean Ecclesiastes specifically. Qoheleth intended for his wisdom to delight readers with truth. The narrator believes Qoheleth succeeded.

Third, there is an evaluation of wisdom in general in verse 11. Wisdom

²⁵ Longman considers Qoheleth a "double failure" in verse 10. He failed at finding delightful words and even in writing words of truth. To be fair, Longman only means that Qoheleth's words are not the final say in a broader Old Testament perspective. Still, Qoheleth's words can certainly be delightful and true as they stand even in a broader biblical context. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 278.

²⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 369.

functions like goads and nails firmly fixed. These two similes may be synonymous.²⁷ Likely, they connote two distinct ideas. On the one hand, wisdom works like a goad, prodding people into wise action.²⁸ Also, as nails firmly fixed, the speaker conceives of wisdom as giving strength and firmness. Roland Murphy states that perhaps wisdom provided “a foundation for life’s activities, a basis for a responsible life style.”²⁹ Those who believe the narrator is distancing himself from Qoheleth believe the images refer to the pain caused by what Qoheleth has written.³⁰ What they rightly observe is that wisdom sometimes causes pain. Even so, the momentary pain produces the positive result of ordering life according to the Scriptures. Even the pain is positive in the end.

Verse 11 ends by identifying the ultimate source of all wisdom. All wisdom comes from one Shepherd. Traditionally, interpreters understand the Shepherd as God. Fox argues that this interpretation is incorrect because even though Shepherd is a metaphor used of God, it typically refers to his role of protecting and providing for his people. He believes those roles are irrelevant in this verse and that it merely refers to a human shepherd, likely one of Israel’s sages.³¹ Longman adds that Shepherd is not a title given to God elsewhere in wisdom literature.³² Bartholomew rightly criticizes Fox for interpreting the word “one” as an indefinite article and for saying that God’s function as keeper and savior are irrelevant in the context.³³

²⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 387, describing the nails fixed: “we should think here of spikes or nails implanted at the end of sticks to be used as prods.”

²⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 366.

²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

³⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 280. Longman references Fox’s conclusions in *Qoheleth and his Contradictions* approvingly and Bartholomew critiques earlier works by Fox that take a negative view of verse 11 (366–7). However, in a more recent commentary (Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 83), Fox affirms that wisdom prods to better behavior while still maintaining that wisdom can sting.

³¹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

³² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 279.

³³ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 367–8.

The contention that Shepherd as a title for God does not appear elsewhere in wisdom literature is not as strong as Longman thinks. To categorize literature as “wisdom” is a helpful device, but it is not the way Scripture classifies itself. If readers remember that Ecclesiastes functions canonically as poetic commentary on exilic conditions, the metaphor of Shepherd for God becomes important. At the beginning of the Latter Prophets is Isaiah. In 40:11 he says “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.” This statement is significant because Isaiah 40:1–11 introduces a number of themes that are prominent in his presentation of a second exodus.³⁴ One of the things God will do for his people is lead them out of exile as a Shepherd. The beginning of Ecclesiastes hints that following the guidance of a son of David is the way out of exile and death. The ending shows that the ultimate Shepherd provides guidance through wisdom. This Shepherd is the same one who will finally complete the second exodus himself. The value of not only Qoheleth’s wisdom, but all biblical wisdom, lies in the fact that God is the one who gives it.

The End of the Matter (12:12–14)

The new sage teaches his son that biblical wisdom is more than valuable. It is final. He warns his son of anything beyond these. As noted above, the word “these” has no referent. Most likely it refers to all of 12:9–11. The entire wisdom tradition in the Bible is the final word. People will continue to write books. Trying to study them all is exhausting. If the young man listening to Qoheleth’s teaching does not guard himself, he can spend his entire life seeking wisdom and will always find something else to read. What he will not find is unerring truth outside of Scripture.

Verses 13–14 conclude the book. These truths are the end people need to know from the beginning of the journey they will take with Qoheleth. Every road leads to this

³⁴ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 122–28.

conclusion. People are to fear God and keep his commandments. Fearing and obeying are the whole duty of all people because they are the most important thing anyone can do.³⁵ Fear and obedience exhibits faith in God and trust in his purposes.

Verse 14 gives the further motivation that God will judge all things. Even secret things will come into the light under that judgment. The dual responsibility and the motivation that Qoheleth gives for obedience are important. Throughout the book, there are many places where these conclusions appear to contradict his observations. At times, Qoheleth makes startling statements. Knowing the end from the beginning allows people to read those statements in context and sets them on a trajectory toward understanding this difficult book.

The Pervasiveness of הַבְּלָה (1:2)

Having seen the conclusion reached regarding the value of Qoheleth's wisdom, readers can now return to the beginning of the book and start the journey toward discovery with him. Many scholars understand Ecclesiastes 1:2 as the motto or overall theme of Qoheleth's work.³⁶ He boldly announces that everything is vanity. Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12:8 serve as bookends.³⁷ Structuring the book this way indicates the parameters of Qoheleth's thought.

Two things are noteworthy about the way Qoheleth presents his motto. First, he uses the Hebrew superlative form (הַבְּלָה הַבְּלָיִם) by utilizing a word twice in a construct relationship.³⁸ Solomon uses the same form in Song of Songs 1:1. This usage indicates

³⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 282.

³⁶ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 104; Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 147; Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 3; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 3; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 111; Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 90.

³⁷ Both verses are identical in content, with the only difference being that 1:2 contains the phrase "vanity of vanities" one additional time.

³⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61.

the highest degree of comparison. The Song of Songs is the greatest song. Vanity of vanities means utter vanity. Qoheleth's journey leads him to conclude that he has found vanity in its supreme form.

Second, Qoheleth applies his verdict of vanity to everything. There is nothing that stands outside of this judgment. As the journey continues, he will scrutinize several specific examples. Throughout, the conclusion remains the same: No matter where he looks, Qoheleth finds vanity and striving after wind.

The pervasiveness of vanity is part of what makes *הֶבֶל* difficult to define. It is undoubtedly an important word, occurring thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. Most scholars recognize that context is vital for determining the different nuances a word may have. Still, there is a tendency to seek a primary meaning suitable to all uses in the book.³⁹ The results have been wide and varied, with no proposal convincing everyone.⁴⁰

Given the variety of proposals and the admission that context can require slightly different interpretations, perhaps the best answer is to admit that there remain multiple possible meanings in each use of the word. Nonetheless, I propose that the nuance of “frustration” is sufficient to account for the variety of uses in Ecclesiastes.⁴¹ Two reasons warrant this conclusion. First, Qoheleth is on a search for wisdom. That quest is in large part a mental exercise. As he tries to understand, and his observations often lead to unexpected results, he is frustrated. Second, given the use of the early chapters of Genesis in Ecclesiastes, “frustration” easily explains the so-called

³⁹ Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qoheleth* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 34.

⁴⁰ See Fuhr, *Analysis*, 32–63, for a survey.

⁴¹ Fuhr categorizes the proposals into “families.” One of his families is the frustration family. The interpreters he includes in that family consider *הֶבֶל* to function almost as an expletive, or at least an indication that Qoheleth is repulsed by what he observes. I distance myself from that view while holding that the word “frustrating” itself is the appropriate nuance in Ecclesiastes. See Fuhr, *Analysis*, 58–59.

contradictions throughout the book.⁴² Almost every positive statement Qoheleth makes concerns the things God calls good in Genesis 1–2. Qoheleth also calls those things הַבֵּל at times. The answer to how he could speak both ways is found in Genesis 3.⁴³ When sin enters the world, frustration is introduced into the things God created and called good.⁴⁴ The contrasting viewpoints do not contradict—they represent distinctive viewpoints. Within a certain view, namely “under the sun,” everything is frustrating.⁴⁵

The Fundamental Problem (1:3)

Many commentators view 1:3 as the fundamental problem posed by Qoheleth.⁴⁶ He cannot see what gain there is in toil. “Toil” is applied to a range of concepts.⁴⁷ As humanity pursues work, in whatever form, there is apparently no ultimate advantage. The key to understanding how Qoheleth comes to this conclusion is his use of the phrase “under the sun.” The phrase is unique to Ecclesiastes, though Qoheleth also uses the similar phrase “under heaven” which is much more common elsewhere in Scripture.⁴⁸ For Qoheleth, the phrase “under the sun” limits his perspective merely to

⁴² Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

⁴³ William H. U. Anderson, “The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Expose of Genesis 3:17–19 in Ecclesiastes,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 70 (1998), 99–113. Anderson says “Gn. 3 is attempting to answer the question why the world is in such a mess, i.e., why corruption has entered an orderly and God declared good creation.”

⁴⁴ For example, in Genesis 2:16 the man is told he can eat from every tree but one. If we understand Genesis 2 as a more in-depth description of day 6 in Genesis 1, giving permission to eat is part of what God calls “very good” in 1:31. Yet, frustration is introduced to eating in 3:19—it will come through sweat until death.

⁴⁵ The word הַבֵּל is the same as the name Abel in Genesis 4:2. His life is the first illustration of the frustration introduced into the world by sin and death.

⁴⁶ E.g., Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 147. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 107 calls it the “programmatically question” and says it informs all of Ecclesiastes.

⁴⁷ Anderson, “The Curse of Work,” 106–112.

⁴⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

what he observes.⁴⁹ By using this phrase often, he is not merely describing the scope of his work. He is also prescribing how to read it.⁵⁰ Since his perspective is limited, readers' expectations and conclusions should remain within that perspective.

Much of Ecclesiastes is based purely on Qoheleth's observation. However, there are times that a viewpoint appears which runs counter to his observation.⁵¹ In those verses, readers get a glimpse of truth that goes beyond the sun. The "beyond the sun" view is one that emerges when readers take into account the rest of Scripture. The "under the sun," observational perspective is in tension with biblical revelation. Qoheleth teaches that in the world circumstances often appear to contradict the word of God.

Since readers know the end from the beginning, they understand that the epilogue affirms the goodness of revelation. Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 show that after all evidence is gathered people are to fear God and keep his commandments. Even when their perception would have them believe that there is no advantage to fearing and obeying God, Scripture says otherwise. Implicitly, all the passages that beckon readers to look beyond the sun affirm the goodness of revelation because they affirm as good what God calls good in Genesis 1–2. God's word stands, though appearances to the contrary are frustrating. Eden is lost. Still, God's declarations about his creation stand firm. Frustration may abound, but God is not willing to abandon his very good world.

Endless Cycles and Forgotten Innovation (1:4–11)

In 1:4–11 Qoheleth begins his observations in an attempt to answer the troublesome question posed in verse 3: what gain is there in toil under the sun? Along the

⁴⁹ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 42–43 says "It is as though the author had said, 'Let us for the sake of argument momentarily rule out the higher things.'"

⁵⁰ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 65–74.

⁵¹ These passages are sometimes called *carpe diem* passages. A few examples are 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–19; and 9:7–10. See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34–35 for the designation of *carpe diem*.

way, he offers his observations of both natural and human history. In both cases he sees no real change. Some things appear to change; but ultimately, they stay the same. Because no change occurs, nothing progresses. Sadly, he also finds no satisfaction.

Qoheleth begins by contrasting transient humans with an enduring earth. It is as if he decides to evaluate the stability of nature to see if he can find some gain or advantage. His observation of nature leads him nowhere. The sun rises and goes down. This process is not real change because the sun only goes back to the place where it can repeat the process. The wind blows around the earth. No real change occurs because it just repeats its route on its predetermined circuits. He watches the water from the streams go to the sea. Even as the stream flows it never empties. It continues to flow to the same place. Also, the new destination is never satisfied. The sea continues to want more and more. Even as nature moves, it does not really change or progress. The stable earth is the same as it has always been.

In verse 8, Qoheleth affirms that nature is hard at work.⁵² It continues its course without wavering. The result is that it is incomprehensible to human senses. Nature defies speech, cannot be seen in its entirety, and escapes the grasp of hearing. There are no words to describe it. Looking and listening will not give complete understanding.

Since Qoheleth cannot find his answer in the endless cycles of nature, he turns his attention to people. Again, his observations lead him nowhere. No matter what work one does, it will provide no advantage. There is nothing truly innovative. Everything that currently exists has happened before. Even those who make the appeal that something is novel are fooling themselves. Not only is nothing new, nothing lasts. Verse 11 says there is no remembrance of things in the past. What was at one time exciting and held promise

⁵² Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 54–55 argues “hard at work” is a better way to understand the term יָגַעַם than “wearisome” in this verse.

is now lost to history. Even more surprisingly, Qoheleth says that there is nothing to anticipate. What has not yet appeared will one day be forgotten.

These opening observations lay the foundation and set the trajectory for what will come in the rest of the book. The earth, the people in it, and the things done on it are endless cycles and merely imagined, soon forgotten innovations. There is no advantage to anything from a limited, “under the sun” perspective.

Conclusion

Qoheleth teaches that knowing the end from the beginning frees people to live their lives wisely now. Fallen humanity looks for meaning in many different places. Qoheleth sought meaning in many different places, experiencing heartache and frustration at every turn. He does not want others to experience what he did. Instead, he preserves wisdom gleaned from his journey to discovery to help set others on the path to wise living. The best way to live wisely is to know the end from the beginning.

Reading the prologue and epilogue together helps readers to understand Qoheleth’s intention in this book. Ecclesiastes 1:1 identifies Solomon as the source of wisdom. The canonical position of the book serves as a commentary on exilic conditions, showing that the way out of exile and death is through a son of David. Ecclesiastes 12:9–11 speak of the value of Qoheleth’s wisdom. Ecclesiastes 12:12–14 give the final analysis that fearing and obeying God is the last word because one day everything and everyone will be judged. Knowing the end allows people to live wisely now. Wisdom says to fear and obey God, regardless of the immediate consequences observed in the world.

Returning to Ecclesiastes 1, readers learn of the pervasiveness of הֶבְרֵל and the fundamental existential struggle that there is apparently no advantage to any effort expended under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:4–11 disillusion people from attempts to find ultimate meaning in natural or human history. Qoheleth’s journey is finished. Readers are now prepared to listen as he recounts his experience. They are in a position to listen

wisely because they know from the outset where things are ultimately going.

The clear application of this text is that people cannot find ultimate value under the sun. In the most general terms, Qoheleth explains this reality in 1:4–11. Moving forward he will go into great detail regarding specific places he looked. At every turn, all he found was frustration. In order to find meaning and wisdom, people need a different perspective. They need to view reality from beyond the sun. They need revelation from the word of God. The key is to know the end from the very beginning.

CHAPTER 3

THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

“There is indeed no pathway to joy except by refusing to pursue it and to grasp at it.”¹ A refusal to believe this truth exposes a fundamental error of modern culture. Everywhere people look, they will find advertisements promising ways to make more money, acquire more possessions, achieve greater status, or secure power over others. They are promised that any, or perhaps all, of these avenues will lead to greater joy. The pursuit of such things is not new. It is quite ancient (Eccl 1:9). Even though the means of trying to acquire joy are robed in different costumes, the pursuits remain the same. People continue to search for joy and pleasure in the tired, empty ways fallen humanity always has.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, Qoheleth tests pleasure by taking the well-worn paths others have trod. Using wisdom, he searches for and offers his analysis of those routes. Along the way, he discovers the value of pleasure. He also discerns the proper context for enjoying it. God does allow his creatures to enjoy pleasure. He embeds it within creation itself. Truly enjoying it requires doing so according to God’s designs.

Need

Qoheleth’s quest for wisdom led him to evaluate pleasure. He decided to pursue it in familiar places. In order to analyze pleasure thoroughly, he immersed himself in it. As he did so, he allowed wisdom to guide him. His experiment led to the discovery that pleasure does have a place under the sun. He discovers the proper attitude towards

¹ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 79.

pleasure in a world where Eden is lost. Qoheleth wants his readers to recognize God's purpose for pleasure and utilize God's good gifts for that end.

Main Point

Qoheleth argues that pursuing pleasure for its own sake is vanity. Doing so only leads to frustration.² Even if a person should find some pleasure, it is of no ultimate advantage. Chasing pleasure is striving after the wind. However, pleasure abounds in God's good world. People can find it and enjoy it most fully if they do so within God's design for his creation. The key is to know the end from the beginning. People must fear God, keep his commandments, and remember that a final judgment is coming (Eccl 12:9–14). Within this framework, pleasure ceases to be the ultimate aim. Worshiping and obeying God emerge as the greatest goals. Through worshipful obedience, people will discover true pleasure as a gift from God.

Preview

My exposition will largely follow Qoheleth's pursuit in Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, while bringing in other statements about pleasure and joy at appropriate times. My outline is as follows:

1. Announcement and Verdict (2:1)
2. Testing Pleasure through Wine and Folly (2:2–3)
3. Testing Pleasure through Accomplishments (2:4–9)
4. Assessment (2:10–11)

Context

Ecclesiastes opens with a discussion of the pervasiveness of הֶבֶל (1:2). Qoheleth then poses a question that exposes the fundamental problem of life “under the

² Recall that I argued for this nuance to הֶבֶל in chapter 2.

sun” (1:3), namely, that there is no advantage to toil. Then, he discusses how all of human history since the Fall is a matter of endless cycles and forgotten innovation (1:4–11). This introduction alerts readers to how Qoheleth will approach every theme he treats. Ecclesiastes 1:12–18 discusses how the pursuit of wisdom frustrates, gives no advantage, and leads to sorrow. In 2:1–11, Qoheleth turns his attention to the pursuit of pleasure, demonstrating that it too ends with the same frustration.³ By following his journey, remembering the end from the beginning, readers can place pleasure in proper perspective.

Exposition

Qoheleth announces his intention to go after pleasure and his verdict concerning it. Afterwards he describes how he tested pleasure and gives his overall assessment.

Announcement and Verdict (2:1)

Qoheleth begins this section by speaking to himself. When he says, “I said in my heart,” he means that he made a decision. He decided to test his heart with pleasure. Immediately, readers face an interpretive obstacle: What is the nature of Qoheleth’s experiment? In the verses that follow, he describes the places he looked for pleasure and the means by which he tried to obtain it. The manner in which he looked is less clear. The debate regarding the nature of his experiment usually centers around the nature of his use of wine in verse 3. However, his experiment is broader than simply the use of alcohol. Readers must consider the totality of verses 2–8 when deciding how to interpret the experiment.

³ Some commentators (e.g., Fredericks) prefer to include 2:1–3 with the previous section on the pursuit of wisdom. Admittedly, the arguments for doing so are strong. However, it also creates an unnecessary break between verses 3 and 4. In my view, it is better to treat 2:1–11 as a unit, especially since Qoheleth emphasizes the presence of wisdom within him in verse 3 and again in verse 9. See Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 85.

Some interpreters regard Qoheleth's experiment as largely empirical.⁴ To be fair, they do not assert that he is not using wisdom to analyze what he is doing. Rather, he is giving himself over to the various pursuits in order to experience them fully. In the case of alcohol use, he may have gotten drunk and simply utilized wisdom after the fact to determine the emptiness of getting drunk.⁵ Or, perhaps he did not get drunk, but was more like a connoisseur of fine wine.⁶ Either way, Qoheleth drinks and along the way makes his discovery.

Others understand Qoheleth's experiment to be introspective. Instead of indulging in the various pursuits, he creates a controlled environment in which he can evaluate his mental state in reaction to the stimuli of pleasure.⁷ This approach has the advantage of keeping the experiment purely a pursuit of the mind. It also eliminates the possibility of Qoheleth sinning in the process of his quest. This view struggles to answer how Qoheleth could speak authoritatively about any of the things he discusses if he did not experience them.

A final option is to affirm that Qoheleth's experiment was both empirical and introspective.⁸ This view allows readers to understand that Qoheleth's tests were real,

⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 130; Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 150; Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 667; Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 12; Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 295; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 58; Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 88; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 71–72; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 125–126.

⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 131; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.

⁶ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 59–60.

⁷ Knut Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 50–51.

⁸ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 85; Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qohelet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 143; Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 18.

while tempered by wisdom. As Roland Murphy notes, “His experiment is neither artificial, as though he did not put his heart into it, nor mindless, as though he simply gave himself to dissipation and a dissolute life. He seriously wishes to discover if joy is the answer to human desires.”⁹

In my estimation, the final view best accounts for the data in the text. The empirical nature of Qoheleth’s experiment is difficult to deny. Still, wisdom guides him. At no point in his program did he extinguish wisdom. Wisdom guided him through (2:3) and was still present at the conclusion (2:9). The final option also works best at reconciling the theology of this section with the rest of the Bible’s teaching, specifically with reference to the use of alcohol. Proverbs strongly condemns abusing wine and taking hold of folly.¹⁰ Qoheleth appears to be searching for wisdom in the opposite way Proverbs calls readers to it.¹¹ If, however, Qoheleth is studying pleasure empirically while using wisdom to moderate his actions and evaluate the results, his approach is very much in line with Proverbs. He indulges up to the point that wisdom is still operational. This approach allows him to have a real experience as well as enough mental clarity to evaluate the worth of what he did.

Qoheleth decided to test his heart with שמחה. The root of this word and its derivatives appear 275 times in the Old Testament (OT), with approximately a quarter of the instances occurring in the Psalms.¹² The biblical authors use this word in a variety of contexts such as calls to rejoice (e.g., Ps 32:11), prophetic promises of eschatological restoration (e.g., Isa 53:1), and even of God himself rejoicing (e.g., Zeph 3:17).¹³ This

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 18.

¹⁰ See for example Proverbs 23:20–21, 29–35; 31:4–7.

¹¹ See the discussion in Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 131.

¹² Michael Grisanti, “שמחה” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1251.

¹³ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 143.

word is also used in “secular” or nontheological contexts.¹⁴ Throughout the Bible, joy or rejoicing is the principle meaning.

Michael Fox contends quite strongly that Qoheleth does not mean joy by his use of the term.¹⁵ Fox admits that שמחה has a variety of uses throughout the OT, but Qoheleth only uses it in the sense of pleasure. Fox notes that translations usually render this key word as pleasure, happiness, or joy. He sees a distinction in each term. Pleasure is something one experiences. It could also be an object of desire intended to lead to experiences of pleasure. Indulging in such may not even bring a feeling of momentary pleasure, let alone true happiness. Fox defines happiness as a state of consciousness, of which pleasure is only one factor. Someone could do something pleasurable and still be unhappy. Or they could be happy even when not experiencing pleasure. He understands joy as an intense form of happiness directed at a particular object.

Fox argues that Qoheleth cannot mean happiness or joy because the items he lists in 2:3–8 are pleasurable, but do not bring happiness. He thinks Qoheleth himself is largely unhappy. He also does not believe Qoheleth could possibly call real happiness הַבֵּל. Finally, there is no need for Qoheleth to advise happiness. Everyone wants happiness and they cannot impose it upon themselves. These considerations require interpreting Qoheleth to be commending the pursuit of pleasures, if not outright hedonism.

While Fox raises good points about Qoheleth’s use of the term, his conclusions do not necessarily follow. Fox’s argument suffers from the assumption that Qoheleth believes שמחה is hollow and ineffectual.¹⁶ As I will argue below, Qoheleth does limit the value of pleasure. However, when understood in the context of the whole book of

¹⁴ Grisanti, “שמח,” 1251–1252.

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 62–64, 70.

¹⁶ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 70.

Ecclesiastes—and the whole Bible—Qoheleth does not believe pleasure is hollow. Even within its limitations, pleasure is still a good gift from God. Thus, there is nothing inconsistent with understanding Qoheleth’s use of שמחה in the sense of “joy” along with other uses of the term in the Bible.

As Richard Fuhr notes, the vast majority of instances of שמחה occur in contexts of worship and piety.¹⁷ Sometimes, it can mean pleasure.¹⁸ Yet, “pleasure” is too semantically narrow to limit Qoheleth’s quest to mere hedonism.¹⁹ He is pursuing real joy. Joy is prominent enough in Ecclesiastes to earn Qoheleth the title “Preacher of Joy.”²⁰ Qoheleth is on a quest that certainly involves pleasurable things. Even so, he is still seeking true joy in them. In 2:10, he finds pleasure. Even though it is limited, it is still good. Pleasure has a place even in a world where Eden is lost. Pleasure may not be ultimate, but it can serve to point people to God. By directing attention to God, it can lead to the kind of joy expressed by the term שמחה elsewhere in Scripture.

In characteristic fashion, Qoheleth anticipates his verdict at the beginning: The pursuit of pleasure is הֶבֶל.²¹ In the verses that follow, he outlines his experiment in detail. His approach and accomplishments are held before readers to show the myriad of ways he sought pleasure. In the end, they proved to be vanity. I will return below to a discussion of the sense in which his pursuit was vanity.

Testing Pleasure through Wine and Folly (2:2–3)

Qoheleth begins the description of his program with an assessment of laughter.

¹⁷ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 143.

¹⁸ Fuhr gives the example of a man rejoicing in the wife of his youth in Proverbs 5:18.

¹⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 130 agrees, at least in that Qoheleth does not mean the negative connotations typically associated with hedonism.

²⁰ R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87–98.

²¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 17.

He renders his verdict quickly—laughter is mad. Nowhere else in this chapter does Qoheleth mention laughter. For his view, readers must consider his theology of laughter from the rest of the book. He treats the subject most extensively in 7:2–6. He addresses it a bit less, though not less severely, in 10:16–19. In chapter 7, he says it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting (7:2), that sorrow is better than laughter (7:3), that the heart of fools is in the house of mirth (7:4), and that the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot (7:6). He gives the same verdict in chapter 10. Inappropriate feasting, and laughing, by the nobility endangers the people in the land.

Why is Qoheleth so negative towards laughter? One answer is that he holds the worldview of the book of Proverbs. There is a kind of laughter that is shallow.²² Some laughter is foolish.²³ This kind of laughter is used as a tool in service to folly. As Zack Eswine says, “We make jokes about things that ought to shame us. We puke drunk and giggle about it.”²⁴ Such laughter is mad. It cannot produce anything good. When pursued constantly, it can destroy.

Even if laughter is not entirely foolish in every situation, it still falls short of bringing real pleasure. Qoheleth wants to find what gain (יִתְרוֹן) or advantage exists for people under the sun. Later, he confirms the value of pleasure, but not gain. Laughter is not ultimately gain because, “Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief” (Prov 14:13). Even in times of experiencing the God-given gift of genuine laughter, hearts may be in deep mourning. If the laughter is foolish, it is destructive. If it is genuine, there is no gain. It cannot give an advantage under the sun.

Qoheleth expresses his attitude towards pleasure differently. Rather than state a conclusion, he asks a question: What use is it? Effectively, his question is the equivalent

²² See Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 84–85 for distinctions.

²³ Compare Proverbs 7:7-27 with 10:23.

²⁴ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 67.

of 1:3, when he asks what a man gains by his toil. That question remains unanswered. First-time readers of Qoheleth's wisdom are still waiting for an answer about pleasure.²⁵ At least they are waiting in one sense. In 2:1, pleasure is called הֶבֶל. It is clearly frustrating. Perhaps it is not pointless. That he leaves it as a question initially requires a bit of patience before finding out his conclusion.

As he moves to verse 3, Qoheleth begins to get specific. He searched for pleasure through the means of wine and folly. As noted above, he decided to immerse himself to find out what they have to offer, indulging only while wisdom still controls him. Translating the beginning of verse 3 smoothly is difficult. The ESV renders it, "I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine." The word "cheer" is the word מִשַׁח, which basically means to pull or drag.²⁶ It may appear to some that he is forcing himself along in his experiment.²⁷ However, the verbs cheer (מִשַׁח), guide (נָהַג), and lay hold (זָרַח) are likely functioning as synonyms in this passage.²⁸ Qoheleth is simply claiming that he considered how to pursue his test with alcohol. At the end of verse 3, his stated purpose is to see what is good for people to embrace for the few days of their lives. He will use alcohol as a means rather than as a stimulus to pleasure.²⁹

Qoheleth also sought to lay hold on folly. Commentators are divided over whether laying hold on folly is related to drinking wine. For those who think Qoheleth got drunk, they do go hand in hand.³⁰ For those who want to protect him from such an

²⁵ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

²⁶ Francis Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 604. See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.

²⁷ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 85 says, "Wine tows the groggy body along, while wisdom leads the lightened heart to wisdom."

²⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 150.

²⁹ Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 71.

³⁰ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 85, "Qoheleth is grasping folly through wine until he finds the advantages he is looking for through wisdom."

accusation, the two pursuits are separate.³¹ Either way, Qoheleth's quest seems to go contrary to the approach of Proverbs. There, people should avoid folly at all costs.³² That he intends to indulge in folly may surprise some. Nonetheless, he is willing to try things that are foolish. His folly may have been merely harmless and enjoyable forms of nonsense.³³ It may have been more depraved than that. He simply does not say. What he does say is that his heart guided him by wisdom. At no point did Qoheleth abandon his rational abilities.³⁴ He knew what he was doing. He was analyzing the entire time.

Qoheleth did more than dabble in his quest. He pushed the experiment to a decisive point. He says he searched how to lay hold on folly, until he could see what was good. By claiming that he wanted to see what was good (טוב), Qoheleth evokes memories of the garden of Eden. As I argued in chapter 2, the entire book of Ecclesiastes is a slow meditation on living in a world where Eden is lost. In Eden, everything was good. Sin introduces frustration (הִבֵּל) into God's good world, but it does not eliminate the goodness of it. Qoheleth understands that people can still find some good. He directs his readers to look for good gifts in what some call the *carpe diem* passages.³⁵ In those texts, he tells readers to do what he calls הִבֵּל in other places. His approach is not contradictory.³⁶ Rather, he acknowledges goodness in the created order even if sin does frustrate those gifts.

Despite Adam's transgression, goodness remains in God's world. Qoheleth set out to find it. He wanted to find what was good to do during the few days of life. "Few

³¹ E.g., Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 60, "The expression 'to lay hold on folly' ...can hardly be the continuation of the experiment with wine." See also Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 150.

³² See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 131.

³³ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

³⁴ Contra Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 89.

³⁵ See the brief discussion of these passages in chapter 2.

³⁶ Contra Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*.

days” underscores the brevity of a human life under the sun. Viewed from that perspective, life is fleeting and appears to offer no advantage. Qoheleth knows the transience of life under the sun through his experience. He tested pleasure through wine and folly and found them lacking. Next, he turns his attention to pleasure through the results of work.

Testing Pleasure through Accomplishments (2:4–9)

Qoheleth now turns his attention to what he has accomplished and acquired as king. It is important to recognize that these verses operate on two levels. The first level is Qoheleth’s accomplishments as king in Israel. The second level is Qoheleth’s accomplishments in relation to the commands God gave in the garden of Eden.

Qoheleth’s accomplishments as king. Scholars frequently note the similarities between Qoheleth’s claims and the biblical record of Solomon. They delineate the similarities whether they believe Qoheleth is Solomon or not. The simplest explanation is that they are one and the same. The first person singular verbs in this section indicates firsthand experience. Qoheleth’s description directly connects to Solomon’s building program in 1 Kings 4–10 and 2 Chronicles 1–9.³⁷

Most of the verbs in verses 4–8 that describe production and acquisition are joined with the preposition לְ, which can be translated “for myself.” To some commentators, the preposition suggests a type of consumerism.³⁸ Qoheleth tries to fill his emptiness with material goods. A surface reading may indicate consumerism. However, a better proposal is that the preposition stresses the level of personal involvement Qoheleth

³⁷ William H. U. Anderson, “The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Expose of Genesis 3:17-19 in Ecclesiastes,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 70 (1998), 110.

³⁸ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 13.

had in his experiment.³⁹ His work and acquisitions were not the fruit of only the labor of others. He involved himself personally.

The achievements listed in this section are the kinds of accomplishments that typically brought honor to kings in the ancient world.⁴⁰ No doubt, they brought honor to Solomon as well. This does not mean that readers should think Solomon is only making an effort to receive glory or ease his life with stuff. Upon close inspection, the accomplishments listed in this passage are understated. What Solomon accomplished in his lifetime was much greater than the generic descriptions Qoheleth gives.⁴¹

Qoheleth begins listing his “great works” with the houses he built for himself. While typically בית refers to a home or even a family, it can be used more broadly of other types of buildings. Solomon built entire cities with residential, commercial, and military properties (1Kgs 9:19; 2 Chronicles 8:1–6). While he did not build it for himself, he also built the temple in Jerusalem.⁴² Solomon oversaw agricultural projects. Qoheleth tells of gardens, parks, fruit trees, and pools. Daniel Fredericks argues that these accomplishments were not primarily recreational. Solomon designed and managed wine, fruit, and timber industries (1 Chr 27:26–28).⁴³ The forests were timber plots that required constant irrigation.⁴⁴ His accomplishments were more than a personal escape from the world that only royalty could afford.

Qoheleth also bought many servants. Those servants multiplied and their children became his servants too. According to 1 Kings 9:20–22, Solomon acquired

³⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 18.

⁴⁰ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 150.

⁴¹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 92. The next three paragraphs follow his discussion.

⁴² The word translated “house” is sometimes applied to the temple (e.g., Zech 1:16).

⁴³ See Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

⁴⁴ Fredericks references Nehemiah 2:8 which speaks of the king’s forest. Solomon may have started it.

slaves as captives in battle. He owned great herds and large flocks. He gathered gold and silver, from both tribute and commercial trade. Qoheleth claims he had the treasure of kings and provinces. The treasure of kings may imply what only kings could afford. It could also refer to unique gifts that kings might exchange with one another. The treasure from provinces could be items like the ones listed in 1 Kings 10:22–25: ivory, apes, peacocks, garments, spices, more horses, and mules. As architect of a large trade enterprise, Qoheleth amassed an impressive personal collection.

Qoheleth collected male and female singers. Presumably, he could hear any song he wanted at any time. He may have even had the opportunity to immerse himself in the musical heritage of many different cultures. Owning these singers would provide opportunity for personal entertainment as well as the ability to stage shows for others to enjoy.

The final possession Qoheleth lists is difficult to define. He uses a *hapax legomenon*, which the ESV translates as “concubines.” The difficulty lies in the various ways interpreters have tried to understand the word both in terms of its meaning and its syntax. The syntax is the noun + conjunction + the plural of the noun. While no precise parallel exists in the Bible, similar forms do appear. Most often the construction denotes plurality, either in terms of volume or variety.⁴⁵ Qoheleth boasts of a multiplicity of whatever he is claiming to have.

Regarding meaning, several proposals appear throughout history. Most of them are without textual warrant, relying on emendations to the text or what appears to be a paraphrase.⁴⁶ The most likely solution is that the word Qoheleth uses (הַרְצִי) is related to the word for breast (רֶצֶץ).⁴⁷ Given the construction, a literal rendering would be that

⁴⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 131–132.

⁴⁶ See the discussion in Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 131.

⁴⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

Qoheleth gathered “breast and breasts.” A smoother reading would be “breasts and breasts.” He could mean a large quantity and a variety. By this description, he is using breasts as a synecdoche for a woman’s body. Thus, many women’s bodies would mean his harem (1 Kgs 11:3). His usage would be similar to the phrase “a womb or two for every man” in Judges 5:30. The specific part of the female is used to emphasize why she is mentioned. Qoheleth acknowledges his unrestricted access to a variety of sexual pleasures. Further validation of this point is that he calls the concubines, or breasts, the delight of the children of man.⁴⁸ He affirms male fondness of women’s breasts and that he had access to more than most could ever imagine. While his way of speaking about women offends modern sensibilities, it is an effective way to get across his point.

Qoheleth accomplished and acquired great things as king. His buildings, business enterprises, and stockpiles of goods and people to provide services are as impressive as any the world has ever known. In comparison with most people, what Qoheleth accomplished under the sun was remarkable. However, his accomplishments and acquisitions as king represent only one level on which these verses operate. Another meaning is at work.

Is Qoheleth trying to recover Eden? A number of scholars have noted comparisons between the words that appear in Ecclesiastes 2:4–6 as well as Genesis 1–2. Arian Verheij recognizes at least eight Hebrew terms that appear in both places.⁴⁹ He remarks that, “Taken separately, these words are not remarkable. . . . It is their combined occurrence here and in Genesis that establishes a firm link between the texts.”⁵⁰ The interconnectedness of the two passages is undeniable. Readers must decide the

⁴⁸ Breasts and delight appear together in Song of Solomon 7:6–7.

⁴⁹ Arian Verheij, “Paradise Retried: On Qohelet 2:4–6,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), 114.

⁵⁰ Verheij, “Paradise Retried,” 114.

significance of the connection.

For Verheij (who believes Qoheleth is only posing as Solomon), Qoheleth is posing, even if only for a moment, as God.⁵¹ He places himself in the garden of Eden as the subject instead of God. His program fails however. When God finished creating, he saw that his work was very good. Qoheleth saw the opposite. His work was הֵבֵל. He failed to re-create Eden.

Verheij overstates his case. That Qoheleth connects himself to the Edenic narrative is obvious. That he is posing as God is not. Equally plausible, and more likely, is that he is taking seriously God's commission to manage the earth in Genesis 1:26–28.⁵² Iain Provan even understands verses 7–8 as an attempt to populate paradise.⁵³

But on what grounds does Qoheleth view such an attempt as commendable? The answer lies in the mandate of Genesis 1:26–28. Adam was a priest-king in the garden.⁵⁴ Both he and Eve were God's viceroys on earth.⁵⁵ Even when they sinned, the command to subdue the earth remained. Qoheleth is king. Not only is he king, but he is also David's son (1:1). Qoheleth's accomplishments are his attempt to subdue the earth. He knows David will never lack a descendant on the throne (2 Sam 7:13, 16). Even if it is not him, he is playing a role that will find its fulfillment in a future Son of David.

Qoheleth only failed if readers assume he is trying to re-create Eden. Such a

⁵¹ Verheij, "Paradise Retried," 113.

⁵² Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

⁵³ The word translated "parks" eventually gave rise to the word "paradise." See Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 72.

⁵⁴ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 33–34, 36. See also G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 81.

⁵⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 76–80; Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 59–62.

task is impossible. Adam fell into sin. God sent judgment into the world. Adam failed to obey God's commandment, so God cursed the world to futility.⁵⁶ The proper response to that reality is not to quit. What God calls good in the garden is still good. Qoheleth's efforts are not vain attempts at recovery. Rather, he is moving forward with the command that God gave to the first couple in his sin-free world. The intention for humanity to have dominion remains. Qoheleth is doing his part. I will deal with his own assessment of what he accomplished below. For now, I only note that he says in verse 9 that he became great and surpassed all who were before him. According to Qoheleth, nobody had kept the mandate at the same level. The whole time, wisdom remained. Back in verse 3 he began his experiment guided by wisdom. In verse 9, he concludes with it having never left him. Its presence throughout positions him for proper analysis now that he is on the other side.

Assessment (2:10–11)

Qoheleth affirms that he did not hold back. Whatever his eyes desired, he did not keep from them. His heart missed out on no pleasure. By now, readers anticipate a particular verdict. Qoheleth has already called his quest *הַבְּלָה* in verse 1. Surely the conclusion of his search will be the same. It is not. Qoheleth is successful in his experiment.⁵⁷ However, he does discover that pleasure itself is the reward. He says he found pleasure in his toil, and it was the reward for his toil.

In verse 11, he considers his toil again. This time, it is vanity, striving after wind, and it gained nothing. What is different? In 1:3, Qoheleth asks what gain there is in toil. The word translated “gain” is *יִתְרוֹן*. Apparently, Qoheleth wants readers to

⁵⁶ Matthew Seufert, “The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (2016), 75–92. See especially 91–92.

⁵⁷ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 150. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 18.

understand a difference between reward and gain.⁵⁸ Pleasure itself is a reward. But it provides no advantage under the sun. People should enjoy pleasure when it comes, but should not expect it to bring advantage.

The challenge many interpreters face at this point is answering how pleasure can be reward and not gain. The reason is simple when considering Qoheleth's perspective: He is meditating on a world where Eden is lost. Under the sun, death renders everything הֶבֶל. No matter what a person does, he sees no advantage. He will die. Still, even though Eden is lost, God's creation remains good. What God calls good in the garden is still good. Sin introduces frustration. Death removes advantages. However, God's creation is good, and he means for his creatures to take pleasure in it.

The pleasures Qoheleth pursues in Ecclesiastes 2 are not lasting. Nor are they ultimate. God gives pleasure through them, but only in passing. The fleeting nature of pleasure graciously points people to the need for eternal things. It also disillusioned readers from pursuing such things as ultimate ends.

Qoheleth's experiment was not hedonism.⁵⁹ It was not workaholic.⁶⁰ Instead, Qoheleth conducted his experiment through the means of pleasure and work. In the end, he found that they fall short of giving an ultimate advantage. People will only find pleasure when they adopt a perspective that requires them to look beyond the sun.

Thankfully, Qoheleth teaches his audience how to see beyond the sun. His theology of joy and pleasure appear throughout the book. Seven times, he calls readers to a wholehearted pursuit of enjoyment.⁶¹ The arrangement of the passages steadily

⁵⁸ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xix, xxi.

⁵⁹ Contra Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 135.

⁶⁰ Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 270.

⁶¹ Whybray, "Preacher of Joy," 87. I owe a great deal of this paragraph and the next to his insights.

increases the emphasis on joy. Ecclesiastes 2:24 plainly states that there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. In 3:12 and 22 Qoheleth respectively perceives and sees that there is nothing better than to be joyful. In 5:18, Qoheleth tells his readers to take note of what he says with the word “behold.” He says it is good to find enjoyment. By 8:15, Qoheleth commends joy. In 9:7–9, he commands joy. Finally, in 11:9–12:1, he gives advice, in the imperative mood, to a young man—rejoice in your youth, remove vexation from your heart, remember your Creator.

Pleasure may not provide any advantage over death. However, it is a gift of God. Ecclesiastes 2:24–25 says, “This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” It is possible to have joy because it comes from the hand of God. As Whybray comments, “What good things God has given us are intended for our enjoyment, and in the giving of them he has shown his approval of our actions. To enjoy them is actually to do his will.”⁶² Qoheleth’s viewpoint counters the “under the sun” perspective presented elsewhere. True joy exists in creation. It comes to believers from the hand of the Creator.

Conclusion

Qoheleth teaches that pursuing pleasure for its own sake is vanity. Pleasure provides no advantage in life. Death still comes. However, God does intend his creatures to enjoy his good world. People can enjoy the world God made if they do so within the confines that he gives. They must know the end from the beginning, fear God, keep his commandments, and remember that judgment is coming. Within this framework, pleasure ceases to be ultimate. People can now pursue it as the gift of God that it is.

After taking Qoheleth’s journey with him, three specific applications arise. First, people cannot expect to find wisdom without intentionally investigating the world

⁶² Whybray, “Preacher of Joy,” 92.

through a biblical worldview.⁶³ Pleasure is not an end for Qoheleth. It is a test to know what is good for people to do during their short time on earth (2:3). Amassing wealth and possessions while believing they provide abundant life is foolish. Jesus exposes such foolishness in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13–21. The fool acquires such great wealth that he needs new barns to house it all. His plan is to relax, eat, drink, and be merry. But that night his soul is required of him and his things go to others.⁶⁴ Believing that material goods provide satisfaction and security is foolish. God orders his world so that people can experience all its goodness as long as they understand it within his design. Viewed through that lens, creation is highly enjoyable.

Second, Qoheleth teaches his readers the futility of grasping for more. Qoheleth had access to anything anyone could want. Israel was more prosperous during the time of Solomon than any other time in their history. Qoheleth lists achievements and possessions that could make even the most accomplished person jealous. He was in a class by himself. Someone may object that not all people have the same resources and opportunities at their disposal. Perhaps others would come to different conclusions if they tried Qoheleth's experiment.

While not with the same scope, most people in the American middle-class today are able to conduct a similar experiment—and in some ways go beyond Qoheleth.⁶⁵ Americans can get exotic food and wine, have large houses, and visit parks nearby. They can pay people for services like the ones Qoheleth had servants to do. Even though there are no harems, internet pornography and websites that connect people who have specific sexual desires provide the opportunity for a wider range of experiences than Qoheleth

⁶³ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 86–87.

⁶⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 149 notes the connection between Ecclesiastes 2 and Luke 12. He wonders if the teachings of Qoheleth lie in the background of the parable.

⁶⁵ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 93–94.

could imagine. Matthew McCullough notes that people today can do even more than Qoheleth. There is international travel, advanced medical care, air conditioning, music streaming services, television, smartphones, and more time for leisure than there has been for most people who have ever lived.⁶⁶ But it is not enough.

People always want one more thing. “For in seasons of need, want, and lowly condition, men will look upon the various forms of pleasure that the children of men know and will consider their own position as particularly unfortunate just because such pleasures are denied them.”⁶⁷ The richest people in the history of the world are often the most unsatisfied.

It is astounding how far from Eden humanity has come. Zack Eswine says, “Once it was enough for a man and a woman to have God and the good gifts that God gave, even if it meant that there was a tree and a fruit that existed but not for them. Now, even though we are surrounded by opportunities to laugh, or drink, or work, or make money, none of it is enough, we are not satisfied, and death stomps on all of it.”⁶⁸ Grasping for more does not satisfy the deepest longings of the soul. Only God can do that.

Third, while Qoheleth’s program is not pure hedonism, it certainly provided great opportunity for hedonistic pursuits. Those today who try his experiment could easily be motivated by hedonism. Pleasure is a good gift that God embeds within creation. Hedonism errs because it seeks pleasure in created things and not in the Creator.⁶⁹ People must guard their hearts from this particular form of idolatry.

Eden is lost. However, God leaves a witness to himself in the goodness of

⁶⁶ McCullough, *Remember Death*, 94.

⁶⁷ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

⁶⁸ Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 77.

⁶⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 136.

creation. Pleasure is not God. It is a gift from him for his people to enjoy. True enjoyment comes only when people are freed from the belief that pleasure is ultimate. It comes only when they refuse to grasp for it. True pleasure within God's design comes when people fear God, keep his commandments, remember that judgment is coming, and use the good gifts that God gives for his glory.

CHAPTER 4

THE PURSUIT OF INDUSTRY

The workaholic, the drudge, and the sluggard have one thing in common—they do not understand the biblical view of work. The workaholic equates his identity with what he does for a living. The drudge views work in merely pragmatic terms. He must work if he wants to eat. The sluggard does not see the point of work and looks for a way out of having to do it, perhaps by finding a safety net to support his desire for a life of ease. Each of these people err at different points on a spectrum. Their miscalculations range from overworking to not working; from work as ultimate to work as ultimately worthless. All of them need correction.

In Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth offers his reflections on work. Like in other areas, he analyzes the results of his empirical quest under the sun and reflects on work in a world where Eden is lost. Readers are invited to feel his frustrations. They are summoned to ache with the pain associated with work. They are also encouraged to see, meditate on, and savor the goodness inherent in the work that God gives to humanity. Qoheleth urges all who would hear his teaching to view work according to God's design and in light of Ecclesiastes 12:13–14. His students should fear God and keep God's commandments because God will bring all their deeds—including work—into judgment.

Need

Work is good, but not ultimate. Work is frustrating, but not totally dreadful. Workers can err in their labor under the sun both by overworking and refusing to work. Qoheleth demonstrates throughout Ecclesiastes that when empirical evaluations of work are pushed to their logical conclusions it can lead to despair. The workaholic realizes too

late the inevitability of despair. The sloth recognizes the possibility of despair from the beginning. He often never starts to work. What people need is a redeemed perspective on labor. People need a view of work's goodness which drives them neither to overwork nor despair.

Main Point

Under the sun, work is frustrating for a variety of reasons. Still, Qoheleth understands it has value because it comes from God. The apparent absence of intrinsic, lasting value that leads Qoheleth to cry "Vanity!" gives way to gravity because of the gospel.

Preview

Qoheleth makes many statements about work throughout Ecclesiastes. My treatment will necessarily be thematic and therefore not tied to one main text. I will argue that Qoheleth's view is best understood as a meditation on work in a world where Eden is lost according to the following outline:

1. Work in the Garden
2. Sin Frustrates Work
3. Work is הַבֵּל
4. Work is Good
5. The Gospel Redeems Work

Context

Ecclesiastes opens with a discussion of the pervasiveness of הַבֵּל (1:2). Qoheleth then poses a question that exposes the fundamental problem of life "under the sun" (1:3), namely: is there any advantage to toil? Then, he discusses how all of human history since the Fall is a matter of endless cycles and forgotten innovation (1:4–11). Qoheleth deals first with the frustration of pursuing wisdom in Ecclesiastes 1:12–18.

Next, he turns his attention to the pursuit of pleasure in 2:1–11, demonstrating that it too ends with the same frustration. Though readers are already aware that toil provides no advantage from 1:3, they have not encountered specific reasons why. Qoheleth’s treatment of work/toil appears several times in Ecclesiastes (2:18–26; 3:9–15, 20; 4:4–12; 5:19; 6:7; 8:17; 9:9; and 10:15). Readers should follow his meditation, remembering the end from the beginning. The end of the matter invites readers to set their reflections on work in a broader biblical-theological context.

Exposition

First, I will analyze work in the Garden of Eden and the frustration sin introduced into it. This analysis will explain Qoheleth’s assessment of work as both **הַבָּל** and good. I will conclude with reflections on the gospel’s redemption of work.

Work in the Garden

God is a worker. The Bible records the beginning of his creative work in Genesis 1. In John 5:17 Jesus informs the Jews that God is still working. In Revelation 21:5, the one seated on the throne declares that he is making all things new. The consistent testimony of Scripture is that God is a worker and that work is part of his good creation.

Seven times in Genesis 1, God assesses his work as “good.” In 1:31, after the sixth day, God calls everything very good. Genesis 2:4–25 provides a complementary view of day 6 in chapter 1.¹ If 2:4–25 is a complementary view of day 6, then God’s activity in chapter 2 falls under the category of “very good.” The literary effect of Genesis 2 is to highlight further the importance of humanity in creation. As the text

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, edited by Frank Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 40–41. He says, “The topic of the creation of the man and the woman is the focus of the whole of chapter 2. What the author had stated as a simple fact in chapter 1 (man, male and female, was created in God’s likeness) is explained and developed throughout the narrative of chapter 2.”

describes humanity's creation and tasks, more details emerge about what God calls very good. Those details are important for understanding Qoheleth's wisdom. For the purpose of this chapter, two issues deserve attention: the creation of humanity in the image of God and the commission to work in Genesis 2:15.

Genesis 1:27 teaches that male and female are created in the image of God. The precise meaning of this verse has frequently been the subject of discussion among biblical scholars.² Peter Gentry notes that most Christians interpret being made in God's image to mean that humans share mental and spiritual qualities with their Creator. He criticizes this position for being overly influenced by a faulty kind of reasoning from systematic theology. He believes better exegesis is necessary. "Image" translates *צֶלֶם*, which normally refers to a statue in the Old Testament. Any interpretation must reckon with that reality. He concludes that the image of God must refer to something physical, "and yet, goes far beyond being merely physical."³ Man is God's representative on earth. As such, humanity is to rule creation. However, the ruling function is the result of being made in God's image and not the image itself. In short, "the character of humans in ruling the world is what represents God."⁴

Genesis 2 begins an explanation of how the ruling function of humans looks in the world God made. In 2:15, God puts the man in the garden to work it and keep it. When the verbs for work (*עבד*) and keep (*שמר*) appear together in the Pentateuch, they describe the work of the priests in the tabernacle. Indeed, "this language is used for no

² For a brief survey see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 220–221.

³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 236.

⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 236.

other purpose.”⁵ Adam was to serve as a priest in the garden-temple.⁶ His working looked a bit different than the later Levitical priests however. Adam and the Eve’s work included the five-fold mandate of Genesis 1:28. They were to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over the animal kingdom. All the tasks are interrelated and require both man and woman to be successful.⁷ Together, they were to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Together, they were to subdue the earth, widening the boundaries of the garden until the earth was filled with people performing their function as the image of God.⁸ Together, they were to subdue the animal kingdom. The man began his task well. Genesis 2:19 portrays him naming the animals, indicating his authority over them. Even after sin enters the world, God’s words to the man teach something about his ruling function. He will work the ground. Subduing the earth involves agriculture. The text in no way indicates work of this type is a new reality. Rather, it asserts the frustrations that will be a part of it going forward.

The man and the woman, as image-bearers, have a noble task. They are representatives of God on earth. They are to portray him to the world in the way they rule over his creation. If they had obeyed, their task would have been pleasurable, fulfilling, and successful. They did not obey. Because of their rebellion against God, sin entered the world with terrible consequences. Humanity’s work would never be the same.

Sin Frustrates Work

In Genesis 3, sin enters the picture. The man and woman sin against the

⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 73.

⁶ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 66–70.

⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Work and Our Labor in the Lord*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 19–20.

⁸ Beale, *Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 83–84.

Creator God and must be punished. As God delineates the consequences of their rebellion, still his mercy abounds. Humans are not cursed. The serpent is cursed, along with the ground. That cursed ground becomes the arena where the inhabitants of the earth endure the consequences of disobedience. Going forward, sin and death will frustrate everything in God's good world.

Sin and death frustrate work. Every aspect of the five-fold mandate suffers because of the man's and woman's transgression. The command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth meets its frustration in God's words to the woman. In Genesis 3:16, God tells her that she will suffer in two ways. First, she will have pain in bearing children. She will suffer physically in the process of giving birth. Even if this suffering does not prevent filling the earth, it certainly diminishes the pleasure in doing so. Her children will also cause her another kind of pain: one of them will die, because the other one will murder him. The process of filling the earth will be hindered because some of the image-bearers will prematurely end the lives of others. Death in general is a tyrant. It gains strength when humans aid its progress. Second, there will be a rift in her relationship to her husband. At this point, frustration is introduced into the marriage relationship. The woman's desire for her husband and his ruling over her will lead to a dysfunctional and contentious relationship with the other image-bearer with whom she is supposed to subdue the earth.

The frustration of subduing the earth is stated plainly to Adam. He will continue to eat, but now he will do so through pain. While presumably the ground normally would bring forth only good fruit, now it brings thorns and thistles. Before, work would have been pleasurable. Now, Adam will eat bread by the sweat of his face. Sweat, and the accompanying dry mouth, makes even the pleasure of eating bread a miserable experience. Adam will suffer under this punishment until he returns to the ground. God tells him that his work will have no end, and he is sprinting toward a death that was never supposed to be his.

The final aspect of the mandate—subduing the animal kingdom—is portrayed in a different way. The man and woman sin because they listen to the voice of the serpent. In doing so, they give their allegiance to a creature’s word over God’s word. They have symbolically dethroned God, transferred their allegiance to the serpent, given the serpent control over the earth, and become its subjects.⁹ Their failure to obey has catastrophic results.

The curse that God pronounces appears to confine work, in all its aspects, to little more than pragmatism. However, God does not leave the man and woman without hope. God’s good gifts continue. The woman will have pain in childbearing and will experience tension in her relationship to her husband. But she will still have a marriage by means of which she can be fruitful and multiply. Together, they can still fill the earth. The man will struggle to produce food from the ground. But he will still eat. God blesses even in pronouncing punishment. There is also hope that the serpent will be subdued. One day, the offspring of the woman will crush its head.

The worldview found in the early chapters of Genesis is the worldview Qoheleth expresses in Ecclesiastes. He knows the goodness of God’s creation. He knows the frustration sin causes. He understands the prospect of redemption embedded in the text. While immersed in this worldview, Qoheleth considers the many aspects of work he has experienced. He outlines for his readers his observations on work in a world where Eden has disappeared. His perspective is informed and balanced. It paves the way for work to be redeemed by God.

Work Is הָבֵל

Qoheleth’s question in Ecclesiastes 1:3 is a rhetorical one. He wants to know what gain or advantage toil brings to the worker. It brings none. The word translated

⁹ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 78–79.

“toil” is עמל. The word refers both to work itself and the results of work.¹⁰ In Ecclesiastes, those results take several different forms. In 2:18, toil itself is left to someone else. In other places, money is the fruit of labor.¹¹ In any case, no advantage comes through labor under the sun. A variety of reasons emerge for the dim prospects of industry outside of Eden.

In Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, Qoheleth chronicles his “work.” In verse 10 he concludes that while he found pleasure in his toil, he did not find gain. On the basis of his conclusion readers can at least hope that work will be pleasurable. In many cases it can be. Often, it succumbs to the frustration that sin injects into God’s good gifts. When God gives pleasure in work it is a blessing. Even so, pleasure remains elusive in a broken world.

The first specific way Qoheleth points to the frustrations of work comes in 2:18–19. He must leave his work to whomever will come after him. The thought of not completing his work is bad enough. The idea that someone else will inherit it is worse still. The height of his consternation is that the person who inherits his work may be a fool—a fool who is master of his wisdom-guided toil.¹² Though many want to deny Solomonic authorship, it is difficult not to see the historical connection with Rehoboam.¹³ In a very short time he managed to split the kingdom of Israel into two warring nations (1 Kings 12). If Solomon pens this concern later in life, perhaps he could already see the foolishness bound up in the heart of his progeny. The great accomplishments of 2:1–11 face an inevitable demise in the hands of a fool. Yet, he can do nothing about it. He finds

¹⁰ Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 54–55.

¹¹ Qoheleth has enough to say about money that I will treat it in a separate chapter.

¹² William P. Brown describes Qoheleth as suffering under a “cosmic predatory loan policy.” See William P. Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do: Qoheleth’s Work Ethic,” *Interpretation* 55.3 (2001), 276.

¹³ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 99–100.

this circumstance frustrating. Working to provide for posterity does not make life worthwhile after all.¹⁴

In the next verse Qoheleth gives up his heart to despair. He tells his readers that he turned about. In turning and giving up his heart, he says he changed his former way of thinking about work. Perhaps despair led him to want to give up working altogether.¹⁵ Fox contends that the word translated “despair” in Rabbinic Hebrew means to “give up for lost.” Therefore, Qoheleth means he gave up his illusions or expectations about work. Fox suggests translating the verse, “I turned to rid my heart of illusions.”¹⁶ Once, Qoheleth believed work brought gain. Now he sees that under the sun it does not.

Work also leaves the laborer empty-handed while someone else enjoys its fruit. Qoheleth believes this reality is a great evil. It frustrates him. At the end of his life, a man has nothing to show for his efforts under the sun. The effects of sin appear to win. He concludes his first round of observations about work in Ecclesiastes 2:23. All days are full of sorrow: the six in which a man works and apparently also the day he rests. Work is a vexation. Later (11:10), Qoheleth counsels a young man to remove vexation from his heart. Qoheleth knows this effect is not right. Still, it lingers. Even at night, rest is elusive. Work should lead to sweet sleep (Ecclesiastes 5:12). Why can the worker find no rest? Under the sun, he invests in work too much. He hopes for too much. When a person’s work goes to potentially worthless heirs, causes despair, others enjoy its benefits, and it leads to sorrow and vexation, the heart remains restless. Such is הַבְּלָה.

After a brief respite from his misery about work, Qoheleth returns to it in 3:9. Again, he poses a question about what gain or advantage there is to toil. There is a clear

¹⁴ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 299.

¹⁵ As Delitzsch seems to say. “He had no more any heart to labor.” See Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 679.

¹⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 17.

connection between the question posed here and in 1:3. In 1:3, the question introduces a poem about endless cycles of nature (4–9) and commentary on forgotten innovation (10–11). Whatever has happened happens again. In Ecclesiastes 3:9, the question follows a poem on times and seasons, but the conclusion is the same.¹⁷ What has happened happens again. Often, the poem on time in 3:1–8 is divorced from the rest of the passage. It should not be. The poetry sets up a problem that the prose will try to resolve.¹⁸ The patterned order of the world, in which God makes everything beautiful in its own time (3:11), does not lead to finding gain in toil. Even though working fits in the grand design God has for his world, workers find no advantage to it under the sun.

Frustration continues for Qoheleth because even though no advantage exists in labor, the busyness of it never subsides. In 3:10–11 he notes that God gives busyness to people and has made what they do beautiful. God has also put eternity in people’s hearts, which probably means he has given an awareness of what eternity is.¹⁹ However, the knowledge of eternity proves to be a barrier to understanding God’s purposes. God gives a knowledge that eternity exists, controls every aspect of it, and teaches people that their lives function within the context of that control. The vastness of God’s perspective and dealings with humanity leave them without an ability to discern how what they do fits within his plan. Qoheleth reiterates this sentiment in 8:17. There, he concludes that the effort spent in trying to understand is wasted. No one can know. To be sure, Qoheleth does not state that God does not know. He merely says that humans cannot know what God does. This limited perspective manifests itself in the frustration of seemingly insignificant work under the sun.

¹⁷ See Seow for comparisons between the two passages. Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 169.

¹⁸ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 53.

¹⁹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

Ecclesiastes 4 is Qoheleth's next round of musings on work outside of Eden. Several problems emerge from his meditations. First, envy tends to be the prime motive for work. In the Bible, only two relationships exist where jealousy/rivalry are normative: the divine-human relationship and marriage.²⁰ These are the only two relationships that require exclusivity.²¹ In other cases, jealousy is damaging (e.g., Prov 14:30). In Ecclesiastes 4:4, the worker's attitude may drive him to performance, but it is vanity. The worker cannot gain any advantage from jealous work. He is striving after the wind. Iain Provan captures this person's attitude well. He says, "It is the suspicion or realization that others are gaining more from life than we are that leads us on to compete with them in the insane rat race, striving to outdo them."²² Overwork is frustrating.

The opposite of overwork is laziness. In 4:5, the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. A person eating their own flesh is a proverbial theme in the Bible.²³ The sluggard will not even bring his hand to his mouth to eat (Prov 19:24). In Isaiah 49:26, self-cannibalism is part of God's judgment against his enemies. While Qoheleth does not state that such laziness is vanity, the foolishness of eating one's own flesh is apparent. Certainly, Qoheleth does not mean for readers to take the self-cannibalism literally. Instead, he figuratively demonstrates that such behavior is destructive. One must work to eat. Laziness reduces a man to eating himself. One should neither overwork, nor be lazy.

Qoheleth's analysis continues in 4:7–8. He sees a person who has no one else with whom to share life. The emphasis in these verses does not appear to be that this man is simply alone. It appears to be on why he is alone. His pursuit of riches led him to

²⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 187.

²¹ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137.

²² Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 105.

²³ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.

withdraw from others in order to focus on his task.²⁴ Qoheleth says the man never even asks himself for whom he is toiling. Apparently, this man is so caught up in his pursuit that he does not even notice he has alienated himself from others. He presents the opposite problem to what Qoheleth encountered in 2:18–22. There, a fool might inherit Qoheleth’s work. Here, there is no one to inherit it.²⁵ This man is all alone. His folly becomes clear in 4:9–12. Qoheleth lists several proverbs that extol the value of living with others in mutually beneficial relationships. The workaholic deprives himself of these relationships.²⁶ He has chosen work above all else. His work is constant, unsatisfying, deprives of pleasure, and has left him alone with no one to share his labor or his life. He has chosen vanity.

Scattered throughout Ecclesiastes are several more statements on the frustration of work outside of Eden. In 5:16–17 Qoheleth bemoans that work is toiling for the wind. The laborer spends his days eating in darkness in much vexation, sickness, and anger. In 6:7 he laments that all work is so that a person can eat, yet the appetite is never satisfied. Readers can easily sense the effects of Genesis 3:19 here. Adam will eat by the sweat of his face, and that cycle will not stop until he goes back to the ground. The rhythm of life has become frustrating work in order to eat, in order to go back to frustrating work, in order to eat, and on and on. The memory of Eden renders life outside of it miserable.

Sin and death frustrate work under the sun. Readers can now feel the frustration. Matthew McCullough articulates this feeling well. He says, “We want our lives to make a mark. We want to accomplish things that matter. We want to do

²⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 108.

²⁵ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 41.

²⁶ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 109–111.

something that lasts.”²⁷ People stress themselves out in pursuit of leaving a mark, but it does not produce the desired result “because nothing we do can change the fact that we will die, and eventually the best we can accomplish will collapse like an elaborate sandcastle in the rising tide.”²⁸ Trying to find lasting meaning in work under the sun proves to be futile. Thankfully, the **הַבְּלָה** of work is not Qoheleth’s only word.

Work Is Good

Qoheleth tempers the results of his empirical quest with deep theological reflection. Eden is lost. Work is frustrating. God is still good. What God calls good in Eden is still good. Positive evaluations of work appear throughout Ecclesiastes in the *carpe diem* passages. The first of these texts is 2:24–26. Qoheleth sees that there is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in toil. The word translates as “better” in verse 24 is טוב, the same word used to describe creation as “good.”²⁹ The frustration of sin does not undo the inherent goodness of the created order. Qoheleth even understands that God actively brings goodness to his creatures. He says in 2:24 that good things are from the hand of God. The “from God” perspective is the antidote to the frustration that comes under the sun. A view of life with no respect to that which is beyond the sun renders everything frustrating. Seeing good gifts as coming from the hand of God brings joy.

Qoheleth affirms the goodness of taking pleasure in toil again in 3:13, 22, 5:18, 8:15, and 9:9.³⁰ In these passages, work is God’s gift to man, is man’s lot in life, and

²⁷ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 97.

²⁸ McCullough, *Remember Death*, 97–98.

²⁹ See David M. Clemens, “The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3,” *Themelios* 19.3 (1994), 7–8.

³⁰ For an evaluation of these texts and their function in Ecclesiastes, see R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982), 87–94.

brings joy. His stance in these verses contrasts starkly with his הָבֵל statements elsewhere. Though I do not believe that Qoheleth contradicts himself, I concur with Daryl Charles's assessment that "contradiction does not cancel out coherence."³¹ The discrepancy between the conclusions is easily understood when readers realize that the הָבֵל conclusions are the effects of Genesis 3, while the טוב conclusions are rooted in the lingering goodness of Genesis 1–2. Qoheleth is practicing good biblical theology. The tension in the text aligns with his observations about life.

Like all themes in Ecclesiastes, work must be assessed in light of 12:13–14. The end of the matter calls students of Qoheleth to fear God. That command alone reveals there is more to life than what is apparent under the sun. The mere existence of God calls for fear. The existence of the God revealed in Genesis 1–2 calls for awe and acceptance of the lot and blessings he provides. Qoheleth also commands his students to keep the commandments of God. One of those commandments is found in Exodus 20:9. As God commands his people to keep the Sabbath, he reminds them that the other six days are for working. The rest on the Sabbath stands out because of the work on the other days.

Qoheleth reminds students to keep these commandments because judgment is coming. Highlighting judgment is another way the epilogue to Ecclesiastes lifts readers above the under-the-sun, observational perspective. God will bring every deed into judgment, both open and secret deeds.³² Surely, these deeds include work. God will judge all work done, and all work left undone. Qoheleth does not force his pupils to read

³¹ J. Daryl Charles, "Wisdom and Work: Perspectives on Human Labor from Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22 no. 1 (2019), 11. To be clear, Charles does not claim Qoheleth is contradicting himself. Rather, he believes two approaches to reality are in dialogue. One approach does not accept divine providence and inscrutability. The other humbly accepts them. The "dialogue" between the views brings competing conclusions to the table. He believes the God-fearing perspective prevails, teaching through "indirect theology" a positive perspective on work. I agree.

³² For similar statements in the New Testament, see for example Matthew 12:36 and 1 Corinthians 3:13.

between the lines to come to this conclusion. He states it plainly in the *carpe diem* passages. Fearing God, keeping his commandments, and remembering judgment have the effect of thrusting work into a positive category. The artistic beauty with which Qoheleth speaks masterfully demonstrates that God's gifts are still good intrinsically. As astounding as this truth is, a greater hope for work emerges in the New Testament—the hope of redemption.

The Gospel Redeems Work

The hope of redemption for work initially begins in Genesis 5:29. A man named Lamech fathers a son and names him Noah, because he hopes “out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.” Lamech hopes for rescue from the results of God's curse. He apparently hopes for a return to Eden, or at least Eden-like conditions.³³

The same hope remains in the rest of the Old Testament. Whatever happens to the people of God, the memory of Eden never fades. Isaiah 51:3 says, “For the LORD comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden.” Likewise, Ezekiel prophesies in 36:35, “And they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.’” The prophets preach this way because Adam and Eve were supposed to extend the boundaries of the garden of Eden until it covered the whole earth.³⁴ Hope lingers for what God originally intended for his creation. Though Isaiah and Ezekiel come after Solomon chronologically, they precede Ecclesiastes canonically.³⁵

³³ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 90. He says “The return and beginning escalation of the prefall Eden indeed can legitimately be called ‘inaugurated eschatology,’ and the final completion of that condition is consummated eschatology, when the old creation is destroyed and the new eternally established.” He also notes that from a retrospective vantage point the original Eden becomes a prototype for the new creation.

³⁴ See Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 81–82.

³⁵ That is, according to the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Prophets, Writings.

Qoheleth speaks after the hope expressed by these two prophets.

As the Bible's story continues, the hope of Eden is eventually realized in the New Jerusalem.³⁶ Astoundingly, New Jerusalem not only recovers Eden—it surpasses it.³⁷ The goodness of Eden is amplified. Rivers flow out of Eden. New Jerusalem has living water, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne. Eden has the tree of life. New Jerusalem has the tree on both sides of the river, with twelve kinds of fruit that heals the nations. The hope of Lamech in Genesis 5 will come to fruition in the eternal state.

Qoheleth lived between Eden and the New Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, he shared the same hope as Lamech. He is certainly more eloquent than Lamech. Still, his view is incomplete. Qoheleth writes chronologically before and in anticipation of the very thing that redeems work. He writes before the gospel. The death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus have far-reaching effects on everything—including work.

Matthew McCullough believes that Paul has the perspective of Ecclesiastes in mind when he writes 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 12–19, Paul concludes that if Christ is not raised, everything is vanity. In verse 20, he changes his tone because Christ has—in fact—been raised. What follows is a lengthy discussion of the resurrection and its implications for believers. In the last verse of the chapter, Paul says, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your *labor* is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).³⁸ All work that a Christian does moves from vanity to gravity because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The gospel redemption of work stands behind the numerous instructions about

³⁶ Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 365–373.

³⁷ See James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012), 404 for a table comparing Eden and New Jerusalem.

³⁸ I owe this insight to McCullough, *Remember Death*, 111–12 (emphasis mine).

work throughout the New Testament.³⁹ The Ephesians should labor, working with their own hands because they have been renewed (Eph 4:23–28). The Thessalonians should work and not depend on anyone else in order to live properly before outsiders (1 Thess 4:11–12). They are to work so as not to be idle and succumb to sloth (1 Thess 5:14). They are to work so as not to be a burden, to earn their food, and not to be busybodies (2 Thess 3:8–12). These few examples suffice.

One of the strongest motivating factors for working in light of the gospel is the fact that work will continue in the new creation. In Revelation 1:6, Jesus is said to have made his people priests to his God and Father. Revelation 5:10 shows the host of heaven worshipping the Lamb who was slain. They praise him for ransoming a people and making them priests to God who will reign on earth. Revelation 20:6 says that those over whom the second death has no power will be priests of God and of Christ.⁴⁰ If Adam truly was the first priest, entrusted with extending the boundaries of Eden until the earth was full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea, it stands to reason that priests in the new creation will complete that task. The success of the task is ensured by identifying Jesus as the root of David in Revelation 5:5. The title likely comes from Isaiah 11:10. Isaiah prophesied that in that day the root of Jesse will stand as a signal for the peoples. The nations will inquire of him and his resting place will be glorious. On what day though? The day described in verses 6–9, which is the new creation. Verse 9 culminates with the promise that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. The role entrusted to Adam has been redeemed. God’s redeemed priests will execute it. The guarantee is that the root of David has conquered. Work was good in

³⁹ For a discussion of key passages related to the gospel’s redemption of work, see Hamilton, *Work*, 69–88.

⁴⁰ This verse comes in the famous “Millennium” passage. The issue of the Millennium is complicated and unnecessary to address at this point. Regardless of whether it is current or still future, the role of priest from Revelation 5:10, which is at work during the millennium, appears to continue into the eternal state.

the garden. Sin frustrated it. It never stopped being good. The gospel has redeemed work. It will gloriously continue forever.

Conclusion

God gave humans work to do in the garden. Work was part of his declaration that all he had made was very good. As image-bearers, Adam and Eve would engage in the noble task of work as they mirror the Creator and his work in the world. When they rebelled, sin entered the world and brought negative consequences to all of creation, including work. Sin will now frustrate all work.

Qoheleth meditates on the tension that exists in a world that God created and declared good, but that sin has also entered and frustrated. Though work is now **הַקָּבֵל**, it is still good. Work is a gift from God that retains its goodness despite the effects of sin. Qoheleth offers a view of work that allows his readers to see the value of it from heaven's viewpoint. Though he writes with an incomplete perspective, he prepares the way for the final solution to the frustration of work. Work's redemption comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Work has value now because of the gospel. Work has eternal value, especially as it will continue into the new creation.

Qoheleth's presentation of work leads to several applications. First, people can and should understand their work in light of being an image-bearer. God works. So do people. Working testifies to his character. God completes his work, does it well, rests at the appropriate time, delegates to others, and fixes his work when problems emerge. Even if a job is mundane and unenjoyable, it still presents an opportunity as an image-bearer to reflect the glory of God. In this light, all work takes on immense value, regardless of the worth assigned by the worker, the company, or society in general.

Second, work is good intrinsically—when it comes from God. Qoheleth says so in Ecclesiastes 2:24. Not all work comes from God. If work violates God's character or requires someone to act in direct contradiction to Scripture, it is not from God. Such

work does not honor him. For example, being a doctor is a noble calling. Using medical training to abort a baby is horrendous. Pastoring a church is a noble calling. Taking advantage of people for personal gain under the pretense of being a spiritual leader is hellish. A proper theology of work requires understanding that work from God can only be work that also honors his character according to his word.

Third, frustration with work is real. Expect it. It is easy to imagine a dream job. Perhaps that job is enjoyable, well-paying, fulfilling, and comes with low stress. In the imagination, that job is worry-free. As long as sin is in the world, it will frustrate work. Even “dream jobs” will often cause people to wonder if a better one may be out there somewhere. Qoheleth would counsel readers to expect frustration, but push through it to see the goodness of what God gives them to do.

Finally, work is not done in vain because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though the curse of sin is evident in all areas of life, one day it will not be so. God’s blessings will flow as far as the curse is found. In the new creation, works will follow the saints (Rev 13:14). They will continue to work, and do so in the presence of God’s glory. The beauty of that reality should sustain the worker through all the frustrations of work that exist outside of Eden.

CHAPTER 5

THE PURSUIT OF WISDOM

A university student has just completed his last exam for his biblical studies degree. He is ready to graduate. While excited about his achievement, he is not as satisfied as he had hoped. At graduation rehearsal, he realizes he is not alone. Several of his classmates echo the sentiment that more should have been required before receiving this degree. The student shares this feeling but is not overly bothered. Soon, he will begin seminary. Once he completes his Master of Divinity, then he will know enough to pastor a church confidently. After a few years, seminary graduation approaches. A harsh reality sets in—he still does not know as much as he should.

He devises a solution to his problem. He will begin an aggressive reading plan, filling in the gaps of what he did not learn in school. While a rewarding experience, he still feels inept in his understanding of the Bible. He thinks that he needs further training. He enrolls in a doctoral program. While he enjoys progressing through the program, he realizes he still has not attained the wisdom he needs to minister effectively. He does not see how he can teach the Bible to people when he does not understand it well enough himself.¹

The above example illustrates Qoheleth's frustration in his pursuit of wisdom. In his empirical quest, wisdom too has proven to be **הֶבְרָל**. He cannot master it. Attaining wisdom increases sorrow (Eccl 1:18). This quest holds out more hope than the others, however. In Ecclesiastes 2:13, Qoheleth affirms that he found more gain in wisdom than

¹ Readers only need to exercise their imaginations a bit to see through the thinly-veiled reference to the present author.

folly. Thus far, gain has eluded him. He invites readers to feel the frustration of pursuing wisdom outside of Eden. He also encourages them to see the goodness inherent in wisdom.

Need

Pursuing wisdom is frustrating. Qoheleth observes numerous instances of futility while trying to attain it. Wisdom brings vexation and sorrow (1:18). Later generations do not appreciate a wise king (4:16). A wise man saves a city under siege, only for the people to forget about him (9:13–15). These examples could cause people to wonder why they should care to be wise. Though frustrations abound, being wise brings more of an advantage than being a fool (2:13). Wisdom becomes the first pursuit of Qoheleth that brings a semblance of gain. Navigating life outside of Eden is challenging, and wisdom provides a better way than folly.

Main Point

Under the sun, seeking wisdom frustrates people for a variety of reasons. Still, Qoheleth understands that wisdom trumps folly because wisdom comes from God (Eccl 2:26). The apparent absence of intrinsic, lasting value that leads Qoheleth to cry “Vanity!” gives way to gravity because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who has become wisdom for believers.

Preview

Qoheleth articulates many remarks about wisdom throughout Ecclesiastes. He also illustrates its value in a variety of ways. My treatment will be thematic and therefore not tied to one main text. According to the following outline, I will argue that Qoheleth’s view is best understood as a meditation on wisdom in a world where Eden is lost.

1. Wisdom in the Garden
2. Sin and Death Frustrate Wisdom

3. Pursuing Wisdom is חָכְמָה
4. Pursuing Wisdom is Good
5. Jesus and Wisdom in the New Testament

Context

Ecclesiastes opens with a discussion of the pervasiveness of חָכְמָה (1:2). Qoheleth then poses a question that exposes the fundamental problem of life “under the sun” (1:3), namely: is there any advantage to toil? Then, he discusses how all of human history since the Fall has become a matter of endless cycles and forgotten innovation (1:4–11). Qoheleth bemoans the frustration of pursuing wisdom in Ecclesiastes 1:12–18. His meditations on wisdom appear in several other places in Ecclesiastes as well (2:12–17; 4:13–16; 7:1–8:17; and 9:1–11:6). Often, he comments on wisdom directly. At other times, he illustrates the value of wisdom. To demonstrate his viewpoint, I will explore the presence of wisdom in the Garden of Eden and the frustration sin introduced into it. Then I will turn to the analysis in Ecclesiastes.

Exposition

First, I will analyze wisdom in the Garden of Eden and the frustration sin and death introduced into it. This analysis will explain Qoheleth’s assessment of his pursuit of wisdom as both חָכְמָה and good. I will conclude with reflections on the gospel’s redemption of wisdom.

Wisdom in the Garden

Wisdom is implicitly commended in Genesis 1–2. God displays his wisdom in two sources: his word and the created order. Readers can perceive God’s direct word as wisdom in his instructions to the man in Genesis 2:16–17. As God speaks, giving Adam both permission and prohibition, he teaches the goodness of obeying his word. The man’s success in living in his new home will be determined by his understanding and obeying

the knowledge he gains from the word of the LORD. In Genesis 3, the woman errs by changing God's word in three major places. First, she minimizes their privileges by saying they may eat, while God says they may eat freely. Secondly, she minimizes judgment by changing God's promise that they would surely die to simply that they would die. Third, she maximizes the prohibition by saying they cannot eat or touch when God only told them not to eat.² The changes, and their subsequent defiance of what God actually said, not only introduce sin into the world—they demonstrate the foolishness of disobeying God's word. God's word displays wisdom. That conviction permeates the book of Ecclesiastes.

The created order also evinces wisdom. A number of texts link wisdom with creation. Job 28:20–28 provides one example. Job wonders about the origin of wisdom. While no one living knows, God knows the way to it. For Job, creation itself proves that God knows where to find it. God created the world by wisdom. Then, he tells man that wisdom and understanding require fearing the Lord and turning away from evil (Job 28:28). God proves his wisdom by creating and reveals his wisdom through his word.³

The key biblical text relating wisdom to creation is Proverbs 8:22–31.⁴ Like Job, Proverbs affirms that God used wisdom as an instrument to create the world (Prov 3:19–20). By wisdom, God established its boundaries (Prov 8:25–29). In Proverbs 8:22–29, Yahweh acts as the subject of all the verbs, thus establishing his relationship to wisdom.⁵

² G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 33.

³ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 373.

⁴ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 105. Webb says, "The great poem of Proverbs 8:22-30 establishes, as basic to the teaching of the whole book, that the entire created order is an expression of the wisdom of God."

⁵ Richard P. Belcher, *Finding Favour in God's Sight: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 31.

Scholars debate the precise nature of this relationship. The importance of this issue stands out in the role Proverbs 8:22 played in the Christological controversies in the early centuries of the church.⁶ The heart of the debate centers around the meaning of the word קנה. The basic meaning of this word is to acquire.⁷ However, acquisition comes in many forms.⁸ Scripture uses this word in cases of someone making a purchase (Gen 47:20). Another way to acquire is to create. The LXX translates קנה as “create” in Proverbs 8:22. Arius favored this translation as he tried to prove that Christ was a created being. Obviously, the New Testament teaching about Christ overturned Arius’s claims. Still, the linguistic debate remains. I will say more about wisdom and Christ below. If wisdom in Proverbs should not be equated with Christ, then “create” could still be a viable translation.

On balance, it seems best to translate קנה as “possess.” Proverbs 8:22–31 does not describe the beginning of wisdom, but of creation. The understanding that God possessed wisdom prior to creation allows wisdom to precede and stand outside creation. This view also allows for the wisdom that God used in creating the world to become part of that creation. Translating קנה as “possess” draws attention to the outcome of what God accomplished in creation, rather than describing some supposed process in acquiring wisdom.⁹ As God created, he embedded wisdom in the created order.

Proverbs 8:30–31 also describes wisdom as a master workman.¹⁰ The implication of this description is that wisdom created the world. However, God created

⁶ For an example of how the church fathers utilized Proverbs 8, see Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 233.

⁷ Izak Cornelius and Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “קנה” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 3:940

⁸ As noted by Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 31.

⁹ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 31.

¹⁰ Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, edited by Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 947 argues that this view has the most support.

everything. The translation “master workman” does not fit the context. Consequently, another way the church has understood this term is simply “faithful.” On this understanding, Proverbs 8 teaches that wisdom consistently accompanied God during creation. This rendering does not diminish wisdom’s importance. To the contrary, “Wisdom should be followed because she was there from the beginning of creation and served as a witness to creation.”¹¹

The imbedding of wisdom in the created order accentuates its role in the garden. If God used wisdom to create the world, then all of creation will show evidence of wisdom. The order that God established in creation also evidences his great wisdom. Wisdom’s presence in the garden means that to understand and operate within creation provides an opportunity to see and know God’s wisdom. For Adam and Eve, wisdom was everywhere and accessible. Their pursuit would have been pure joy. Pursuing knowledge was good. Yet, God put restraints on where they should seek it. They should not seek to attain it by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead, it should come by his word. Unfortunately, they did not stay within the bounds set by God.

Sin and Death Frustrate Wisdom

A hunger for knowledge overpowered Adam and Eve.¹² They were so desperate that they grasped for it in a way forbidden by God.¹³ Sin entered into the world and immediately frustrated wisdom. The serpent promises the woman in Genesis 3:5 that she would be like God in that she would know good and evil. In Genesis 3:22, God confirms that once the first humans sinned, they did become like him in knowing good and evil. Such knowledge may seem desirable. However, the fact that the knowledge

¹¹ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 33.

¹² William H. U. Anderson, “The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Expose of Genesis 3:17–19 in Ecclesiastes,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 70 (1998): 109.

¹³ David M. Clemens, “The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3,” *Themelios* 19, no. 3 (1994): 7.

follows sin indicates otherwise. When the phrase “knowledge of good and evil” appears in the Bible it means the exercise of moral autonomy. Adam and Eve’s sin, and subsequent “becoming like God,” means they wanted to choose for themselves what was right and wrong independently of God.¹⁴ Now fallen, humanity would no longer look to God’s Word alone for wisdom and knowledge. They would seek to determine it for themselves.

Other areas of the created order designed to show God’s wisdom come undone. God tasked humanity with exercising dominion over the beasts. Clearly, humans are the pinnacle of God’s creation. In Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth recognizes that sin and death obscure the distinction between man and beast to some degree. In 3:19–20 he acknowledges that both come from the dust and will return to the dust. Thus, man has no advantage over beasts in that regard. After sin enters the world, childbirth becomes painful. God intends to fill the earth with the knowledge of himself as the waters cover the sea (Hab 2:14). In his wisdom, he decided to accomplish that in part through childbirth. Sin frustrates that wisdom.

God intended for humanity to have dominion over the earth and to exercise that dominion together. In his wisdom, God declared that his image would best be expressed by male and female working in harmony to subdue his creation. God’s wisdom shows through harmonious relationships. Qoheleth bemoans the breakdown of that relationship in Ecclesiastes 7:25–29. Marriage does not entirely disillusion him (9:9), but sin brings frustration. It appears that the entire created order will cease to work correctly.

In Genesis 3:17 God cursed the ground. Since then, thorns and thistles pervade that ground.¹⁵ As humans die, they return to the dust. Sin and death frustrate God’s

¹⁴ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 254.

¹⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 312.

wisdom in making humanity from the dirt when they go back to it. God sent Adam and Eve away from the garden—the place of perfect creation. They will no longer live where God displays his wisdom fully and unmistakably. The world going forward will be full of הָבֵל.

The flow of the narrative in Genesis is present in Ecclesiastes. Genesis 2 teaches that God made man from dust. Ecclesiastes 3:20 affirms that truth. Qoheleth concludes that God made mankind upright, but they have sought out many schemes (7:29). He draws this conclusion from Genesis 3, which he validates by his observations of life. Genesis 6:5 says that God saw that every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. Qoheleth concurs. Ecclesiastes 8:11 says that the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Again, he says in 9:3 the hearts of the children of man are evil and madness is in their hearts while they live. Once their time ends, they experience 12:14, when God brings every secret thing—good or bad—into judgment.

The first humans did not find rest in God's wisdom. As a result of the Fall, the restlessness of the human spirit remains. Qoheleth knows this restlessness. He wants to pursue understanding in everything. He gets further than most. He surpasses every one of his predecessors (Eccl 1:16). He finds frustration. He does not give up hope. He embraces the testimony of God's word—the source of wisdom. Creation still works according to God's design—evidence of wisdom. By observing a frustrated world in light of Scripture, he finds the value of wisdom.

Qoheleth embraces the worldview found in the early chapters of Genesis. He knows the goodness of God's creation. He knows the frustration sin causes. While immersed in this worldview, Qoheleth reflects on his pursuit of wisdom. He outlines for his readers his observations of that pursuit in a world where Eden has disappeared. His worldview explains how he can say that wisdom is both הָבֵל and good. He invites readers both to feel his frustration and embrace what is good. I will consider the הָבֵל statements first before turning my attention to his positive assessments.

Pursuing Wisdom Is **הַבִּיל**

Ecclesiastes 1:12–18 present Qoheleth’s foundational statements about wisdom. This pericope divides into two sections. In verses 12–15, Qoheleth informs readers that wisdom guided him to his conclusions throughout the book. Verses 16–18 give his analysis of wisdom itself.¹⁶ Qoheleth makes a conscious decision to seek out by wisdom and experience a knowledge of everything done under heaven. He comments primarily about his observations apart from what he knows through revelation. Readers should expect his conclusions to remain within the realm of observation.¹⁷

After a thorough analysis, Qoheleth finds that all of humanity’s efforts amount to striving after the wind. In verse 15 he says that whatever is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted. Given later statements in Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth likely acknowledges that God makes everything crooked.¹⁸ God determines reality. People cannot change that.¹⁹ In verse 15, readers meet twin realities: sin brings frustration and sovereignty belongs to God.²⁰ As Qoheleth pursues wisdom, he recognizes both truths. He cannot change the way the world works. He can only know so much. What he observes bothers him.

Qoheleth likely did not realize the truth of Ecclesiastes 1:15 until the end of his experiment. In verses 16–18 he recounts how he had mastered wisdom in a way none of his predecessors had. He was able to apprehend a knowledge of both wisdom and folly. In the end, the whole program was striving after wind. The effort spent in pursuing

¹⁶ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 68.

¹⁷ Recall that I argued for taking this approach in chapter 2.

¹⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 147. Compare to Ecclesiastes 3:11, 14; 7:13.

¹⁹ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 82.

²⁰ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 82.

wisdom led to vexation and sorrow. At this point in Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth does not clarify why he reaches this conclusion. As the narrative progresses, readers begin to understand—the more he learns, the more הִבֵּל he recognizes. His quest for wisdom deepens his understanding of how far from Eden humanity has fallen.

Qoheleth returns to an evaluation of the intrinsic value of wisdom several times throughout Ecclesiastes. In 2:12–17 he considers the value of living wisely. While he does make positive statements about wisdom (more below), frustration still overcomes him. Under the sun, wise and foolish people fare the same. They both die. No one remembers either of them. Why be wise? Being wise is difficult work. Whether a person chooses wisdom or folly, she still dies and the world forgets she ever existed. Qoheleth mourns such futility—so much that he hates life.

In Ecclesiastes 4:13–16, Qoheleth illustrates his conclusion from chapter 2. A wise youth went from prison to the throne. He ruled multitudes of people well. Yet, later generations did not rejoice in him. They either forgot his leadership or did not care about his accomplishments. Qoheleth may be inventing a hypothetical situation.²¹ He also may be grounding his statements in historical reality. While no individual in the Old Testament matches Qoheleth's description precisely, the text provides warrant for seeing allusions both to Joseph and David.²² Joseph rose from prison to power over Egypt. While officially he rules under Pharaoh, the text of Genesis portrays Joseph as the true authority over Egypt (Gen 41:41). Joseph rules wisely. Yet, in Exodus 1:8, a Pharaoh arises who did not know Joseph. Joseph's wise leadership did not prevent the subjugation of his people. David did not emerge from prison, but Ecclesiastes 4:14b refers to the youth being born poor. If this statement merely indicates humble origins, David meets the

²¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

²² Graham S. Ogden, "Historical Allusion in Qoheleth IV 13-16?" *Vetus Testamentum* 30, no. 3 (1980): 309–315.

criteria. The absence or presence of a historical referent does not fundamentally change Qoheleth's assessment. Though the wise king ruled with wisdom, people eventually forgot him, and his accomplishments failed to capture the affection of later generations.

After a lengthy reflection on wisdom in chapters 7–8, Qoheleth reminds his readers of wisdom's limitations in 8:16–17. Though God allows Qoheleth great advancement in wisdom, he still cannot find out all that God does under the sun. The divine prerogative is to keep some details a mystery. Qoheleth notes in verse 17 that even if a wise man claims to understand God's work in the world, he only fools himself. Wisdom ultimately falls short of supplying what Qoheleth seeks.²³ God places barriers to human insight. Though the wise person positions himself best to perceive what God does in the world, he still cannot grasp it.²⁴

The frustration due to sin and death pervades the pursuit of wisdom (9:10). If readers only consider the הִבֵּל statements in Ecclesiastes, the outlook for the quest to find wisdom appears bleak. Wisdom has limits, cannot achieve its goals, fails to provide the promised benefits, is vulnerable to folly, and is helpless in the face of death.²⁵ Wisdom also hurts because it reveals frustration in the created order.²⁶ Though the pursuit of wisdom frustrates Qoheleth deeply, he still has an astonishing number of positive thoughts about wisdom's value.

Pursuing Wisdom Is Good

In one sense, the very existence of the book of Ecclesiastes validates the

²³ Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qoheleth* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 89.

²⁴ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 87–88.

²⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 79.

²⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 90. Though I disagree with his assessment that the world displays “irredeemable senselessness.”

goodness of wisdom. In chapters 4 and 7–11, readers find a series of proverbial statements. These statements reflect upon “the practicalities of contentment and what brings success in this life.”²⁷ These proverbial statements characterize much of Hebrew wisdom and show that “Qoheleth is working within the framework of the wisdom tradition.”²⁸ That tradition was firmly in place and flourished under king Solomon.²⁹ Ecclesiastes is the product of a sage who simultaneously extols the value of wisdom while acknowledging the frustrations and limitations in the quest for and acquisition of it. Qoheleth implies the goodness of wisdom by preserving it for his readers in the pages of Scripture.

Qoheleth roots his observations about wisdom in the conviction that what God declared was good in the Garden of Eden is still good. Each time Qoheleth speaks about or illustrates wisdom he balances his הִבֵּל assessment with reflections on wisdom’s goodness. In Ecclesiastes 2:12–17, even though Qoheleth hates life because the wise person and the fool meet the same end, he begins by commending wisdom. In verse 12 he says wisdom provides more gain than folly. The acknowledgment of “gain” is important. Elsewhere, Qoheleth implies—or even states—the absence of gain. In 1:3 he asks if mankind gains anything by toil, implying that they do not. In 2:11 toil brings no gain. “Gain” eludes Qoheleth at every turn. However, wisdom apparently gets him closer to it than folly.³⁰ Wisdom brings light and allows its adherents to see truth. Folly keeps people in the dark and prevents them from knowing how to live.³¹

²⁷ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 86.

²⁸ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 87.

²⁹ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 12.

³⁰ See Fuhr, *Analysis*, 61–63 for a discussion of what Qoheleth means by “gain.” Fuhr concludes that Qoheleth never attains it. Still, even with its limitations, wisdom better equips people for life under the sun. See also 182.

³¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 140.

In Ecclesiastes 2:26, Qoheleth affirms that God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy. God sovereignly dispenses these gifts and allows people to enjoy them.³² Precisely because the gifts come from God, they are good. The pursuit of wisdom may not bring the ultimate advantage that Qoheleth seeks, but the wisdom itself comes from God and can be enjoyed for the advantage it does bring.

The example of the wise, young king illustrates the frustration of life under the sun. Kingship is thankless. It is “toil and trouble on the one hand, and a lack of appreciation on the other.”³³ If readers recognize that Qoheleth uses kingship as the vehicle for illustrating the principle of human advancement, the positivity of these verses becomes apparent. Verse 13 compares a poor but wise youth with a king who had become foolish. The point appears to be that, “Poverty with wisdom is better than advancement with folly.”³⁴ Though the particular example frustrates, the principle he illustrates extols wisdom.

Qoheleth includes two lengthy wisdom sections in the latter part of Ecclesiastes. He asks two questions in 6:12. The first question—who knows what is good for man?—he answers in 7:1–8:17. The second question—who can tell man what will be after him?—he answers in 9:1–11:6.³⁵

Ecclesiastes 7:1–8:17 demonstrates human inability to find what is good within the divine outworking of God’s plan. Nonetheless, wisdom supersedes folly. Two statements about God stand at the heart of chapter seven.³⁶ Verses 13–14 teach that God rules over both good and bad times. Moreover, he does not teach people what the future

³² Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 27.

³³ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 107.

³⁴ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 108.

³⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 317–8.

³⁶ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 476.

holds. Verses 15–18 teach the need to fear God for a balanced approach to life. These two statements sit between two sections of proverbs and observations. Ecclesiastes 7:1–12 calls readers to consider death and choose wisdom in light of the fact that death is coming (vv. 1–6). Remembering death can help protect the heart from bribes (v. 7), cultivate patience (v. 8), quell anger (v. 9), and prevent nostalgia from lying about God not still being in control (v. 10).³⁷ Wisdom protects and preserves life (7:12).³⁸ Ecclesiastes 7:19–8:1 urges wisdom in various relationships.³⁹ Although God made man upright, all have sinned (7:29). Therefore, people need caution in dealing with others. While no one may be able to find what is good during his vain life, wisdom still yields the better way.

Ecclesiastes 8:1–17 contains three more statements about God, all following observations Qoheleth makes about common topics in wisdom literature. In 8:1–10, he comments extensively about kings. While he never guarantees that the righteous will prosper, he does teach that those who fear God fare better than those who do not (8:11–13).⁴⁰ Sometimes injustice abounds (8:14). All people can do is enjoy the life God gives them (8:15). Anyone who claims to know wisdom beyond what Qoheleth has found claims the impossible (8:16–17).

The second question posed in Ecclesiastes 6:12 concerns the ability to know what the future holds. Chapters 7–8 testify to the mystery of the present. The future is less certain still. Qoheleth demonstrates the superiority of wisdom within this uncertainty in Ecclesiastes 9:1–11:6.

Ecclesiastes 9:1–12 teaches that only one event comes without question—death. Many times, certain advantages do not bring the desired results (9:11–12).

³⁷ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 100–4.

³⁸ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 141.

³⁹ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 476.

⁴⁰ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 476.

Wisdom illustrates that enjoying the simplicities of life—eating, drinking, marriage, and work—is the true way to live.⁴¹ In Ecclesiastes 9:13–18, Qoheleth teaches that wisdom prevails over strength. Even so, sin destroys much of what wisdom builds.⁴²

Ecclesiastes 10:1–11:6 lists several more proverbial statements based on Qoheleth’s observations. In all circumstances, he prefers wisdom. In 10:1–7 he notes that while wisdom deserves honor, fools often become exalted.⁴³ Ecclesiastes 10:8–20 contains miscellaneous proverbial sayings about unfortunate incidents in working (10:8–11), prudence in speech (10:12–15), and the benefits of good leadership (10:16–20). The section closes in 11:1–6 with a call to diversify interests to guard against the probability of disaster. In the final analysis, only God knows the future, how the world works, and what will ultimately succeed. Wisdom calls readers to hold loosely to possessions, put “success” into proper perspective, and live wisely in the providence of God.⁴⁴ People cannot know what is good in the present, nor what will come in the future. Still, they can thrive in God’s world—even outside of Eden—if they live by the wisdom he gives.

Pursuing wisdom was לְבַקֵּשׁ for Qoheleth in many ways. Even so, wisdom’s benefits far outweigh a foolish life. Readers should pursue wisdom for several reasons.⁴⁵ Wisdom possesses inherent goodness. It brings people closer to gain than folly (Eccl 2:13). Wisdom prepares people for life in a world that constantly changes. Wisdom testifies. God is wise and those who live wisely preach his character to the world. Wisdom truly makes life better for people. Finally, wisdom triumphs because every action will eventually come under God’s judgment. Folly will not get the last word.

⁴¹ Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 107.

⁴² House, *Old Testament Theology*, 478.

⁴³ House, *Old Testament Theology*, 478.

⁴⁴ Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 119–30.

⁴⁵ This paragraph is owed to Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, *The Gospel According to the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 91–2.

Qoheleth reminds students to follow wisdom because of coming judgment. The reality of judgment lifts readers beyond the sun. Fearing God, keeping his commandments, and remembering the coming judgment serve as a masterful way to motivate readers to choose a life of wisdom. Pursuing wisdom under the sun frustrates. Pursuing wisdom is still good, because God declared it to be so in the Garden of Eden. Qoheleth acknowledges the frustration, embraces the good, and models for his readers the importance of wisdom. Qoheleth is a Torah-informed son of David and king who taught his people.⁴⁶ In the New Testament, another Torah-informed son of David and King appears to instruct people in the ways of wisdom. His name is Jesus.

Jesus and Wisdom in the New Testament

“Salvation history finds its goal and fulfillment in Christ. So too does wisdom.”⁴⁷ Jesus arrives on the scene as a wise man speaking in the tradition of Israelite wisdom. The New Testament portrays him not only as wise, but as wisdom incarnate. For this reason, wisdom is important for Christology, informing readers of both the person and work of Christ. Wisdom then presents several implications for the Christian life.

Jesus the wisdom teacher. Jesus frequently spoke in parables, riddles, and other aphorisms to communicate his message. Some estimate that around seventy percent of Jesus’ sayings take the form of a wisdom utterance.⁴⁸ In his teaching, Jesus not only conveys wisdom as others before him have, he transcends them. In Matthew 5, Jesus employs a “you have heard it said. . . but I say to you” formula. He expands upon the teaching of those who preceded him. In Matthew 12:41 he claims to be greater than

⁴⁶ See chapter 2 under “superscription” for the significance of Solomon as son of David.

⁴⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2000), 499.

⁴⁸ Eckhard J. Schnable, “Wisdom,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al., (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000), 846.

Jonah. In Matthew 12:42, especially pertinent in a study of Ecclesiastes, Jesus announces his superiority over Solomon and his wisdom. Jesus is a wisdom teacher, but he is a greater teacher than the sages who prepared the way for him.

Jesus as wisdom incarnate. Jesus embodies the wisdom of God. In Matthew 11:25–27 he describes his unique relationship to his heavenly Father. Only God knows all things. He has given all things to the Son. The Father reveals all things through the Son to those ready to receive it.⁴⁹ The author of Hebrews claims that though God spoke through prophets in the past, now he has given his final word in his Son (Heb 1:1–2). Jesus brings the final expression of God’s revelation.

If Jesus is wisdom incarnate, the question remains regarding his relationship to the personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8. That passage raises a host of questions. For my purposes, I am only concerned with whether or not Wisdom is a divine hypostasis that directly connects it to Jesus. In the context of Proverbs, it does not appear that Jesus and Wisdom should be equated. Proverbs 1–9 personifies Lady Wisdom frequently. While similarities exist between Wisdom and Christ, differences also surface.⁵⁰ The differences provide enough warrant not to equate them. However, the similarities lay a strong foundation for understanding Wisdom as a type of Christ.

Typology requires both historical correspondence and escalation.⁵¹ Christ and Wisdom both preach their message in public, call people to follow them, and warn those

⁴⁹ Schnable, “Wisdom,” 846.

⁵⁰ Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 38, notes that though God utilizes both Wisdom and Christ as instruments of creation, Christ plays a greater role. Creation is for Christ, he restores creation to its intended order, and he reconciles all things to himself. These truths mean that Christ transcends what Wisdom does in Proverbs.

⁵¹ Matthew S. Harmon, “Allegory, Typology, or Something Else? Revisiting Galatians 4:21–5:1,” in *Studies in the Pauline Epistles: Essays in Honor of Douglas J. Moo*, eds. Matthew S. Harmon and Jay E. Smith (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 154–5. Harmon argues that typology has five essential aspects: analogical correspondence, historicity, a pointing-forwardness, escalation, and retrospection. One aspect seemingly left out of his list is authorial intent. However, he includes intent under the category of “a pointing-forwardness.”

who reject them. Both invite people to a banquet and experience opposition from sinners. Both existed with God before creation, come down to earth from heaven, and offer blessings. However, Christ transcends Wisdom in that he is God's Son (John 1:18), equal to the Father and not just utilized by him (John 10:30), and is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:20; Heb 1:3).⁵² In light of the above evidence, Wisdom and Christ should not be equated. Instead, Lady Wisdom in all of Proverbs, including 8:22–31, typifies Christ.

Christ's incarnation as the wisdom of God finds its ultimate expression in the gospel. God's wisdom is beyond human ability to discern. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30, Paul says that Jesus is the wisdom of God. By this, he shows that the cross is the "climactic expression of God's wisdom and power" that cannot be grasped by human wisdom.⁵³ The gospel is God's wisdom for salvation. The incarnate Son of God accomplished and displayed God's wisdom by his sacrifice.

Wisdom and the Christian life. Wisdom literature quite clearly intends to instruct people in how to live. The New Testament continues that tradition by calling believers to correct behavior in light of their identity as Christians. This exhortation comes through such avenues as vice and virtue lists and household codes.⁵⁴ Christian ethics requires believers to make decisions about behavior consistent with God's revelation in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God—wisdom incarnate—and his wise teachings reveal the path to behavior that glorifies the Father.

Wisdom that glorifies God comes from above. The book of James calls readers to ask for wisdom if they lack it (Jas 1:5). He does not teach them to ask for some abstract notion of wisdom. He defines what he means explicitly in 3:13–18. Believers should not follow earthly, unspiritual, demonic "wisdom." Instead, they should exercise

⁵² This paragraph is indebted to Belcher, *Finding Favour*, 38.

⁵³ Schnabel, "Wisdom," 846.

⁵⁴ Schnabel, "Wisdom," 846.

wisdom from above. That wisdom receives its greatest clarity in Christ. He embodies wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere (Jas 3:17). He models for Christians the path to wisdom. He is also its end. For the believer, to pursue wisdom is to pursue Christ himself.

In his person and through his work, Christ reveals wisdom and amply demonstrates its value. In the words of Goldsworthy, “Christ justifies our confused wisdom by having perfect human wisdom for us. He sanctifies our confused wisdom by patterning the truth and by giving his Holy Spirit to lead us in the paths of that truth. Finally, he will glorify our wisdom when we are renewed through our resurrection and are made to reflect his character perfectly.”⁵⁵ Readers of Scripture learn these wonderful truths of God’s wisdom through the greatest Torah-informed Son of David and King of God’s people. Qoheleth did not see perfectly, but he did speak about wisdom truly. His teaching paves the way for Christ to bring perfect wisdom to God’s people.

Conclusion

Wisdom is bound up in creation. Adam and Eve were free to grow in wisdom without any pain. They sinned. Sin and death entered the world and brought frustration. Qoheleth meditates on the tension that exists in a world that God created and declared good, but that sin has also entered and frustrated. Though pursuing wisdom is now *הִבְּלָה*, it is still good. Though Qoheleth writes from an incomplete perspective, he paves the way for the redemption of wisdom through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In light of the teaching in Ecclesiastes, two applications emerge. First, pursuing wisdom will frustrate. Ecclesiastes 12:12 says, “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” God has ordained his creation in such a way that chasing wisdom to its limits only reveals that mystery still remains. Some

⁵⁵ Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom*, 524.

details belong to God alone. Wisdom provides a better way. People should seek it. But they must know that they cannot fully master it. Wisdom exhausts but it cannot be exhausted. Readers should pursue it diligently, aware of their limitations.

Second, the pursuit of wisdom brings people closer to gain than folly does (2:13). Qoheleth does not find the gain he seeks originally.⁵⁶ He does not fail because of ineptitude. Rather, wisdom alone cannot bring gain. The wise and the fool die alike. Still, wisdom presents the better way. The path of wisdom brings people closer to advantage. The gain Qoheleth sought may have eluded him. However, the gospel brings great gain in Christ. The path of wisdom is illuminated by the gospel and leads to the gospel. The wise will seek wisdom. By grace, they will find Christ.

⁵⁶ Fuhr, *Analysis*, 182.

CHAPTER 6

THE PURSUIT OF WEALTH

Fictional characters often give the most perceptive analysis of the human condition. From the safety of a contrived universe, these characters make statements that resonate with the hearts of fallen humanity. Though the actors and their setting are invented, they speak words that express how the audience truly thinks. The words of one character on a recent television show aptly illustrate how many people think about money. On the show *30 Rock*, wealthy businessman Jack Donaghy orders his life around the pursuit of money. He views everything in life as having a price tag and constantly schemes to take advantage of others to get richer. In many ways, the show portrays him as a caricature of American success. A priest once asks Jack if he has faith. Jack replies, “I have faith . . . in things I can see and buy and deregulate.”¹ His materialistic worldview also leads him to claim, “Money can’t buy happiness. It is happiness.”² Though Jack equates wealth with fulfillment, the show subtly mocks him for having an empty life. While he is a fictional character, Jack’s attitude reveals the heart of any person who chooses mammon as their god. His life also previews the emptiness that striving for wealth often produces.

In Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth reflects on the pursuit of wealth. Eden was perfect, with an abundance of everything humanity needed to thrive. Once sin and death entered God’s creation, they frustrated his good world. Humanity lost trust in the Creator. God’s

¹ *30 Rock*, season 3, episode 11, “St. Valentine’s Day,” directed by Don Scardino, aired February 12, 2009, on NBC.

² *30 Rock*, Season 5, episode 8, “College,” directed by Don Scardino, aired November 18, 2010, on NBC.

abundant provision suddenly had the potential to become an idol to pursue instead of a reason to worship. Qoheleth watched many misguided attempts in the pursuit of wealth and noted the ruin it brings to those who pursue it above all else. In order to prevent his readers from plunging headlong into the destruction that often accompanies the pursuit of wealth, he exposes the pitfalls and sets wealth in its proper context. Wealth is a gift from God but not a replacement for God.

Need

Qoheleth evaluates the **הֶבֶל** of pursuing wealth. He devotes ample space to riches because, as Leupold says, “First, because there are so many sides to riches, and, second, because the number of those who are entangled by the allurements of riches is very great.”³ In the hearts of fallen people, too much is never enough. Wealth can be a master according to Matthew 6:24. The prospect of losing wealth causes sorrow in Matthew 19:22. However, it cannot save or satisfy. When treating wealth as having the status of “god,” people will never understand it or utilize it according to its purpose. If and when wealth or financial security come, they arrive as a gift from God. People should enjoy them as such. Qoheleth desires that his readers view wealth in light of Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 and enjoy the blessings of life as good gifts from God.

Main Point

Under the sun, the pursuit and accumulation of wealth lack the ability to bring joy or satisfaction. Though wealth is not intrinsically evil (Eccl 5:19), reliance on it in the place of God is. Ecclesiastes 5:10–6:6 evaluates wealth and prosperity in a variety of situations, demonstrating that they too display **הֶבֶל**. Wealth becomes a blessing only when God gives power to enjoy it.

³ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 125.

Preview

Qoheleth makes statements about money (Eccl 4:8) or the results of labor, which could include wealth (Eccl 2:18), in a variety of passages. My exposition will follow his most extensive treatment of it in 5:10–6:6.⁴ My outline is as follows:

1. Wealth outside of Eden
2. The הֶבֶל of Wealth Apart from Joy (5:10–17)
3. God’s Gift: Joy (5:18–20)
4. The הֶבֶל of Prosperity Apart from Joy (6:1–6)

Context

To demonstrate his conclusion of the pervasiveness of הֶבֶל, Qoheleth has guided his readers through his empirical observations of several different pursuits including wisdom, pleasure, and work. Everything is הֶבֶל. However, many of the same themes also receive an analysis of “good” or “nothing better.” As I have argued in earlier chapters, Qoheleth does not contradict himself. Instead, he offers his analysis of living in a world where Eden has disappeared. Though sin and death frustrate God’s good gifts, these gifts remain good. Like his other pursuits, chasing wealth outside of Eden proves to be הֶבֶל. However, wealth can still be good.

To draw attention to his point that wealth can be a blessing when God gives power to enjoy it, Qoheleth employs a chiasmic arrangement. This literary technique allows him to center his argument in Ecclesiastes 5:18–20. Most commentators recognize a distinct pericope concerning wealth in this section of Ecclesiastes. Daniel Fredericks notes that, “The unity of 5:9–6:9 is seen by many commentators, who with different titles distinguish it clearly from its surrounding material.”⁵ Though commentators generally

⁴ The versification differs in the Hebrew and English Bibles. For simplicity, my references will follow the English Bible.

⁵ Daniel C. Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 no. 1 (1989): 18. His reference of 5:9 is to the Hebrew text.

agree that Qoheleth offers an extended treatment of wealth, they disagree over the exact length of the pericope and the structure of the chiasm. Fredericks offers the most thorough analysis of the structure.⁶ Many follow his conclusions, but with some modification.⁷ Others remain unconvinced of his analysis.⁸ Those who discern an intentionality in the structure tend to see 5:18–20 (or at least a portion) as the center. I have adopted a broader structure than most. My aim in doing so is to recognize the chiasmic arrangement while not trying to force details into my scheme. It appears that Qoheleth analyzes the frustration of wealth in 5:10–17 and the frustration of prosperity in 6:1–6. Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 stands in contrast to both. It contrasts with 5:10–17 in that God is never mentioned in those verses, but appears in 5:18–20.⁹ It contrasts with 6:1–6 (especially vv. 1–2) in that there Qoheleth sees what is evil compared to what is good in 5:18–20.¹⁰ The one detail that moves wealth from הַבָּל to good is when God gives the ability to enjoy it.

Exposition

First, I will analyze the Old Testament’s view of wealth outside of Eden as context for Ecclesiastes. Then, I will offer commentary on the text of Ecclesiastes. I will conclude with continuing reflections about wealth from the New Testament.

⁶ Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure,” 17–35. See also Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 147-149.

⁷ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 49; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 216-217.

⁸ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 216n14.

⁹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 119.

¹⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 217.

Wealth Outside of Eden

Within the three-fold division of the Old Testament canon, one can also discern another basic structure. The primary history covers the Torah through the Former Prophets (Genesis–Kings). Next, comes poetic commentary on the primary history in the Latter Prophets and the beginning of the Writings (Isaiah–Ecclesiastes). The final section of the Writings resumes the narrative.¹¹ I will briefly discuss the view of wealth presented in the primary history and then the poetic commentary, before analyzing Qoheleth in both historical and canonical context.

Torah and Former Prophets. God created the material world and intended for humanity to enjoy it. While the word “joy” does not appear in the early chapters of Genesis, Craig Bartholomew argues, “It is implied by the theology of blessing and embodied in the response to the good creation that is made as a home for humans.”¹² When Adam and Eve sinned, frustration entered the world. Sin’s corrupting presence created the need for redemption. God began the redemption process through Abram. From Abram’s family eventually came the nation Israel, through whom God would bless all nations. God gave Israel a special land where they would enjoy prosperity whenever they obeyed him rightly.¹³ On the way to the land, God brought his people to Sinai. God gave them laws demonstrating principles of liberty and justice. When prosperity came, Israel would have to follow regulations that promoted fairness. Land allotments should be proportional to tribe size (Num 26:52–56). Field boundaries were regulated (Deut 19:14).

¹¹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *With the Clouds of Heaven: The Book of Daniel in Biblical Theology*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 41.

¹² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 228.

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 55.

Scales and balances should be accurate (Lev 19:35–36).¹⁴ While God certainly desires fairness, a greater danger underlies unjust practices in the context of prosperity.

The greatest threat to Israel’s existence finds expression in Deuteronomy 8:14–20. Upon receiving blessing, they would need to take care not to forget the LORD. In verse 19, forgetting the LORD inexorably leads to following other gods. Deuteronomy 8 anticipates the battle for the heart between Almighty God and “almighty” mammon. As the primary history proceeded, many unfortunately chose mammon. Those with wealth often gained it at the expense of the poor, though by no means was this always the case. The pitfalls of pursuing wealth quickly became apparent and emerged as one topic that brought prophetic denunciation.

Poetic commentary. The prophetic literature focuses on numerous ways that people were unfaithful to God, including with their money. Their denunciations often target those taking advantage of others for their own gain (e. g., Ezek 22:29; Mic 2:2; and Amos 5:11-12). Such unrighteous behavior proves that these people worship mammon and do not belong to God. The Writings concur with the prophets and add further meditations on the deceitfulness of riches. The reasons why some get rich and others remain poor belong to the mystery of God.¹⁵ Even if riches come, one should not trust in them (Ps 62:10, Prov 11:28). These works encourage the righteous to remember that God will eventually bring justice and redeem the material world (e. g. Isa 60–66). In the interim, they should trust in God and not in worldly possessions. It is within the poetic commentary that Qoheleth writes.

Ecclesiastes in canonical and historical context. Canonically, Ecclesiastes fits within the poetic commentary on the primary history. In this position, Qoheleth adds

¹⁴ All references found in Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 40.

¹⁵ Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 82.

wisdom to the prophetic message regarding wealth. Historically, Solomon ruled during the united monarchy.¹⁶ This period saw Israel at the height of its economic prosperity. Within that prosperity a great temptation emerged to pursue riches above trusting in God. Solomon writes as a father and a king, faithfully instructing a young man (11:9) in the wisdom of the LORD.¹⁷

Solomon was a rich king. He had great wealth (1 Kgs 10:14–29). He knew what it was like to have great possessions. Armed with knowledge and experience of great wealth and its many pitfalls, he is now in position to instruct his readers about the הֵבֶל of pursuing wealth and point them to a better way.

The הֵבֶל of Wealth Apart from Joy (5:10–17)

Qoheleth often announces his verdict regarding his pursuits before describing them.¹⁸ In the outside sections of his chiasm, he begins by alerting readers that what he describes will be הֵבֶל. According to 2 Chronicles 9:22, Solomon was the richest and wisest king on earth. As such, he is qualified to speak about riches. Qoheleth’s wisdom comes from within the experience of rich living. James Kugel notes that Qoheleth inhabits a class of “financial high-rollers.”¹⁹ C. L. Seow concurs, noting “It takes a very rich person to bemoan the cost of wealth.”²⁰ The words of Ecclesiastes come from the pen of someone who knows first-hand the emptiness of pursuing wealth.

¹⁶ As a reminder, I affirm Qoheleth is Solomon. I am following David Gibson’s lead. I use Qoheleth instead of the name Solomon because doing so is in keeping with Ecclesiastes’ self-presentation. Only I transliterate Qoheleth whereas he prefers to translate it as “the Preacher.” See David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 163n1.

¹⁷ James M. Hamilton Jr., “That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (2010): 10–17.

¹⁸ See the discussion of this phenomenon in chapter 2.

¹⁹ James L. Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 46.

²⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 219.

In Ecclesiastes 5:10–17, Qoheleth speaks to money’s inability to satisfy. He states this conclusion plainly in 5:10. Readers already know this truth from 4:8. Now he takes a deeper dive. He teaches that a wrong approach to money results in countless troubles, not joy. Qoheleth gives readers no less than eight reasons that the pursuit of money cannot satisfy.

First, he notes that possessing wealth actually increases expenses (5:11a). He says that when goods increase, so do those who eat them. “Eating” or “consuming” functions as a key word in this pericope.²¹ Several times already, Qoheleth tells readers it is good to eat. He will say it again in 5:18. In this instance, however, the owner and procurer of the wealth watches his stockpile evaporate at the suction of human leeches.²² The more the owner acquires, the more expense he accrues. Seow says, “It is costly to be rich.”²³ How can this be? According to Matthew McCullough, “Experience shows that your perceived needs will always rise to meet your resources. Consumption always keeps pace with stock, so you never feel like you’ve arrived.”²⁴ A person may increase possessions and simultaneously see the acceleration of their disappearance.

The second reason money does not satisfy is that an increase in wealth only means the owner has more to see but not necessarily to enjoy. In 5:11b, Qoheleth asks what advantage more possessions bring other than allowing the owner to see them with his eyes. Readers already know that the eye is not satisfied with seeing (1:8). Looking at riches provides virtually no advantage other than giving the eye a focal point for a moment before they disappear. This pseudo-advantage cannot be what Qoheleth sought

²¹ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 126.

²² Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 312. The designation “leeches” may be too harsh. Perhaps the owner voluntarily shares his wealth.

²³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 219.

²⁴ Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 96.

during his experiment (1:3). Money could not satisfy his soul. Mammon and satisfaction do not go hand in hand.²⁵

The third reason money cannot satisfy according to Qoheleth is that an increase in wealth increases worry (5:12). The laborer sleeps soundly regardless of the contents in his stomach. The rich person goes to bed full and unable to sleep. Perhaps he suffers from indigestion.²⁶ However, since Qoheleth claims the laborer sleeps regardless of food intake, he probably means that the rich always eat their fill. Though the full laborer sleeps, the full rich man cannot. His riches cause worry. He has labored to acquire them. They have left him unsatisfied. Others want them. Deep down he knows they can disappear quickly. No wonder he cannot sleep.

Fourthly, Qoheleth observes in 5:13 that hoarded wealth can injure the owner. Commentators differ on precisely what Qoheleth means. The ambiguity of Qoheleth's words make it possible that the evil he describes follows his observation. If so, the rich person's hurt would be the pain of losing what he hoarded.²⁷ Alternatively, he could be looking backward to what he has already described. If so, the evil would be that despite an increase in goods, the owner only experienced harm.²⁸ Roland Murphy believes both approaches merit attention. If one loses sleep over guarding wealth, then losing it compounds the evil.²⁹ Whether Qoheleth has a specific idea in mind or simply offers a general observation, his point stands: hoarded wealth hurts those who hoard it. Those who pursue riches above all else not only remain unsatisfied, but they also hasten their

²⁵ Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 334.

²⁶ Knut Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 97. Heim also thinks toiling for the wind in 5:16 connects to the indigestion of 5:12. He believes Qoheleth uses humor by referring to a special kind of "wind" the rich vainly pursue.

²⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 221.

²⁸ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 127.

²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 52.

own demise.

In 5:14 Qoheleth describes the fifth shortcoming of wealth as its ability to disappear quickly and unexpectedly. A father lost his wealth in a bad venture. Though the situation appears to be a specific instance that Qoheleth knew, he leaves the details unspecified. This move could be intentional, allowing readers to relate his misfortune to things that have happened to them.³⁰ This scenario recalls Ecclesiastes 4:7–8. There, a man works hard for riches but has no son with whom to share them. Here, the father has riches and a son—until the riches flee. Both men acquired great wealth. One kept his wealth, and the other lost his. Both know the הֶבֶל of their pursuits. Qoheleth wants his readers to know that wealth cannot be the security many believe it to be.

The sixth reason money will never satisfy appears in 5:15. Death pries wealth from everyone. Most likely, 5:15–17 describes the father from verse 14 and not the son.³¹ The father (like all people) comes from his mother's womb naked and can take nothing with him when he leaves the world. Job acknowledged the same reality in Job 1:21. Job recognized that his loss was the LORD's doing and blessed him for it. Qoheleth does not say that the circumstances he describes are owed to the sovereignty of God; but since he says God gives the riches (5:19; 6:2), he likely implies that God takes them also.

Qoheleth filters his observations through the lens of Psalm 49. The psalmist reflects on death as the great equalizer between him and his wealthy and powerful enemies. In verses 8–15, he focuses on the impotence of material resources in the face of death. Because God will ransom the righteous from Sheol (v. 15), he instructs readers not to fear the rich nor trust in riches themselves. Knut Heim argues that Qoheleth uses Psalm 49 intentionally to teach readers that since wealth can be lost at any time and for

³⁰ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 166.

³¹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 151.

countless reasons (5:13), and since no one can take wealth with them (5:14), pursuing and hoarding wealth can only end in frustration.³² Death will strip away all wealth eventually. Qoheleth tells his readers they would be better served not to make the pursuit of wealth ultimate.

Money's seventh shortcoming is that it provides no advantage (5:16). Qoheleth asks, "What gain is there to him who toils for the wind?" "Gain" or "advantage" largely eludes Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes. He appears to despair in the very search since 1:3. Although at times he finds some gain (2:13), mostly he finds none. In this section on wealth, he admits of a small gain in 5:11. However, he appears to do so in a mocking way. The only advantage wealth provides is giving the eyes a focal point. Those who tirelessly pursue wealth have no real advantage when they find it. This truth stings more deeply for those who acquire wealth only to watch their work evaporate like the morning fog.

Lastly, wealth will never satisfy because living for wealth proves to be foolish and fills life with evil. Commentators note the difficulty with interpreting 5:17. Primarily, they disagree on the reference to the rich person consuming in darkness. Perhaps he had to work long hours to make up for lost riches, so he eats at night. Some think he is now so poor he cannot afford to light his lamp. Others believe he is too cheap to pay for oil.³³ Still others believe Qoheleth uses figurative language as a metaphor for loneliness.³⁴ Daniel Treier notes that 5:17 contrasts ironically with 5:11. Before, he watched others consume his goods—but at least he saw it. Now, he cannot see any fruits of his labor.³⁵

³² Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

³³ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 37. Fox believes this is the opposite of 9:7. Rather than joy he hoards his wealth and "lives poor to die rich."

³⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 222 articulates the options.

³⁵ Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 337.

While interpretations diverge, paying attention to the way the metaphors function in the context points readers in the right direction. “Eating” describes a fact of life for rich and poor alike. “Darkness” occurs twice in 6:4 regarding the fate of the stillborn. He is dead. The basic idea then is that those who pursue riches above all else live life as though they are already dead.³⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:14 claims that the fool walks in darkness. His entire life mirrors the fate of the stillborn. In fact, his fate is worse, as 6:1–6 will show. His life has been foolish and only brought misery. The pursuit of wealth can often make life feel like death.

It is important to note that wealth does not present a problem *per se*. For all the evil that Qoheleth sees (5:13, 16; 6:1–2), he also sees good. Sandwiched between his two sections on the חֵלֶק of wealth, Qoheleth teaches that there can be goodness connected to it. However, such goodness only comes as God’s gift.

God’s Gift: Joy (5:18-20)

Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 presents a radically different approach to life under the sun than the previous section.³⁷ Qoheleth sees what is “good.” The word “good” recalls Eden. At the conclusion of his creating work, God declared that it was very good. Eden may be lost now that sin has entered the world and frustrated everything. Still, sin has not removed the goodness of creation. God’s declaration stands. God gives people true joy, not just mere moments to dull the pain.³⁸

Qoheleth never mentions God in 5:8–17.³⁹ In 5:18–20, he acknowledges the work of God four times. Many ungodly people imagine that wealth and joy go hand in

³⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 222.

³⁷ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 226.

³⁸ Contra Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 168.

³⁹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

hand. Qoheleth teaches that they do not.⁴⁰ A person may have wealth without joy. He may also have joy apart from wealth. The two do not relate, nor are they mutually exclusive. When God grants joy along with wealth, it is a gift.

By using the language of “gift,” Qoheleth implies that humanity is a passive recipient of God’s beneficence. Because they are so, they must exercise sobriety in their evaluation of wealth. They must also refuse to let wealth control them.⁴¹ Wealth is not a god. Instead, wealth comes under the control of the true God. God shows his superiority to wealth by being the one who gives it. In 5:18, God gives life. In 5:19, he gives wealth and possessions. God also gives—as a gift—the power to enjoy wealth and possessions. Out of his abundance, he graciously dispenses gifts.⁴² Even so, God dispenses those gifts—including joy—at his discretion according to his purpose (6:2)

Ecclesiastes 5:18–20 belongs to the *carpe diem* texts throughout the book.⁴³ R. N. Whybray cites this text as part of his proof for Qoheleth being a “preacher of joy.”⁴⁴ Joy becomes the key differentiator between 5:18–20 and the הַבִּלְהָל passages on the outer edges of his chiasm. God gives gifts and humanity receives them. True joy comes in the recognition of that relationship.

In Ecclesiastes 5:19, Qoheleth affirms that God both allows and approves of the enjoyment of material possessions. In this verse he also affirms several truths important to his theology.⁴⁵ First, those who secure wealth only do so through divine providence. He says that God is the one who gives wealth and possessions. Second, those

⁴⁰ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119; Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 334.

⁴¹ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 130 says, “the usual experience of men who have accumulated wealth is that *they* stand under the power of their *wealth*, not *wealth* under *their* power.” (Emphasis original).

⁴² Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 338.

⁴³ See chapter two for a discussion of these passages.

⁴⁴ R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87–98.

⁴⁵ Knut Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 106–7.

who enjoy wealth do so through divine providence. He affirms that God gives the power to enjoy. Third, some can be content with only a little, if God grants it to them. Qoheleth says that God gives some power to accept their lot. Finally, all who possess the first three skills can exercise them only because they are a gift from God. Those who believe they secure their own wealth, cannot enjoy it, and constantly want more will never know true joy. Those who realize that their possession of wealth, their ability to enjoy it, and their contentment in what they have come from God know true joy. Those who know such joy live in the moment, so occupied with God's good gift that God allows them to forget the הֶבֶל of this life (5:20).

People who approach life according to Ecclesiastes 5:10–17 pursue wealth only to find הֶבֶל. Those who approach life according to 5:18–20 operate from a different mindset. Fuhr notes that for them, “In light of the observation that life is fleeting, death is inevitable, and the circumstances of one’s future lie outside the realm of man’s control, the wise will enjoy life, recognizing that joy is ultimately an opportunity for present satisfaction given as a gift from God.”⁴⁶ Indeed, “genuine enjoyment comes only from God, putting worldly desires in the proper context, namely that they are always passing away.”⁴⁷ Wealth is not able to satisfy. For some, when God grants it, wealth can be enjoyed. Joy only comes when people know that God is God and wealth is a poor substitute.

Qoheleth frames this section of Ecclesiastes with another observation of evil. In 6:1–6, he evaluates the הֶבֶל of more than just material goods. He evaluates a broader range of blessings that typically characterize a prosperous life. Such prosperity is no safe haven from a life that proves to be הֶבֶל.

⁴⁶ Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qoheleth* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 185–6.

⁴⁷ Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 341.

The הַבֵּל of Prosperity Apart from Joy (6:1–6)

Several authors note the parallels and contrasts between Ecclesiastes 5:18–19 and 6:1–2.⁴⁸ Ecclesiastes 5:18–19 refers to everyone, while 6:1–2 speaks about a particular case. In the former, Qoheleth sees “good.” In the latter, he sees evil. In both places, God gives wealth and possessions. However, in 5:18–19 he grants the ability to enjoy them while withholding that ability in 6:1–2. God graciously gifting people with the ability to enjoy wealth proves to be the difference between a life of contentment and a life of misery.

Prosperity when God withholds joy (6:1–2). Qoheleth sees another evil which lies heavy on mankind. The word translated “heavy” typically refers to quantity, but can also refer to quality.⁴⁹ If Qoheleth uses the term quantitatively, he means something like “this particular evil happens frequently.” If he uses it qualitatively, he would mean that when such a circumstance comes to pass, it weighs heavily on a person. I understand the term quantitatively. Though God gives some people the ability to enjoy prosperity, he does not give it to all. In light of Qoheleth’s observation of the troubles that riches can bring, and the universal appeal of mammon, most likely he means to say that many rich people succumb to this burden.

Perhaps no one understood the burden of riches better than Solomon. In 2 Chronicles 1, God told Solomon to ask anything from him. Solomon asked for wisdom and knowledge. God granted those to him—along with possessions, wealth, and honor (2 Chr 1:11–12). Though Solomon did not ask for them, God gave them anyway. Ecclesiastes 6 mourns a man who had wealth, possessions, and honor. Though speculative, one must wonder if Solomon refers to himself. Perhaps he was not able to

⁴⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 235; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 225; Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 340.

⁴⁹ See the discussion in Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 169.

enjoy the blessings God gave him. Many details in Ecclesiastes fit Solomon's life seamlessly. This one is no different.⁵⁰

Whoever the unfortunate person is, he not only feels no joy in his prosperity, but someone else does. Earlier, Qoheleth complained about inheritance going to the wrong person (2:18). However, at least it went to someone he knew. In 6:2, a stranger enjoys it. Qoheleth bemoans leeches consuming riches (5:11). Still, those leeches apparently have a face and a name. In 6:2, an unknown person enjoys the riches—and presumably because God allows him to do so (5:19). Qoheleth sees הֶבֶל. To paint a further picture of the evil, Qoheleth employs two analogies to show the emptiness of a life filled with godless joylessness.

Two analogies (6:3–6). The first analogy uses hyperbole to apply two proverbial blessings to this unfortunate man: children and a long life.⁵¹ He has one hundred kids—more than anyone can imagine. He also lives an incredible length of time. Verse 6 specifies the clearly fictional length of one thousand years twice over—more than double those in the early chapters of Genesis. Should anyone achieve such outstanding accomplishments, their life could still end in הֶבֶל. They could die joyless and without a burial. Not having a burial likely indicates judgment and isolation from true community.⁵² Among Semitic peoples, proper burial indicates that a good life came to end in a good death.⁵³ In Ecclesiastes 4:8–12, Qoheleth speaks about behavior that isolates a person from others. Community is better than loneliness. He hopes his readers

⁵⁰ Whether he speaks about himself does not ultimately matter. His point stands: the situation is a miserable one.

⁵¹ See Job 1:12–17 as one example.

⁵² Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 172. He cites Isaiah 14:20 as one example.

⁵³ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 129.

embrace that perspective before it is too late. By Ecclesiastes 6:3, this unfortunate man has died. He has no one to bury him. His affluent life ends with nothing, paving the way for the second analogy.

Qoheleth compares a joyless life with that of a stillborn. The stillborn comes in הַבֶּל and goes in darkness. In darkness, its name is also covered. The stillborn does not see the sun nor know anything. Readers can rightly question why being a stillborn presents a better option. Qoheleth only tells them that the stillborn finds rest.

While Qoheleth's words may sound insensitive, interpreters must remember that he is using an analogy to turn worldly "wisdom" upside down. The prosperous man in 6:1–3 has all a person could desire. People would congratulate and envy him. In contrast, a stillborn never lived nor possessed any of the wares the rich man had. Worldly "wisdom" would call its situation sad. Qoheleth disagrees. He does not celebrate the tragedy of a stillborn. Rather, he says its existence is preferable to the joyless man. Zack Eswine says, "The stillborn child, though he or she never had money, never built a house, never saw the latest movies, or tried on the latest trends, is nonetheless, at rest. Rest, and this with God, is one thing the rich man still does not possess."⁵⁴ While a still birth is tragic, a greater tragedy exists in a prosperous life that lacks the true joy that comes from God.⁵⁵ Qoheleth breaks off his statement about this prosperous man with an ellipsis. Readers already know the situation is evil. Death, the great equalizer, receives the prosperous man as it did the infant. The difference being that he lived a life without joy.

God-given joy sets wealth in proper context. Qoheleth's teaching finds parallel expressions in the New Testament. Solomon, the Torah-informed king and son of David, taught people wisely in his day. When the greater Torah-informed, High King of Heaven,

⁵⁴ Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 173.

⁵⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 720. He captures the thrust of Ecclesiastes 6:1-6 well. He says, "Better, certainly, is no life than a joyless life, and, moreover, one ending dishonorably."

and greatest Son of David came, he continued that teaching and called people to joy and rest in himself.

Qoheleth, Wealth, and the New Testament

The New Testament does not quote Ecclesiastes. However, the New Testament authors embrace the same worldview as Qoheleth. Therefore, readers should not be surprised that Qoheleth's teaching finds echoes and considerable parallels in the New Testament. Space limitations only allow for a few representative examples.⁵⁶

In the gospels, Jesus frequently addresses the dangers of wealth. In Matthew 6:19–24 he calls his followers to lay up eternal, indestructible, and safe treasure in heaven. They should not make the acquisition of earthly treasure their ultimate aim in life. If they do, mammon becomes their god. Jesus bluntly expresses the impossibility of serving dual masters: you cannot serve God and money. Matthew's gospel provides an apt illustration of this principle in 19:16–24. The rich young man leaves Jesus saddened because he did not want to separate from his great possessions. Riches make entrance into the kingdom difficult.

Jesus recognizes the great teaching potential that wealth provides. In Matthew 13:1–9 he tells the parable of the soils. One type of seed falls among thorns and get choked. In 13:22, Jesus tells his disciples that this type of soil illustrates how the deceitfulness of riches chokes the word and renders it unfruitful. Later in the same chapter, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field and a great pearl. The greed bound up in sinful hearts easily grasps the appeal of treasure. Jesus is able to turn that inclination in a positive direction by showing that people should seek God's kingdom with a fervency at least equal to the pursuit of earthly wealth.

Jesus also wants his followers to recognize the limited value of wealth. In Luke

⁵⁶ For a thorough treatment on the New Testament's teaching about material possessions, see Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 111–240.

12:13–20, he tells the parable of a rich fool who stores up his goods only to have death pry them from his fingers. Several scholars note the similarities between the rich fool and the unfortunate man in Ecclesiastes 5:15.⁵⁷ Money provides no earthly security. It can flee and life can end suddenly.

The epistles carry forward and expand on the teachings of Jesus. They teach that rather than pursue riches, believers should be content with what God provides. Hebrews 13:5 warns readers to keep their lives free from love of money and be content with what they have. The apostle Paul tells the Philippian church that he knows how to be content in all situations (Phil 4:11–12). He fits the description in Ecclesiastes 5:19 of the man to whom God gives the ability to accept his lot.⁵⁸ First John 2:15–17 warns readers that the world and all of its desires are passing away. An inordinate desire to possess and consume goods proves antithetical to serving God.⁵⁹

The most extensive New Testament passage with links to Ecclesiastes 5–6 is 1 Timothy 6:5–10, 17–19. A cursory reading reveals numerous parallels.⁶⁰ Perhaps Paul had the text of Ecclesiastes in front of him when he wrote to Timothy. He notes the dangers of discontentment and how the pursuit of riches can plunge people into ruin and destruction. A desire for riches has turned some away from faith. Like Qoheleth, Paul affirms that no one can take anything out of the world when they die. Contentment in God’s provision is the best attitude to possess. For those who are rich, they should not be haughty or hope in their uncertain riches. Instead, they should hope in the God who provides everything to enjoy. They should do good to others and be generous. In that way they store up for themselves treasure as a good foundation for the future and take hold of

⁵⁷ e. g. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 221.

⁵⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

⁵⁹ Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 339.

⁶⁰ See Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 210-211; Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 336.

that which is truly life.

Conclusion

While God created the world for enjoyment, the entrance of sin quickly turned human hearts away from God's original design. Eden was perfect. God provided plenty of resources to bless all people that would have come to inhabit it. Sin brought a destructive desire to hoard and prevent others from sharing in equal blessing. Moses, as well as Israel's other prophets, constantly call the people away from the allure of wealth, warning them of the destructive effects it can have when it becomes central in their lives. Qoheleth adds his voice to this tradition, describing the הֵבֶל of wealth and prosperity apart from the gift of joy that comes from God.

Qoheleth's words have great relevance in the contemporary church. Wisdom calls for more than simple agreement with his observations. Concrete action becomes imperative. I offer two suggestions. First, those in the church should search their hearts and realize how strong an idol wealth is. One way to do this is to pay attention to how appealing the rhetoric of advertising can be. Advertisers are the "great prophets and evangelists of Mammon" who create myths about the necessity of products.⁶¹ They persuade many Christians of their message because both share the same gods. If the church would break from the destructive pattern the pursuit of wealth causes, it should learn how to resist deceptive rhetoric and abandon its false idols.

Second, if wealth has the potential to bring as much pain as Qoheleth claims, and can seduce people away from God, Christians can guard against the temptation to overvalue it by giving away some of their surplus.⁶² Some may be overwhelmed by this suggestion. It raises questions of how much and to whom should the money go? There is

⁶¹ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 135.

⁶² Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 247.

no one-size-fits-all answer. Church leadership should strive to help their people understand a balance of wealth, contentment, and stewardship.⁶³ In this way, they can provide guidance through such financial questions as well as model it. One way to do so is to research organizations, at home and abroad, who faithfully administer funds to meet a variety of needs with the ultimate goal of making Jesus known through the preaching of the gospel. The church can keep a list and work to maintain partnerships with these organizations as an avenue for individual members to give to them either through the church or outside of it. From there, prayer and individual counsel become important in the discernment process for what obedience entails in that person's or family's life. Through this process, people can enjoy the wealth God gives them and enjoy the blessings of faithful stewardship in seeking to share their wealth with others in need.

While God allows some to enjoy riches, true riches do not ultimately come in this life. Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christ was rich and became poor so that by his poverty believers might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Peter counsels his readers that an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance awaits those who belong to Christ (1 Pet 1:4). True riches lie ahead. Life in the new creation will mean enjoying the material world created by God, completely free from the הֶבֶל that now dominates.

⁶³ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 157–158.

CHAPTER 7

THE INNER LONGING FOR JUSTICE

Children learn the concept of justice at an early age. Though they are not likely able to define justice, their grasp of the concept can be heard in their complaint that something is not fair. Parents often wisely attempt to instill the notion of justice within their children as they train them how to behave toward others. As children grow, they learn that not everything is fair. For example: people cheat to win prizes; one person works hard on a project while another gets credit; and some people take advantage of others' generosity. Intuitively, children understand that something is amiss in these situations. Justice has broken down. Life is not fair.

The yearning for justice grows exponentially when a particular phenomenon manifests itself—when wicked people prosper and righteous people suffer. Surely a just God who created a perfect world would never let that happen. However, it does happen. Injustice pervades the world outside of Eden. Believers need to be prepared for injustices of various sorts and be equipped to face them.

Qoheleth witnessed many examples of injustice. His teaching on the subject shows readers that injustice is typical and to be expected outside of Eden. In Ecclesiastes, he offers his meditations to help readers navigate various injustices and to set their hope on the God who will bring about perfect justice in the end (Eccl 12:14).

Need

Qoheleth evaluates the הַבָּל he found while looking for justice. Other wisdom traditions in Israel taught that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer (e.g., Prov 9:9, 11:8). Qoheleth knows this wisdom teaching very well. He wrote much of it. Still, in

Ecclesiastes he notes the numerous instances of injustice that he has seen. Outside of Eden, injustice not only exists; it appears to prevail. Qoheleth wants his readers to recognize the reality and extent of injustice in the world. He also wants to give readers wisdom for how to respond in such situations.

Main Point

Under the sun, injustice abounds in astonishing measure. Qoheleth reports on his observations of injustice in various places. Even where justice ought to exist, he finds injustice (Eccl 3:16). For Qoheleth, expecting sinners outside of Eden to act justly displays הֶבֶל. Still, though injustice abounds, believers can respond properly by applying the cumulative message of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth teaches his readers to recognize their limitations, be joyful, and remember that final judgment is coming.

Preview

Qoheleth treats the issue of injustice in several places throughout Ecclesiastes. My treatment will necessarily be thematic and not tied to one text. I will demonstrate Qoheleth's attitude toward and prescription for injustice outside of Eden according to the following outline:

1. The Breakdown of Justice outside of Eden
2. Injustice "Under the Sun"
3. Qoheleth's Prescribed Reactions to Injustice
4. The New Testament and Final Judgment

Context

To demonstrate his conclusion of the pervasiveness of הֶבֶל, Qoheleth has guided his readers through his empirical observations of several different pursuits including wisdom, pleasure, and work. Everything is הֶבֶל. Unlike other themes treated throughout this project, justice and injustice receive no analysis of "good" or "better."

Instead, Qoheleth affirms that justice will prevail at a time set by God. He treats the issue of injustice in Ecclesiastes 3:16–22; 4:1; 5:8; 7:15–18; 8:9–17; and 10:5–7.¹ As readers maneuver through the text, they need to remember the end from the beginning. They are to fear God and keep his commandments, because the day is coming when every work will be brought into judgment (Eccl 12:13–14).

Exposition

First, I will analyze the breakdown of justice once Adam and Eve were removed from Eden. Then, I will comment on Qoheleth's examples of injustice and how he encourages readers to respond to them. I will conclude with reflections from the New Testament about the advent of true justice at the return of Christ.

The Breakdown of Justice outside of Eden

In Genesis 1:26–28, God created man and woman in his image. In doing so he implies ontological equality between the sexes. God then tasks them with multiplying and filling the earth. God also tells them to have dominion over all his creation. In the parallel account of creation in Genesis 2, God shows that the task of subduing is too much for one person. Adam needs a helper corresponding to him. God knows the task of subduing is still too difficult for two people, so they must multiply and fill the earth. When Adam fathers Seth, he fathers a son in his own image, which is God's image (Gen 5:3). This description shows that the equality between the man and woman extends to their offspring as well. Every human created in God's image is equal and worthy of dignity.

¹ Some scholars find discussions of divine justice in other passages. For example, Lisa Wolfe understands 9:1–3 as a justice passage. In it, the righteous and the sinner both die. It seems unjust for both to receive the same fate. However, Qoheleth does not view death as unjust. It is simply a reality for all. My concern in this chapter is the passages that specifically address situations in which wickedness appears to prevail and the righteous suffer. See Lisa M. Wolfe, "Seeing Gives Rise to Disbelieving: Qoheleth's 'Absurd' (הַבְּרָלָה) Search for Divine Justice," *Proceedings* 24 (2004): 35-43.

When the man and woman sin, God punishes them. There will now be a rift in Eve's relationship to her husband (Gen 3:16). At this point, הַבָּל enters into human relationships. Those relationships continue to deteriorate as the story moves forward, illustrating increasing injustice. Enmity arises between Cain and Abel as Cain murders Abel. Injustice appears to triumph as the righteous Abel dies and the wicked Cain continues to live and perpetuate his line.² After Cain commits murder, his descendant sustains the tradition. Lamech kills a young man for striking him. Retaliation goes beyond the crime. Justice has broken down. By Genesis 6:5, readers discover that wickedness was great throughout the earth in the days of Noah: "Every intention of the thoughts of a man's heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). Part of the outworking of this reality must have been the multiplication of injustices like those of Cain and Lamech. Eden is a distant memory by this point. Justice seems too far gone to recover.

Qoheleth realizes that people generally desire equality and justice. He also observes that the desire for justice in this life is often unmet. The retribution principle found elsewhere in Scripture does not always work out neatly in the details of life. Old Testament scholar John Walton labels Ecclesiastes 8:10–14 as, "Live as if the Retribution Principle Were True, but Don't Expect to See It Operating in Your Experience."³ Walton probably overstates his case. Nonetheless, he captures the frustration Qoheleth voices: there should be justice, but it is absent.

Even so, God is still just. If the responsibilities of a sovereign require him to maintain justice in his realm, God will certainly uphold righteousness and punish wrongdoing in the world he created.⁴ The biblical authors believed they inhabited a world

² David M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19, no. 3 (1994): 7.

³ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 368.

⁴ John A. Davies, "Theodicy," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 815.

in which God punishes wickedness. They also believed that those in a relationship with God who exhibit a lifestyle consistent with that relationship will be blessed by him. God is the one to whom the righteous under oppression can turn for deliverance. They also understand that God sovereignly dispenses justice, which means he can choose to withhold punishment. If God chooses to show mercy to those who have committed injustice, then his exercise of justice does not proceed according to a formula.⁵ The God of justice is not unjust because he does not act precisely the way one thinks he ought to act in a given situation.

However he decides to act, God is a just judge (Gen 18:25). Although injustice and wickedness exist in the world, God frequently intervenes to establish his righteousness.⁶ Qoheleth believes in the righteous character of God. What troubles him is that if God is a just judge, then where is justice? To answer that question, readers must consider Qoheleth's observations about injustice and then contemplate his prescribed reactions to them.

Injustice “Under the Sun”

Qoheleth roots many of his statements about injustice in his empirical observations. He frequently uses “I saw” as an autobiographical marker.⁷ He sees breakdowns of justice in various arenas. The unrighteous treatment of human beings outside of Eden has spread rampantly. Injustice seems to exist everywhere, in large amounts, and is so entrenched that it appears nothing can be done to change it.

⁵ Davies, “Theodicy,” 815.

⁶ Mark Seifrid notes that references to the righteousness of God can be to his saving righteousness or his retributive righteousness. References to retributive righteousness typically come in response to divine judgment. References to saving righteousness tend to appear in contexts where the biblical author expresses an expectation that God will right present wrongs. See Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ, our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 44. Qoheleth bemoans an apparent lack of saving righteousness while holding firm to a belief in a final retributive righteousness.

⁷ Wolfe, “Seeing Gives Rise to Disbelieving,” 37. She notes how Qoheleth's observations give rise to the theological matters he explores.

Qoheleth describes the first breakdown of justice as happening simply in the place of justice and the place of righteousness (3:16). Most likely he only references one place. By calling it the place of righteousness he shows that he believes the place of justice to be an arena where righteous judgments would be made.⁸ The place of justice is probably the law courts⁹ or the city gates.¹⁰ Those who served in this position were responsible for making sure that justice prevailed in the land. In 2 Chronicles 19:6–7, Jehoshaphat said to the judges, “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes.”¹¹ If God is just and the judges were to rule for the LORD, then they should rule righteously. Qoheleth perceives that they act wickedly. C. L. Seow believes the place of righteousness also includes the temple.¹² To be sure, righteousness should prevail in the place of worship. It does not. The abruptness of Qoheleth’s language in 3:16 highlights his outrage.¹³ Such circumstances should not exist.

In Ecclesiastes 4:1, Qoheleth describes further injustice. Here, he takes up the theme of oppression raised in 3:16 and extends his critique.¹⁴ He claims he has seen “all”

⁸ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 127.

⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 25; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 127.

¹⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 177.

¹¹ Daniel Fredericks drew my attention to this verse. See Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 120.

¹² Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 175. He understands 5:8 (English) to connect with the previous passage on worship.

¹³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 127.

¹⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 185; Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 199.

the oppressions done under the sun. His lack of specificity indicates widespread abuse. All around he sees evidence that Eden is lost. Humanity was commanded to subdue the earth. However, the oppression of other image-bearers is the evil extreme of implementing that commission.¹⁵ The oppressors have power, but the oppressed have no one to comfort them. Qoheleth laments such terrible conditions.

Michael Fox notes that Qoheleth does not demand that the oppressors stop, nor does he condemn what they do. He also does not think Qoheleth sees a possibility for improvement.¹⁶ Tremper Longman adds that Qoheleth does nothing to alleviate the suffering, nor ask others to do so.¹⁷ Daniel Treier sees a subtle condemnation of members in the community for their inaction on behalf of the oppressed.¹⁸ Whatever the nature of the oppression, Qoheleth wants justice but knows that bringing it is beyond his power.

In Ecclesiastes 5:8, Qoheleth describes another injustice. He also instructs his readers not to be surprised if they see it. He tells them that oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness will happen because of an intricate network of corruption.¹⁹ Officials are watched by another, and their supervisor is monitored by a higher one still. Fox argues that simply watching would not lead to injustice. Instead, the nuance in 5:8 is that officials look out for each other, making it impossible to root out corruption.²⁰ Qoheleth appears resigned to the reality.

¹⁵ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 132.

¹⁶ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 27.

¹⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 134. For Longman, Qoheleth's inaction proves that he is not Solomon. He argues that justice is the ultimate responsibility of the king. Qoheleth does not like the injustice but also takes no responsibility for it. However, Solomon is not sovereign. His inability to bring complete justice as king leaves readers longing for one greater than Solomon who would rule forever as a righteous king. Qoheleth's inability does not necessitate that Qoheleth is not really Solomon.

¹⁸ Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 309.

¹⁹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 217.

²⁰ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 213.

In 7:15, Qoheleth shares another of his empirical observations. He claims to have seen everything in his *הַבְּלָה* life. Here, he stresses that he has seen the breakdown of a simplistic retribution theology. He has seen a righteous man perish in his righteousness and a wicked man prolong his life in his evildoing. Significantly, the righteous perish “in” their righteousness and not because of it.²¹ Similarly, the wicked prolong life in spite of evildoing and not because of it. Qoheleth’s experience led him to find examples that appear to contradict Proverbs’ character-consequence teaching that righteousness leads to blessing while folly brings destruction.²² Roland Murphy suggests that the contradiction is an example of what God has made crooked (7:13).²³ Below, I will show how the “contradiction” actually sets the stage for Qoheleth’s advice in 7:16–18.

Qoheleth has seen yet another example of injustice: the way a king rules over people to their harm. In 8:9 Qoheleth claims he has observed under the sun incidents of one man having power over another to his hurt. This verse explains the reason for all of 8:2–15. Daniel Fredericks says, “Unjust leadership puts wise subordinates in tough positions of servile compliance (vv. 2–5), believes itself invincible (v. 8), winks at cultic hypocrisy (v. 10), allows proliferation of evil (v. 11), and strains any faith in justice (vv. 12–14).”²⁴ To this list one might add the folly of 10:5–7. The ruler promotes “idiots” to places of honor while demoting others.²⁵ Wicked kings can rule over people in harmful ways—and then those kings die.

The death and burial of the wicked presents a special problem for Qoheleth in 8:10. While they were alive, these wicked people used to go in and out of the holy place.

²¹ Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, 358.

²² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 255.

²³ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 69.

²⁴ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 194.

²⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 325.

They were hypocrites. Qoheleth warns against such people in 5:1–7. The warning now has a tangible example that Qoheleth has seen.²⁶ Even though these people participated in worship, it had no effect on their wickedness. As Craig Bartholomew says, “They were hypocrites going through the form of religion but denying its spirit.”²⁷ The hypocrisy is bad enough. What really bothers Qoheleth is the response of others to the hypocrisy.

Crucial to the interpretation of the people’s response to the wicked is the translation of a key verb. The Masoretic Text reads that the wicked were וְאִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ. This word should be translated as “forgotten.” Some scholars suggest an emendation to the Masoretic text, changing the rendering to וְאִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ.²⁸ The emendation would be translated “praised” and is the reading adopted by the ESV.

If the proper reading is “praised,” then the meaning of the verse is relatively simple: the wicked people went to worship and others spoke highly of them for it. In this reading, the wicked receive praise for their outward actions which contradict the reality of who they are. If the proper reading is “forgotten,” further issues emerge. What does it mean that the wicked are forgotten? Some scholars understand “forgotten” to connect not to the wicked, but to the rest of the clause. They believe that those who used to go in and out of the holy place and are then forgotten are the righteous.²⁹ In order for this interpretation to work, Qoheleth would have to shift his emphasis within the verse. He appears to discuss the wicked throughout. They are the ones who are forgotten.

Others understand the word “forgotten” to apply to the wicked, but in a positive sense. Iain Provan argues that the hurt mentioned in 8:9 is ambiguous. The hurt

²⁶ Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, 377. Treier notes that the same hypocrisy is in view in both passages.

²⁷ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 290.

²⁸ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 139. He says the emendation is “almost certainly correct.” See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 218-219.

²⁹ Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 748-749; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 294.

could fall on those under the rule of a harsh king, or it could fall on the king himself. He believes that Qoheleth wants readers to keep both outcomes in mind. The hurt that falls on the wicked king damages himself. He eventually dies and his reign comes to an end. He is then forgotten and the memory of him fades even where he was most well-known.³⁰ The problem with this view is that Qoheleth calls the burial הָבֵל. The death of a wicked king would be good news. That he calls the king's death הָבֵל requires further reflection.

A final approach accepts the majority reading of “forgotten,” applies it to the wicked, and reads it in a negative sense. To say the wicked are forgotten means that after the wicked die, people forget what they were really like.³¹ The community did not deal with their wickedness while they were still alive. They then forgot that any wickedness existed at all. Justice never comes to them and the neglect fosters further wickedness.³²

The final approach is most likely. The majority Hebrew reading fits best with the details of the passage. Hypocritical worship is a perennial problem. However, Qoheleth wants justice to come to these people. They saw no justice in this life. Their wickedness was forgotten, so they are never called to account for their actions. Treier notes the parallel often seen today in celebrity eulogies. Regardless of their misdeeds, they are often still lauded as “great people.” Their evil appears to be of no consequence.³³ Qoheleth sums up the entire episode from 8:10b–13 in 8:14.³⁴ The righteous sometimes receive the punishment that wickedness deserves. The wicked sometimes get the reward that righteousness deserves. This reality is הָבֵל. How can people function, let alone thrive, in a world where such injustice abounds?

³⁰ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 167.

³¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 290.

³² Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, 378.

³³ Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, 378-379.

³⁴ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 253.

Qoheleth's Prescribed Reactions to Injustice

In the passages dealing with the lack of justice outside of Eden, Qoheleth offers his readers three pieces of advice. Admittedly, the first two do nothing to solve the problem of injustice. The resolution only comes with his third recommendation. If the people of God would live wisely outside of Eden, they must recognize their limitations, be joyful, and remember that final judgment is coming.

Recognize limitations. Qoheleth calls on his readers to recognize their limitations in several ways. The first comes in 3:18–21. While observing the injustice of 3:16, Qoheleth said to himself that God is testing people so they may see they are but beasts. All die and return to the dust. On the surface, equating people with animals appears to contradict Genesis 1–3. However, readers must remember that Qoheleth offers empirical observations. Based on what one can see, all people can know is that humans die like animals do. Apart from divine revelation, this conclusion is the only one anybody could know for certain.³⁵ Qoheleth is not alone in equating humans and animals in this way. Genesis 7:21–22 notes that everything in whose nostrils was the breath of life—animals and mankind—died in the flood.³⁶ Qoheleth appears to be emphasizing the fickleness of creaturely existence. Breath and dust are not a stable combination.³⁷ Observationally, humans are no better than animals because they both eventually die. Qoheleth wants readers to recognize the reality of death, how fickle they are in the face of it, and let that reality inform how they think about justice.

The second call to recognize limitations comes in 7:16–18. As mentioned above, Roland Murphy believes that Ecclesiastes 7:15 contradicts the character-

³⁵ Treier, *Ecclesiastes*, 306.

³⁶ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 97; Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 121, also notes, “the Fall brought humans and animals even closer in identity, since humanity became less reflective of God’s image and more beastly in its lusts and conduct.”

³⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

consequence teaching of Proverbs. However, this “contradiction” provides the context for Qoheleth’s advice that follows. If Ecclesiastes 7:15 is true, what should people do? Qoheleth replies that people should not be overly righteous nor make themselves too wise. Yet, they also should not be overly wicked nor a fool. Some have seen the influence of Greek philosophy in these verses, specifically Aristotle’s teaching that virtue lies as a mean between opposite extremes. Bartholomew points out that Aristotle denied this principle in cases where no mean existed. Some qualities, such as adultery and murder, can never be correct.³⁸ No mean exists between extreme expressions of vice. Furthermore, no biblical author would recommend a small amount of wickedness to offset righteousness.

Norman Whybray interprets 7:16–18 as a call to avoid self-righteousness and pretensions to wisdom.³⁹ Numerous scholars criticize Whybray for interpreting the text to mean pretense in wisdom and righteousness.⁴⁰ Nothing in the text indicates that Qoheleth argues against a lack of sincerity. Another shortcoming of Whybray’s position is that 7:16 and 7:17 parallel one another. Ecclesiastes 7:17 contains no hint of pretending to avoid wickedness and foolishness.⁴¹ People should simply avoid them.

Qoheleth addresses the problem of overconfidence in righteousness and wisdom. Quite simply, no one can be so righteous that they avoid all problems and extend life. As Longman says, no principle of retribution assures the righteous that they will fare better than the wicked in this life.⁴² Moreover, the righteous are not as righteous as they perceive themselves. Ecclesiastes 7:20 affirms that no one is so righteous that

³⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 256-257.

³⁹ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 47.

⁴⁰ e. g. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 267.

⁴¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 255.

⁴² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 196. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 267.

they always do good and never sin. In 7:29 he says that though God made humanity upright, they have sought out many schemes. Not only is perfect righteousness absent with sinners, but wisdom cannot always keep them from danger either. In 1:18 Qoheleth asserts that with wisdom comes much vexation. In 12:12 much study wearies the flesh. Even the pursuit of wisdom proves elusive and beyond finding out (7:23–24). Qoheleth’s students should not trust in their righteousness nor wisdom as a certain way to gain a long life.

Qoheleth draws attention to human limitations in wisdom and righteousness so that he can offer positive advice in 7:18. If the character-consequence teaching of Proverbs does not hold rigidly, and if wisdom cannot guarantee long life and avoidance of disaster, many people will react in one of two ways. They will either try to attain perfection in character and knowledge, thinking that doing so would solve their problems, or they will decide that God is unfair and devote themselves to immorality and foolishness to get the most they can out of life.⁴³ Both options would hurt them. Instead, Qoheleth tells them to fear God, in anticipation of his final conclusion in 12:13. One should neither simply strive harder nor desert all efforts at righteousness and wisdom. Qoheleth offers better counsel. Wayne Brindle summarizes nicely. He says, “Do not strive for exaggerated righteousness or try to make yourself the wisest person on earth, for these are not really worthwhile goals; and in the end, such striving will ruin your life. Likewise, do not turn to immorality or act like a fool, since God’s principles do still operate and you will put yourself in danger of premature death. God is still in control.”⁴⁴ Recognizing limitations along with the sovereignty of God frees humanity to face injustice.

⁴³ Wayne A. Brindle, “Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23, no. 3 (1985): 256.

⁴⁴ Brindle, “Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes,” 257.

The third passage that teaches readers to recognize limitations comes in 8:16–17. Qoheleth applies his heart to know wisdom. However, humanity cannot find out what God is doing under the sun. Qoheleth already introduced his readers to the inscrutability of God’s ways in 3:11. He restates that conclusion in 8:16–17, adding that no amount of toil will reveal everything. Also, even the one who claims to know fools no one but himself.

Accepting limitations does not mean that there are no answers to injustice in the world. Qoheleth simply teaches his students to recognize the sovereignty of God and that there are some things he simply does not allow his creatures to know. Not accepting limitations and over-reaching can lead to despair and destruction. Qoheleth counsels his readers to do the exact opposite.

Be joyful. Having accepted limitations, Qoheleth advises readers to be joyful. Both 3:22 and 8:15 appear in contexts where Qoheleth discusses injustice, and both belong to the *carpe diem* texts. Admittedly, being joyful does not solve the problem of injustice.⁴⁵ Injustice will always exist outside of Eden. Instead, God allows his people to enjoy blessings now despite injustice. Qoheleth teaches that life in the kingdom of God can still go well. As Fredericks states it, “Not perfectly, but well. Not disease-free, but well enough. Not well off, but well enough.”⁴⁶ Rejoicing in God’s good world is possible and good, despite all the wrong that sin causes.

In 3:22 Qoheleth instructs readers to rejoice in work because that is a person’s lot. In 5:19 he argues that the power to accept a lot is a gift from God. Joy, then, comes from God. The call in 3:22 also sets the enjoyment of the present in the context of an

⁴⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 178.

⁴⁶ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 200.

uncertain future.⁴⁷ No one knows the future except God. He is the one to fear. The same good God tells his creatures to enjoy the present when they can.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 speaks in much the same way as 3:22. Now, Qoheleth adds that eating and drinking are good gifts to enjoy. He claims that eating, drinking, and joy are all that will go with a man in his toil during the days that God gives him under the sun. One should enjoy life because ultimately God controls his days.⁴⁸ Even though 8:14 describes a backward application of retribution theology, 8:15 teaches that people can find joy if and when they entrust themselves to the sovereignty of the God who determines everything.

Accepting limitations and being joyful might seem like a resignation to the presence of evil and a call to ignore it whenever possible. In reality, Qoheleth teaches his readers to do neither. He makes one more recommendation, and it is only in light of this third recommendation that the first two become possible.

Remember that final judgment is coming. Qoheleth takes comfort in the fact that God will bring judgment against injustice. In 3:17, he reminds himself that God will judge. Scholars debate what Qoheleth means regarding both when and where God will judge. Longman maintains that Qoheleth states that God will judge in keeping with what he had been taught by traditional Israelite wisdom. However, Qoheleth casts doubt on the assertion. Longman claims that Qoheleth does not believe justice will come in the present and that he also does not have a concept of judgment day and eternal life.⁴⁹ This stance effectively eliminates any belief that justice will surely come at all.

⁴⁷ Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 156.

⁴⁸ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 198.

⁴⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 127-128.

Fox believes that Qoheleth does affirm future judgment.⁵⁰ However, 3:17 does not describe such a reality.⁵¹ Fox rightly translates $\alpha\psi$ as “there” but says that it refers to the place where the just judgment should be—the law courts. If Fox is correct, it would mean that Qoheleth is vague as to how this would happen. It would also mean that God is an imperfect judge since justice does not always happen in earthly courts.⁵²

The judgment Qoheleth refers to is eschatological judgment.⁵³ When he writes “there,” he means the occasion of judgment in the afterlife. Huovila and Liroy write, “Understanding the judgment to take place in the afterlife is more in line with the idea of God as a righteous judge, it provides a clear occasion for the fulfilment, it is highly relevant for the text, and it does not contradict Qoheleth’s [*sic*] ideas about the afterlife.”⁵⁴ Interpreting Qoheleth to mean final judgment has the added advantage of connecting this passage to 3:15. Qoheleth writes that God seeks what has been driven away. David Gibson writes of how the imagery suggests a shepherd going after a stray animal. He remarks, “In this case, it is all the events of human history that time has chased away into the past, and to us they are gone and lost forever. But not to God. He will dial back time and fetch the past into his present to bring it to account.”⁵⁵ Moreover, the end of 3:17 refers to a time for every matter and work. Ecclesiastes 3:1 declares that there is a time for every matter under heaven—which would include the judgment of 3:17. The reference to work in 3:17 also finds a parallel in 12:14 where Qoheleth writes that God

⁵⁰ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 69.

⁵¹ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 197–8.

⁵² Kimmo Huovila, and Dan Liroy, “Coherence in Ecclesiastes 3:16-22,” *Conspectus* 33 (2022): 49.

⁵³ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 304.

⁵⁴ Huovila and Liroy, “Coherence,” 49.

⁵⁵ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 58.

will bring every deed into judgment.⁵⁶ God will bring judgment. If not, Delitzsch notes that the distinction between the life of man and beast disappears.⁵⁷ Remembering a coming judgment puts unjust actions by human courts into perspective.

Qoheleth writes of future judgment in 8:12–13. He affirms that a sinner does evil a hundred times and yet prolongs his life. He then insists that it will be well with those who fear God, but not the sinner. Some scholars see a contradiction here. When Qoheleth says “I know that it will be well with those who fear God” in verse 12, Roland Murphy believes that Qoheleth shows his awareness of orthodox teaching about retribution, but does not agree with it.⁵⁸ Upon closer examination, Qoheleth does not contradict himself. The sinner who prolongs his life in 8:12 is the same as the evil man in 8:11. A delayed sentence allows life to continue. When Qoheleth asserts in 8:13 that the wicked will not prolong his days like a shadow, he means that even the extended life of the wicked is still as brief as a shadow.⁵⁹ It may appear that justice has failed. However, the wicked will receive judgment for their transgressions while the righteous who fear God will fare well. Qoheleth does not contradict himself. He simply understands that perfect justice lies in the future. Richard Fuhr notes, “It is not the immanent hand of judgment that provides the primary impetus for Qohelet [*sic*] to commend the fear of God. . . .but rather, it is his awareness of the transcendent God that compels him to fear God *in spite* of the apparent lack of divine activity in meting out justice.”⁶⁰ The momentary silence of God toward injustice provides an opportunity for a remarkable expression of faith from Qoheleth.

⁵⁶ “Work” in 3:17 and “deed” in 12:14 translate the same word from Hebrew.

⁵⁷ Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 692.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

⁵⁹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 196.

⁶⁰ Richard Alan Fuhr Jr., *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs Within the Book of Qohelet* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 164. Emphasis original.

The combination of fearing God and expecting future judgment appears in the epilogue, particularly 12:13–14. Since I have treated this material in chapter two, I will keep my comments brief. After Qoheleth has considered everything, he counsels readers to fear God, keep his commandments, and remember that judgment is coming. One day, all will come to light and be judged by Almighty God.

The hope for final judgment on behalf of the righteous puts injustice in perspective and makes it more bearable. Zack Eswine says, “Our human longing for right judgment makes sense. Good judgment is authentic. It says what is true.”⁶¹ Right judgment not only states truth, it sets things right. Again, Eswine says, “The eternity pressing into our hearts, the eternity that Eden was made for, the eternity that life under the sun beats up, stomps upon, ridicules, and dishonors, will finally also behold its vindication. God himself will take his rightful place and we, as Eden intended, will again bow, fully satisfied, as his creatures.”⁶² Injustice may abound outside of Eden, but it will not last. Until judgment day comes, the people of God must recognize limitations, be joyful, and remember that judgment is approaching. Only then will injustice die.

The New Testament and Final Judgment

Like Qoheleth, the New Testament teaches believers to recognize their limitations (Rom 12:3) and be joyful (1 Thess 5:16). However, when it comes to facing injustice, the most common tactic biblical authors employ is to point readers to the return of Christ. The time between now and future judgment can be agonizing and challenging. Believers may be required to take a slap on the cheek and then offer the other, give their cloak to the one who sued them for their tunic, or go a second mile with the one who forced them to go the first (Matt 5:39–42). They may have to shake the dust from their

⁶¹ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, The Gospel According to the Old Testament (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 223.

⁶² Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 223.

feet when unbelievers reject the gospel (Matt 10:14). The Lord may call upon believers to experience reproach and affliction, such as the plundering of their property (Heb 10:33–34). Christians must rejoice when they share in Christ’s sufferings (1 Pet 4:12–13). All of the above must take place in the context of Christians eagerly awaiting the Lord’s return (Heb 9:28). Whatever injustices befall the faithful in this life will be set right at the second coming.

The New Testament builds upon a strong tradition of the expectation that God would one day reestablish righteousness within a fallen world.⁶³ The promises God made to do so (e.g., Isa 45:24) will find their fulfillment at the return of Christ. When the Lord appears, tyranny and delayed judgment will no longer trouble believers.⁶⁴ Many dreadful aspects accompany the great day of the Lord for those mired in unbelief.⁶⁵ For those in Christ, it will be a wonderful day of salvation (2 Thess 1:10). Though it may appear that sinners get away with injustice, God will be just.⁶⁶ He will either crush sinners, or show unmatched mercy to the repentant because he has already crushed his Son in their place (Isa 53:5, 10; 1 Pet 3:18). When the kingdom comes, the faithful finally get to enter into the joy of the Master (Matt 25:21, 23) who makes all things new (Rev 21:5) and dwells in their midst forever in the new creation (Rev 21:3–4).

Conclusion

Outside of Eden, justice broke down quickly. The entrance of sin injected frustration into human relationships, causing people to mistreat other image-bearers.

⁶³ Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness, Justice, and Justification,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 742-743.

⁶⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 294.

⁶⁵ J. A. Motyer, “Judgment,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 615.

⁶⁶ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2012), 337.

Qoheleth witnessed many injustices in his life. He learned that often little to nothing could be done to correct those injustices. Inhabiting a world filled with such frustration could seem too much to bear.

However, Qoheleth does not want his readers to despair. Even in the midst of injustices, believers can still live wisely in the good world that God made. Qoheleth teaches that in the face of injustices, one should consider their limitations. Who knows what God is doing in a given moment or how he will work out the details of a troublesome situation? Humanity is fickle, sinful, and incapable of knowing all that God is doing. Remembering so gives perspective to any situation. One should also be joyful. God grants it to people that they can still rejoice in his good gifts despite living outside of Eden. Finally, readers should remember that final judgment is on its way. All that is currently wrong will be made right by God himself.

While injustice remains a mystery, the story the Bible tells teaches that there will be a time of judgment, and justice will finally prevail.⁶⁷ For now, the expectation of justice remains a confession on the lips of believers. It will come, but it does not always appear to be so. Believers need faith to overcome mere observation. Bartholomew states the case well when he says, “Faith here provides a place to stand and from which to hope in a way that an empirical epistemology, limited to what is observable, can never provide.”⁶⁸

Qoheleth’s empiricism led to a cry that everything is הֶבֶל. His faith led him to trust that God would work all things together for good in the end. Injustice always has been, and will continue to be, a problem outside of Eden. However, the church can say along with the words of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 8:12b: “I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.” The church can make such great

⁶⁷ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 180–1.

⁶⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 181.

statements because of 12:14: “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” Injustice may remain under the sun, but perfect justice will prevail under the Son.

CHAPTER 8

REJOICE AND REMEMBER

“Living in the moment is a gift, that’s why they call it the present y’all.”¹

While bringing a roll of the eyes from many, the truth bound up in the cleverness of this play on words resonates well with Ecclesiastes. Every day is a gift from God. The relationship between the giver and receiver of a gift bears certain expectations. When someone gives a gift, they expect that the recipient will use and enjoy it. They also expect them to use and enjoy that gift according to its purpose. Finally, they expect them to use the gift in a way that honors the giver. The expectations that accompany gift-giving between two people, rise when God bestows the gift.

God gifts people with time and a good creation. He expects them to enjoy his gifts in light of their relationship with him. Though Eden is lost and הֶבֶל pervades, creation remains good. Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:8 encourages readers to enjoy the days that God gives. Qoheleth enjoins his students to rejoice in youth and remember their Creator before death engulfs them.

Need

In Ecclesiastes 11:9, Qoheleth tells his student (a young man) and his implied audience (all readers) to rejoice in youth. They are to take advantage of all that God has given and celebrate the blessings of this life while still able. They must also remember their Creator. Qoheleth wants his audience to remember their Creator “before” (12:1, 2, 6) it is too late. He does not want them to wait until they are old, but to remember him

¹ Ted Lasso, season 2, episode 7, “Headspace,” directed by Matt Lipsey, aired September 3, 2021, on Apple TV.

from early in life. Readers need to understand that living well requires remembering their Creator, recognizing who they are in relation to him, and enjoying his good creation while aware of the coming judgment.

Main Point

All that comes under the sun is הַבָּל (11:8). Furthermore, the days of not being able to see the sun are fast approaching (12:2). The response to this condition should not be despair. Rather, readers should use their allotted time to rejoice in the goodness of the Creator's provision with an awareness that death is coming soon and everything will come under judgment—including whether people enjoyed creation.

Preview

Two verbs govern the structure of this passage: rejoice and remember. My outline will follow that structure for the text of Ecclesiastes. Afterward I will turn to the New Testament to consider parallels with the imagery of Ecclesiastes. My outline is as follows:

1. Rejoice in Your Youth (11:7–10)
2. Remember Your Creator (12:1–8)
3. New Testament Use of Qoheleth's Eschatological Imagery

Context

Qoheleth demonstrates his conclusion that הַבָּל permeates every area of life by guiding his readers through his empirical observations of many different pursuits. Everything has proven to be הַבָּל. His message remains the same in the final section prior to the epilogue. Ecclesiastes 11:8 and 12:8 both declare that everything is הַבָּל. Life is full of dark days and הַבָּל. Then, the light goes out for good in 12:2. Once again, by remembering the end from the beginning and orienting life according to the Creator who will bring judgment, readers are able to live well.

A key issue for interpretation is the parameters of the text. Some commentators see 11:9 as the beginning of the pericope.² There is some wisdom in this approach because of the first of the governing imperatives: rejoice. That verb appears in verse 9 and the subsequent verbs elaborate on what it means. However, beginning the section at 11:9 still leaves questions about whether 11:7–8 properly belong with what follows or with 11:1–6. Daniel Fredericks claims that 11:1–12:8 should all be taken together. He bases his conclusions on what he calls “natural” vocabulary in the pericope. He also provides evidence of an extensive chiasmic arrangement to validate his position.³ While some words appear multiple times throughout 11:1–12:8 (e.g., clouds, trees), it does not follow that Qoheleth intends for his readers to take the whole section as a unit. Furthermore, Fredericks’s chiasm only covers 11:3–12:2 before the symmetry disappears.⁴ His efforts at discerning a chiasm hardly proves that all of 11:1–12:8 form a distinct unit.

A better proposal for the parameters comes from Graham Ogden.⁵ On the basis of the key terms (rejoice and remember) and several structural markers (time references, darkness, “before,” and הָבֵל), he begins the pericope at 11:7. Ecclesiastes 11:7–8 introduce the key terms and themes. Ogden also argues that the structure itself illuminates the constituent parts and becomes indispensable for interpretation.⁶ In line with several others, I have followed Ogden’s proposal.

² H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 267–268; Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 212.

³ Daniel C. Fredericks, “Life’s Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11:1–12:8,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 52 (1991), 101.

⁴ Perhaps conveniently, clouds and rain frame the chiasm, which appears to lend credence to Fredericks’s meteorological reading of 12:2ff. While meteorological elements clearly appear in the text, his reading is not the most convincing for reasons I will treat below.

⁵ Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8: Qoheleth’s Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34, no. 1 (1984): 27–38.

⁶ Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8,” 30.

One issue for determining the parameters of the text remains: the concluding verse. Essentially, the decision hinges on whether 12:8 properly belongs to the epilogue. In my view, 12:8 belongs with what precedes, not what follows for two reasons. First, the word הָבֵל in 12:8 forms an inclusio with 11:8. Part of the function of 11:8 is to introduce the section. הָבֵל would then serve as a key for marking the pericope. Second, the word הָבֵל also forms an inclusio with 1:2. Since 1:2 presents the overall theme of Ecclesiastes, the repetition with slight modification in 12:8 indicates the parameters of Qoheleth's thought. Ecclesiastes 12:9 begins to speak of Qoheleth in the third person. This feature led me to limit the epilogue to 12:9–14, which I treated in chapter 2. Moreover, 12:1–8 artistically reverses the structure of 1:2–8.⁷ For these reasons I will treat 11:7–12:8 in my exposition.

Exposition

First, I will analyze 11:7–8, which introduces the text, before commenting on the command to rejoice in 11:9–10. Then, I will treat the injunction to remember the Creator in 12:1–8. I will conclude with reflections from the New Testament, how its message coheres seamlessly with Qoheleth's, and how recognizing the connections aids in the interpretation of this difficult text.

Rejoice in Your Youth (11:7–10)

Ecclesiastes 11:7–8 marks the beginning of the passage and introduces several key terms and themes. The first two terms occur in verse 7: light and sun. Both words appear again in 12:2. Light and seeing the sun function positively in 11:7 as the antithesis to incoming darkness in 12:2. Together the terms convey the goodness of being alive. Qoheleth says that light is sweet. Normally “sweet” would be an unfitting way of

⁷ Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 309–310.

describing light, which is perceived by the eyes. However, the Bible uses the idea of tasting as a metaphor for experiencing. For example, Psalm 34:8 beckons readers to taste and see that the LORD is good. Tasting can describe a full immersion in the experience. The sweetness of the light indicates that experiencing it is good.

This meaning becomes clear by interpreting light and sun together. Throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth speaks negatively about happenings “under the sun.” Outside of Eden, from the standpoint of observation, everything is *הַבָּל*. Despite that reality, being able to see the sun—being alive—is pleasant. The opposite of light and seeing the sun is when the sun and light go dark in 12:2. Seow notes that “sun” appears thirty-five times in Ecclesiastes, with 12:2 being the last. The first use comes in 1:5 where it rises, sets, and repeats on a predictable cycle unchanged. Finally, in 12:2, it (and every other source of brightness) goes dark. Qoheleth intends readers to imagine complete darkness—which is death.⁸ The use of light and sun in 11:7 and 12:2 tie this section together.

The next important term appears in 11:8. Qoheleth says that people should “rejoice.” They should rejoice in every year that God gives them. Qoheleth knows that years will come in which people will find no pleasure (12:1). Even so, those years are a time for rejoicing. That rejoicing begins in youth (11:9) and continues until the lights dim (12:2). However, this rejoicing comes within certain confines, which will be discussed below.

The fourth key term is “remember.” The term appears again in 12:1. While rejoicing, Qoheleth’s readers should remember that the days of darkness will be many. Though God grants many years, within them will be many dark days. The darkness sets in permanently in 12:2, symbolizing death. However, darkness probably means more than simply death in 11:8. Ecclesiastes 5:17 says that a man eats in darkness all his days. He is

⁸ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 376.

alive, but in darkness. Most likely, 11:8 uses “darkness” to include all that Qoheleth has described up to this point as הַבֶּל.⁹ Perhaps the frustrations outside of Eden function as preludes to the darkness of death.¹⁰ Within a life of rejoicing, much will occur that reminds people of approaching death. The final key for interpreting this passage, as in all passages, is the word הַבֶּל. Its appearance in 12:8 frames this section, as well as everything since 1:2.

Once Qoheleth introduces the key terms and themes, he begins to elaborate. The two terms dictate the structure of the rest of the text. The command “rejoice” governs 11:9–10, while the imperative “remember” governs 12:1–7.¹¹ Qoheleth commands rejoicing from a “young man.” Qoheleth’s point has nothing to do with gender. His focus is on youth.¹² Youth is the time for rejoicing. It is also the time for remembering in 12:1–8. Readers can easily miss that Qoheleth does not want them to wait until old age to ponder these realities. They should think about them while young. As he describes death in 12:2–7, the young man—and every reader—should recognize that Qoheleth describes his death specifically.¹³ Death is hastening. All need to recognize its inevitability while young in order to live well.

The young man should let his heart cheer him in the days of his youth. The function of the heart in this text recalls 2:1–3. Several similarities emerge upon close inspection.¹⁴ In both places the heart causes delight. In 2:2 the heart leads, while 11:9

⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 344.

¹⁰ Richard Belcher says, “Although this section begins with light (11:7–8), the darkness slowly dominates.” Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 168.

¹¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 343.

¹² Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 219.

¹³ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 289.

¹⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 370–371.

teaches readers to follow. While 2:1–3 indicate the הֵבֵל of pursuing joy, 11:9 calls for rejoicing. Pursuing joy may have no ultimate advantage, but it is a gift from God that readers should experience while they can.

The remainder of 11:9–10 contains four further imperatives, all secondary to “rejoice.”¹⁵ Qoheleth first commands his pupil to walk in the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. If the heart serves to cheer a person, he should follow where it leads. Qoheleth’s words have troubled readers since shortly after he penned them.¹⁶ Some even questioned the canonicity of Ecclesiastes because of this verse.¹⁷ On the surface, he seems to contradict Numbers 15:39. However, two details keep Qoheleth within the bounds of orthodoxy and out of conflict with Moses. First, the pursuit of joy should be understood within the context of the *carpe diem* passages. God intends for his creatures to enjoy his good creation. Second, the mention of judgment at the end of the verse serves to curb any temptation to pursue joy in sin.¹⁸ The young man should follow his heart and his eyes, provided that they lead him in the paths that God paves.

The barrier that prevents the pursuit of joy from leading into sin is the reality of judgment. Qoheleth commands the young man to “know” that God will bring judgment. Many claim to find evidence that an editor included this command and Qoheleth never wrote it. However, Qoheleth affirms the fact of judgment elsewhere (3:17; 12:14). There is no good reason why he could not have written these words here as well. The connection between joy and judgment can be difficult to understand. Tremper Longman believes that Qoheleth tells his readers that God will judge them for the

¹⁵ Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8,” 31.

¹⁶ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 116–117.

¹⁷ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 260.

¹⁸ Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 333.

enjoyment they pursue.¹⁹ However, people are supposed to enjoy life as a gift from God (e.g., 5:18–20).²⁰ Therefore, they should pursue joy with the knowledge that judgment is coming. Barry Webb says, “God as creator [*sic*] lays down the parameters within which life is to be enjoyed.”²¹ The knowledge of judgment will guard against sin. God will not only judge when the pursuit of joy goes outside the bounds he sets. He will also judge when his people refuse to enjoy the blessings he gives. “Rejoice” is a divine imperative. Not doing so invites judgment. According to Deuteronomy 28:47, God will bring curses because Israel did not serve him with joy and gladness. God desires the delight of his creatures and will judge them for not delighting in him. As David Gibson notes, “Christian living collapses when it is not delighted with the bounty God gives.”²² God requires joy. Believers ignore his command to their own peril.

As people follow their heart, knowing that judgment will come, Qoheleth also commands them to remove vexation from their hearts. Several times already readers have encountered vexation (1:18; 2:23; 5:17). Here, they must remove it and put away evil from their bodies. Qoheleth says to put away $\eta\psi\chi$ from the body. This word could be translated as “pain.”²³ It could also be translated simply as “evil.” If the latter, readers could understand Qoheleth to mean sinfulness. They should not use their body for evil activities.²⁴ The foundational meaning of the root for this word refers to anything

¹⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 260.

²⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 371.

²¹ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 98.

²² David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 136–137.

²³ Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 416.

²⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

detrimental to life. It is the antonym of טוב.²⁵ Seow notes that the use in 11:10 anticipates the “days of evil” in 12:1.²⁶ Qoheleth likely wants readers to read parallel to one another the statements about removing vexation and putting away evil. One should be removed from the heart. The other should be removed from the body. Together, they teach readers to avoid both emotional and physical stresses.²⁷ Since רַעַה is the antonym of טוב, Qoheleth teaches readers to put away anything that detracts from experiencing God’s good creation. Once again, he reminds his students that Eden is lost, but creation is still good. Though youth and the dawn of life bring frustration, God counsels his people to pursue joy within the bounds he sets.

Remember Your Creator (12:1–8)

Along with rejoicing, Qoheleth instructs the young man to remember his Creator. While the unity and purpose of 12:1–8 are clear, two issues need to be resolved. The first issue is the translation of “Creator” in verse 1. Part of the challenge is that the form is apparently plural. Some commentators wish to emend the text because God is never called the Creator elsewhere in Ecclesiastes. They also do not believe the translation “your Creator” best suits the context. None of the recommended emendations satisfy all the issues of interpretation.²⁸

The translation “your Creator” is the best way to render the text for at least four reasons. First, it is the only option supported in the textual witnesses. Some manuscripts have the form as a singular, but all use the term “Creator.” Second, Ecclesiastes frequently encourages enjoying God’s creation even though Eden is lost. In

²⁵ David W. Baker, “רַעַה” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1154.

²⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.

²⁷ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 237.

²⁸ See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351 for a survey of suggestions.

Genesis, Eden emerged as the good work of an almighty Creator.²⁹ Emending the text to say something other than “Creator” would remove that focus and weaken the thrust of the passage. Third, in 12:7 Qoheleth consciously recalls Genesis 2:7 and 3:19. Therefore the context of 12:1–8 demands a recognition of the Creator, making that translation the most likely. Finally, recognizing a Creator implies that people are creatures. Only within that recognition can they accept limitations. Only within that recognition can they know true joy. The text stands as it is written. Qoheleth tells his student to remember his Creator.

Qoheleth’s pupil must remember his Creator in the days of his youth. Youth is the appropriate time to recognize the Creator-creature relationship.³⁰ It is only by orienting himself to God that a young man can live rightly and enjoy life. Three times Qoheleth instructs his reader to do so “before” certain events transpire. The first instance is verse 1. He should remember his Creator before the pleasureless years arrive. Death hastens. Qoheleth desires that the young man come to grips quickly with Ecclesiastes 5:2—God is in heaven and he is on earth. Rejoicing in God’s creation requires a swift recognition of humanity’s standing in relation to him.

The second interpretive issue in this passage is the function of the imagery in 12:2–6. The variety of imagery makes it one of the most difficult passages in Ecclesiastes. Scholars have taken many different approaches and have come to conflicting conclusions, even within each school of thought.³¹ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the details of each interpretation. Instead, I will offer a brief description of the major approaches, along with representatives of each, and some of their conclusions, before offering my analysis within a particular school of thought.

²⁹ Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 140.

³⁰ This is not to say that the window ever closes for recognizing the relationship, contra Longman who says that old age, “is a time when it is not propitious to establish a relationship with God.” Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 267.

³¹ See Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 281–98, for analysis and history of interpretation.

The first approach to Ecclesiastes 12:2–6 can be termed the “physiological” approach. This reading is by far the most common.³² In essence, this approach understands each image as describing the breakdown of the body in old age. Using this method, the grinders in verse 3 are the teeth. The dimming of those who look through the window reflects deteriorating eyesight. Most of the details find little agreement among commentators. Sometimes the suggestions become comical in their variety. For example, the grasshopper in verse 5 is interpreted as either an old man bent over, drooping buttocks, the difficulty of sex in old age, a penis that cannot become erect, or an actual grasshopper feeling heavy to an old man.³³ The disparity in options leaves interpreters frustrated. Not only does the variety frustrate, even the agreed upon conclusions do not always make sense. Regarding the grinders, no one who takes the physiological approach can explain why losing teeth causes someone to stop chewing. Would a person not need to chew more if some teeth fell out? Even though Longman espouses this approach himself (while claiming that his take is less arbitrary than others), he rightly notes that it is extremely subjective and suspicious.³⁴

A second way some have read this text is through the metaphor of a ruined house.³⁵ The ruined house represents the failure of human efforts in a topsy-turvy world. No matter what humans do, they die. In 12:3–4a, the house sits in disrepair while the world continues on its course. Nature and society continue to bustle, indifferent to the passing of an individual. While some elements of this approach may have merit, overall,

³² Representatives include: Franz Delitzsch, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 788–805; Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 333; Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 274–83; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 267–72; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 214–16; Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 418–24; R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 91.

³³ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 80.

³⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 263.

³⁵ J. F. A. Sawyer, “Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94, no. 4 (1975): 519–31.

it is unconvincing. Fox notes that the presence of mourners in verse 5 hardly proves the indifference of society to death. He also wonders if the indifference of nature and society to disaster is an adequate motivation to enjoy life while young.³⁶

A third approach interpreters take is to read the text as a funeral procession.³⁷ Several details in the text could point to a funeral procession, but do not necessarily do so. For example, the actions of the people in 12:3 fit the funerary reading, but they also fit seamlessly into the meteorological reading (see below). The household could be shutting down to go to the procession. The people could also be afraid of a coming storm. In order to establish the funerary reading, interpreters need to demonstrate through the details of the text that such a reading illuminates the true meaning of the passage. Even proponents of this view admit its shortcomings, however. For example, Fox concedes “the fragmentary state of our knowledge of Israelite mourning customs and symbols,” knowing very little about funerary laments in ancient Israel, and that not all details in the text contribute to his reading.³⁸ Surprisingly, he claims that it does not matter if all details contribute to his understanding for it to be right.³⁹ While this view does take seriously the theme of death in the passage, it fails to account for a consistent reading of all the details.

The fourth reading of the text is the meteorological reading. One formidable defense of this approach comes from Daniel Fredericks.⁴⁰ He argues that the images in 12:3–6 should be taken literally as preparation for a looming storm, which then function metaphorically for the destruction of the body at death, described in 12:7. He believes that the response of the community to a storm compares to the response of those who

³⁶ See Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 283–284 for his critique.

³⁷ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 284; Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 81; C. Taylor, “The Dirge of Coheleth,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 4, no. 4 (1892): 533–49.

³⁸ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 284–7.

³⁹ Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 288.

⁴⁰ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 238–43.

witness the demise of an individual's life.⁴¹ No one can deny the meteorological elements in the text. What is not clear is that a literal storm is in view, nor that the literal storm functions as a metaphor for approaching death. Again, such an interpretation is possible, but not necessary. This view assumes that the victim is old and that the approach of death is obvious. However, Qoheleth never states that his concern is with old age. That is a mere assumption based on physiological approaches. After all, he does address a young man about his own death. If it is the young man's own death that he should ponder, perhaps death does not approach—instead, it pounces. In such a case, the community could not prepare for the “storm” of the breakdown of an old man's body. This view does not account for the possibility of the sudden death of a young person.

A final approach can be described as the eschatological reading. Advocates of this reading appear early in church history. For some, the text is purely eschatological, portraying the end of time. Virtually no modern interpreters adopt this view. Instead, they argue that the text uses eschatological terms to portray the end of life.⁴² This reading is the most consistent and likeliest way to understand the text. Even those defending other views concede the eschatological connections.⁴³ Qoheleth appears to describe the death of the individual using Day of the LORD terminology. He connects the death of the individual with the prophetic eschatological vision of the day of the LORD. He seems to say that the death of the individual points forward to the end of history and cosmic judgment. Instead of reducing the imagery of cosmic judgment down to the death of the individual, he moves from the individual to cosmic judgment.⁴⁴ The day of the LORD is

⁴¹ Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, 233.

⁴² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 353; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353–64, 372–80; Choon-Leong Seow, “Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 2 (1999): 209–34.

⁴³ Garrett, Proverbs, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 333; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 214; Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 423.

⁴⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 353.

coming. All will participate in it. By drawing attention to that reality, Qoheleth sets his student in proper position in relation to God. He is to recognize his coming participation in the day of the LORD and remember Eden and the goodness the Creator gave then. Remembering where he came from and where history is going provides the context for enjoying life within God's design now. I will follow this eschatological approach in my comments on the text.

Qoheleth begins by describing the darkening of lights. The sun and light go out—undoing the sweetness and pleasantness of 11:7. The moon and the stars also dim. The Old Testament prophets frequently use the metaphor of darkened luminaries to describe the day of the LORD (e.g., Ezek 32:7–8). Qoheleth evokes the creation account with the light (Gen 1:3) and the sun, moon, and stars (Gen 1:16) to portray death as the undoing of creation.⁴⁵ He also says that the clouds return after the rain. Rain plays a key role in the undoing of creation in Genesis 6–9, and does not appear in the rest of Genesis. Also, the word that Qoheleth uses for “clouds” does not appear in Genesis, but a synonym does (אֲנָנִים). Again, that word does not appear outside of the flood narrative. Apparently, Qoheleth recalls the flood story and the unmaking of creation that happened then to portray the end of human life.⁴⁶ The cosmic scope of Ecclesiastes 12:2 eventually gives way to the individual in 12:7. There, Qoheleth recalls Genesis 2:7 and 3:19, when God made man from dust and breathed life into him. Now, the man dies, the dust returns to the earth, and the spirit goes back to God. Qoheleth portrays the crown jewel of creation being unmade.⁴⁷

The great day of the LORD is a day of both terror and desolation. When

⁴⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 348; Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 142; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 213.

⁴⁶ Knut Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 193.

⁴⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 273.

Qoheleth spoke of the time of youth and old age, he used the plural “days.” In 12:3, he says “day.” The implication would be that the terror that comes, comes swiftly.⁴⁸ The effects of that day show in many ways. In verse 3, the details appear in a household. Sudden destruction comes, causing various reactions. The keepers of the house tremble. When the word “tremble” appears in the Old Testament, it always means in fear or excitement, but never weakness.⁴⁹ Qoheleth does not describe limbs becoming weak in old age. The fear that overcomes the keepers of the house causes the strong men to be bent. Instead of showing bravery, they crouch in fear.

Qoheleth also says that the grinders cease because they are few. Grinding grain would be a daily necessity to sustain life. If the number of grinders dwindle, those that remain would need to work harder. Instead, they stop. The best explanation is that sudden and extensive death happens on this single day. Finally, those who look out the window are dimmed—just like the luminaries. In the Bible, looking out the window depicts dashed hopes (See Judg 5:28; 2 Sam 6:16–23; 2 Kgs 9:30). Those who look out in Ecclesiastes 12:3 do so to witness destruction. The loss of life is unbearable. Life in the household crumbles with the day of the young man’s death.

That crumbling spills over into the public square. The doors on the street close. The doors on the street likely refer to the gates that open to the marketplace of the city. If the doors shut, then the city shuts down.⁵⁰ Commerce and social interaction cease.⁵¹ The sound of the grinding becomes low, probably indicating an eerie silence in place of formerly bustling activity. This interpretation is strengthened by the description of birds in the rest of verse 4. The sound of the birds rises, filling the silence of a depopulated city

⁴⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 214.

⁴⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 214–15.

⁵⁰ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 349.

⁵¹ Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 217.

with their celebratory cries over the death they see. The “daughters of song” being brought low likely refers to these birds swooping down to their new habitat.⁵² As they swoop, the people become afraid of what is high and terrors in the way. Attacks (perhaps from the birds) come from up high, and travel is dangerous during times of such calamity.⁵³

The desolation that comes to the house and society also strikes nature in Ecclesiastes 12:5b. Qoheleth says that the almond tree blossoms. While this may be an indication that nature continues even as human life ends, another reading is preferable. In Jeremiah 1:9–12, Jeremiah sees an almond branch, which signifies coming judgment.⁵⁴ Given the eschatological emphasis in this passage, Qoheleth likely intends the same meaning here. Understanding the almond tree as a symbol of divine judgment also clarifies the meaning of the dragging grasshopper and broken caperberry.⁵⁵ All of nature is in travail on this great and terrible day.

The catastrophe of this day culminates in the end of life. The mourners go about the streets because man is going to his eternal home. Qoheleth employs four images in Ecclesiastes 12:6 to portray the end of life: cord, bowl, pitcher, and wheel. The four images belong to a well. Like making bread, drawing water is necessary for daily life. The well ceases to function. The cord snaps, so the bowl cannot be lowered. Even if it could be, it is broken anyway. Once the water is drawn, it goes in the pitcher to be taken home. The pitcher lies shattered. The wheel at the top of the pulley system even breaks. Life is destroyed. Daily activity ceases. Human operation does not carry on as it

⁵² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 379.

⁵³ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.

⁵⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 350.

⁵⁵ The ESV interprets the caperberry breaking as desire failing. The caperberry was thought to work as an aphrodisiac and as an appetite stimulant (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 363). If the physiological reading is correct, the point would be that even the caperberry cannot bring back desire and make life pleasurable. I interpret the caperberry tree literally, as representative of nature. The grasshoppers and trees represent animate and inanimate life respectively.

once did. The young man sees the end of his own life. His body goes back to the dust. His spirit returns to the God who gave it. Everything is הַבָּל because of the inevitability of death.

Qoheleth's student must keep his own death before him from early in life. He must remember that judgment follows (11:9; 12:14). Before that day comes, all Qoheleth's readers must enjoy life while it is still possible, do so within the parameters set by God, and remember their Creator, because judgment is coming. If they do so, they can experience the goodness of God's creation as he intends his creatures to do.

New Testament Use of Qoheleth's Eschatological Imagery

Further validation of the eschatological approach to Ecclesiastes 12:2–6 comes from the way the New Testament uses the same metaphors as Qoheleth in apocalyptic texts. Many of the same images appear in Matthew 24–25, Luke 17, and Revelation 6:12–17; 18:2–23. Qoheleth writes of the luminaries being darkened. Jesus warns in Matthew 24:29 that the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall before the Son of Man appears. Likewise, Revelation 6:12–13 describe the sun becoming black, the moon like blood, and the stars falling on the great day of the wrath of the one seated on the throne and the Lamb. Qoheleth also describes the clouds returning after the rain. If the above analysis that Qoheleth alludes to Genesis 6–9 is correct, then a parallel appears in Matthew 24:37–39 and Luke 17:26–27 when Jesus describes the day of his coming being like it was in the days of Noah.

Ecclesiastes 12:3 depicts several classes of people in a house trembling at the sudden terror that falls. Matthew 24:30 says that all tribes on earth will mourn when Jesus appears. Revelation 6:15 specifies that the mourners include kings, great ones, generals, rich, powerful, slave, and free. Qoheleth twice draws attention to the cessation of grinding. Both Matthew 24:41 and Luke 17:35 claim that two women will be grinding

when one is suddenly taken on that day.⁵⁶

Qoheleth tells of the sound of birds filling the air concomitant with sudden destruction. In both Matthew 25:28 and Luke 17:37, Jesus says that vultures will gather over the corpse. His statement also resonates with Revelation 19:17–18, where the birds are called to feast on the flesh of those defeated at his return. Lastly, Qoheleth vividly portrays the travail of nature in Ecclesiastes 12:5. Revelation 6:13 compares the falling of the stars to the way a fig sheds its fruit when shaken by a gale. The parallel use of imagery seems too consistent to ignore.

In using a variety of images, Qoheleth depicts a large-scale, sudden cessation of activity in the community. Revelation 18 provides a similar picture. When Babylon falls, the destruction comes quickly. John highlights this fact by describing her plagues as coming in a single day (18:8) and by stating three times that her destruction came in a single hour (18:10, 17, 19). Qoheleth's community stops all commercial activity in Ecclesiastes 12:4. At Babylon's fall, no one buys her cargo (18:11–19), and the craftsman and millworkers stop working (18:22). In Ecclesiastes 12:4, the eerie sound of birds creep in because normal activity ceases. Revelation 18:22 tells that music ceases along with commerce, while 18:2 says that Babylon has become a haunt for every unclean bird. Finally, Ecclesiastes speaks of the onset of permanent darkness. Revelation 18:23 states that Babylon will have no lamplight ever again. The New Testament use of the same imagery validates the eschatological approach to Ecclesiastes 12:2–6.

Not only does the eschatological interpretation match in details; the overall message of Ecclesiastes 11:7–12:8 finds expression in eschatological contexts as well. Revelation 18:4 calls believers to come out of Babylon. They are not to enjoy her wares and ways. Instead, they should remember their Creator. Ecclesiastes speaks of joy with a remembrance of judgment. Revelation 18:5 says that God remembers Babylon's

⁵⁶ Seow, "Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem," 216.

iniquities. Revelation 18:8 tells of the punishment he brings as the mighty Lord God. The people should refuse the empty enjoyment of Babylon, remember their Creator, and rejoice—at Babylon’s fall. Revelation 18:20 issues the command to rejoice, which the saints do in 19:1–3. Jesus echoes the call to joy in the context of the day of his return. In Matthew 25:21, 23, he says to the faithful at his return, “Enter into the joy of your master.” The temporal joy Qoheleth speaks of in Ecclesiastes becomes permanent at the return of Christ.

Conclusion

Eden is lost, but God’s creation is still good. People should enjoy it within the parameters set by God, remembering that judgment is coming. Qoheleth urges his readers to get right with the Creator, and the current rejoicing in his provision foreshadows the rejoicing to come in the new creation.

Qoheleth’s words model the message the church must preach to all who will hear. While it may be difficult and unpleasant at times, the church must proclaim the reality of death and decay.⁵⁷ Life will end, and the end is speeding forward. People must not ignore that truth. Death is the great preacher calling people to recognize their composition as dust. Pushing death out of the mind does nothing to slow down its approach, nor to equip people to face it correctly.

Along with the reality of death and decay, churches must also teach the goodness of God and the beauty of life within that goodness. The best life one can live is a life of both virtue and joy. The proper way to live this existence is by remembering the Creator. Believers should focus on what the Creator has made, that it was and still is good, and that they are but creatures. In view of those realities, they can then focus on what the inevitable end is—death. Because death hastens, they should also focus on what

⁵⁷ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 223.

their relationship with the Creator should be.

Throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth explains that everything he saw was הֶבֶל. Even when he found reward, he found no gain.⁵⁸ When Qoheleth says he found no “gain” he means that nothing will prevent him from dying. Reward from his pursuits only came in the immediate experience. Death is the tyrant that imprisons everything under frustration. If death is the great הֶבֶל-maker, the only real solution is the end of death. If הֶבֶל is to disappear from God’s creation, there must be a resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul expounds upon the implications of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Among them, he says in 15:26 that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. The resurrection of Jesus pried away the cemented grip of death on humanity. Its tyranny experienced a blow unlike any other it had ever known. Suddenly, the finality of its power faded. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead ensures the future resurrection of all who trust in him for salvation. First Corinthians 15 also discusses that future for believers, whether dead or still living at the return of Christ. On that day, death dies, the immortal puts on immortality, and the sting of death becomes a dim memory. On that day, the brutal reality that causes everything under the sun to be הֶבֶל will no longer be able to affect anyone who belongs to Christ. The apocalyptic imagery that Qoheleth uses to portray the end of an individual life gives way to the glory of the Day of the LORD. That Day will bring the resurrection of believers, the presence of God, and a new creation where הֶבֶל can never again undermine the experience of the people of God.

⁵⁸ See chapter 3 for a discussion of the difference between the two terms.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Throughout this project I have attempted to argue that Ecclesiastes is an extended meditation on the realities of living in a world where Eden is lost. Qoheleth is caught between a worldview shaped by Genesis 1–2 and his observations of a post-Genesis 3 world. Underlying my approach is the assumption that the Bible is a unified whole. I also understand that the biblical authors write from a shared perspective and that later authors both utilize and build upon earlier Scripture. Solomon, writing as “the Qoheleth” (Eccl 12:8), evaluates the world in light of the goodness of creation and the reality of sin.

In chapter 2, I treated the prologue and epilogue together, defining and discussing key terms as well as Qoheleth’s pedagogical approach. Throughout Ecclesiastes, he wants his readers to know the end to which history is moving from the beginning in order to live well in the present. He often states his conclusion before describing the journey to discovery (e.g., 2:1). Along the way, he finds that everything is הֶבֶל. Scholars translate הֶבֶל in various ways and disagree on the significance of it in Qoheleth’s theology. I attempted to define it as “frustration.” In my view, that translation best explains how Qoheleth can say that many topics are both הֶבֶל and good (compare 2:21 and 2:24 for example). Far from being a contradiction, Qoheleth simply recognizes that God created a good world and sin introduces frustration into those good gifts. Even so, goodness remains.

In the remaining chapters, I treated various topics that Qoheleth covered in his meditation. I considered his pursuits of pleasure, industry, wisdom, and wealth, along with the inner longing for justice he felt in an unjust world. In each chapter, I tried to

highlight the goodness of each topic as expressed in Genesis 1–2, followed by the frustration that entered as a result of Genesis 3. I then aimed to show that Qoheleth maintains a balance between that frustration and the inherent goodness in God’s creation. From there, I showed how each of the topics find expression in the New Testament and how the gospel of Jesus Christ provides the answer to the הֵבֵל facing Qoheleth. In the final chapter I treated the commands to rejoice and remember that govern Qoheleth’s instructions in 11:7–12:8. In that text, he commands a young man to rejoice in youth and remember the Creator before death overtakes him. By situating the young man in a position of remembering Eden and the perfect beginning there, and knowing the end toward which history is moving, he can rejoice even in a world where Eden is lost. The frustration of sin is not enough to undo the goodness of God’s creation.

In the process of my thematic treatment of Ecclesiastes, it soon became apparent that I would not be able to exhaust all the topics Qoheleth discusses throughout the book. I believe more work can be done on other themes that will demonstrate my thesis that Qoheleth meditates on life outside of Eden.

To begin, I generally recognize the limitations of my chapter on the pursuit of wisdom. I had to make an exegetical decision between only treating the passages where Qoheleth specifically uses the word “wisdom,” or also treating passages where he illustrated the value of wisdom. I chose the latter. The result was a large portion of text which meant a limitation on how much I could comment on various sections. Readers of that chapter will perhaps be frustrated by the brevity of my comments. More work can be done on the proverbial wisdom texts.

More specifically, three areas need further attention within the framework I have proposed. First, Qoheleth describes the frustration of the marriage relationship as well as the goodness of marriage. In 7:26–28 he seems rather harsh on women. However, he probably is not describing women in general. Most likely, Qoheleth gives readers an autobiographical statement in 7:28. He claims that he found one man out of a thousand

who is upright, but not one woman. First Kings 11:3 reports that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines—a thousand women. They turned his heart away from the LORD. He knows firsthand how marriage can be infected by הֶבְלָה. Yet, in Ecclesiastes 9:9, he counsels his student to enjoy life with the wife whom he loves. Marriage is still good. Further reflection is needed on Qoheleth's teaching

Second, Qoheleth frequently speaks about time and appropriate behavior (e.g., 3:1–8; 7:1–10). God gives people business and has made everything beautiful in its time. Yet, God also makes life work in such a way that people cannot figure out what he is doing. Mankind cannot figure it out no matter how hard they try (8:17). Qoheleth also understands that God makes known the beginning and the end, but does not let people understand the details of in between (3:11). More work could be done on behaving appropriately within the time that God gives, especially when it is not clear what God's purposes are in a given situation.

Finally, further study could be done on Qoheleth and determinism. In several places, Qoheleth seems to say that God does what he does and humanity is along for the ride (3:14; 7:13). Even so, he never counsels his readers to resign to the fact that they must sit back and let life wash over them. A healthy tension appears to exist between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Perhaps someone more qualified than me could treat Qoheleth's approach to the tension.

Ecclesiastes has proven to be the challenge that I expected, and more. The benefits of studying this book have been immense and created within me an appetite to search further still. I began this project hoping to better understand the book and perhaps to be able to write something that could benefit the church. At the time of writing this chapter I have not had the privilege of preaching Ecclesiastes to Ephesus Baptist Church. However, a sermon series is on the horizon. I can already see the benefits of biblical-theological reflection on Ecclesiastes. I sincerely hope that these sermons will help the people see the importance of enjoying creation despite the frustration of sin. I also hope

they will fuel a lifetime of study for others as we continue to mine the depths of God's word together.

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ABSTRACT

FROM VANITY TO GRAVITY: PREACHING ECCLESIASTES IN BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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This project consists of a series of sermons attempting to set Ecclesiastes in its biblical-theological context. Chapter 1 defines biblical theology and outlines the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 treats the prologue and epilogue of Ecclesiastes together. The remaining chapters cover several important themes including Qoheleth's pursuit of pleasure, industry, wisdom, and wealth, along with the inner longing for justice he felt in an unjust world. The final chapter focuses on the commands to rejoice and remember in 11:7–12:8. Throughout, I have argued that the book is best understood as an extended meditation on the realities of living outside of Eden. Though sin introduces frustration into the world, the goodness of creation remains. People can still enjoy God's creation and look forward to the day that it gives way to the new creation.

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