

Wisdom in the Old Testament—2 Ecclesiastes: The Search for Wisdom

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INTRODUCTION

On first superficial reading Ecclesiastes appears to be a puzzling book. What exactly is the Preacher's view of the world and life? Is he a pessimist? Is there a place for pessimism in the Scriptures? On the other hand, does the oft-repeated theme of the celebration of life (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9) suggest revelry and loose living? There is definitely no place for that in the Bible either. He recognises that God is the Creator who created a beautiful world, but that the creation and mankind live under a curse, especially the great tragedy of death. I have found that the author of the book is a wise, godly person who gives saintly counsel in how we are to conduct ourselves in this life.

HEAVENLY MATTERS

The Preacher instructs us to watch our step when we go to the house of God; to draw near, to listen to his Word (5:1). The meaning of listen in Hebrews is twofold: to pay attention and to obey the Torah. The statements, 'God is in heaven, and you upon earth' (5:2) and 'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it' (12:7), clearly tell us that God is the sovereign Creator, 'who makes everything' (11:5; 12:1).¹ He rules his creation forever:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by (3:14–15).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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In this day and age it is good for us to know that ‘God will outlast all creatureliness and will preserve all that is, was, and will be’.² God is indeed a faithful Creator (1 Pet. 4:19).

We are of the earth and created with a measure of knowledge and wisdom, but unable to find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (3:11; 7:23):

... then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out (8:17).

This all may allude to Genesis 2 and 3 with its teaching about the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil (‘the tree was to be desired to make one wise’).

We will never find out what God is about in this world, but we are urged to go to the house of the Lord to listen to the revealed will of God as expounded in the Torah. ‘The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deut. 29:29, RSV). The message of Ecclesiastes is loud and clear and simply this: Go to the house of God, listen to his word, stand in awe before the Creator, fear him and keep his commandments (3:14; 5:7; 12:13):

Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God (8:12–13).

Furthermore God is judge, ‘For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil’ (12:14). He is the one who determines the conditions of human existence on earth, precisely because he is first of all Creator.

ECCLESIASTES AND GENESIS

In the book, God is supremely the Creator: ‘who presides over all of creation with power of an unchallenged kind. This is creation theology at its most formal and most formidable, perhaps seeded by the speeches of Yahweh in Job 38–41.’³ The Preacher draws heavily on the creation story in Genesis. He knows that the Creator has made everything suitable (‘beautiful’, NIV) in its time and has put eternity in the human heart, thus binding mankind to himself (3:11). This may allude to the creation account of Genesis 1 where all things were created good; that is, all things function properly together. The Preacher also urges us to consider the sobering fact that there is crookedness in the world which God has put there and which we are powerless to remove (7:13). In particular, God made man simple but ‘man’s complex problems are of his own devising’ (7:29, JB). These are most likely references to the creation of human beings in the image of God and their subsequent fall as in Genesis 1–3. In the

² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 394.

³ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 393.

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saying, ‘all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again’ (3:20), the Preacher reminds us that death is mankind’s great tragedy (cf. Gen. 3:19, with almost similar wording). He tells us that we are meant to live in companionship (4:9–12), reflecting ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’ in Genesis 2:18.

Setting the Scene

The Preacher in the opening poem of the book (1:4–11) gives us a revelation of the order and regularity of creation as a sign of God’s graciousness and blessing. This too comes from Genesis, ‘As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease’ (Gen. 8:22). Those who have a glorious creation theology see in this poem an affirmation of the order and regularity the Creator has established in his creation. No wonder he cries, ‘He has made everything beautiful in its time’ (3:11, NIV) and ‘I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live’ (3:12, NRSV).

Others who do not have a high view of creation or those who are of a miserable disposition see nothing but endless, boring monotony. But Johnston observes, ‘Perhaps most importantly, Ecclesiastes and Genesis exhibit substantial agreement as to the central point of the creation motif—that life is to be celebrated as a “good” creation of God.’⁴ Seven times in the opening chapter of Genesis, God looks at his creation and calls it ‘good’. Johnston then goes on to say that:

Creation theology provides a strong contextual suggestion concerning the Preacher’s intention. If Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom tradition, and wisdom finds its place in creation theology—moreover, if the Preacher shows within his work a direct acquaintance with and dependence on the book of Genesis—then it is not in the least surprising that the Preacher seeks to affirm life as something to be celebrated and enjoyed as good, as something to be beheld reverently and interacted with joyously.⁵

But the problem for the Preacher was the intrusion of sin into the world through Adam’s rebellion. He declares that ‘the human heart is fully set to do evil’ (8:11). The curse of God upon man and his environment meant there was a drastic change. Instead of pleasurable and easy work conditions to produce enormous quantities of varied and luscious produce, there now had to be great toil ‘by the sweat of your face’ to produce meagre returns while constantly battling the ‘thorns and thistles’. In the words of Ecclesiastes: ‘oh, what a weary task God has given mankind to labour at!’ (1:13, JB). Mankind’s whole life became involved with this effort.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE IN OUR FALLEN WORLD

Thus the real question of the meaning of life is the query the Preacher asks: ‘What do people gain for all the toil at which they toil under the sun?’ What do people have left when all their painful and wearisome toil is complete? If there is meaning to life,

⁴ R. K. Johnston, ‘Confessions of a Workaholic’, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 38 (1976), pp. 14–28.

⁵ I have changed ‘Qoheleth’ to ‘the Preacher’ in this portion from pp. 22f.

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where is it hidden? The Preacher recognises that there is a great difference between his world and the one created by God. By the curse, God subjected the creation to the frustration of bondage and decay (cf. Rom. 8:19–21), creating the enigma which bewilders us. The whole world has been turned upside down, so that it bears little resemblance to the pristine paradise that it once was. The Preacher now wants us to acknowledge that his world and life in it is marked by aimlessness, enigma and tyranny; hence his oft-repeated statement that all is vanity (‘meaningless’, NIV).⁶ But at the same time he ‘upholds the creational design to celebrate life as a divine gift, to be enjoyed as good, something to be cherished reverently’.⁷

Ecclesiastes begins with the author reporting on his quest to find out what life is all about. It was not his search for wisdom, but he applied his mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven (1:12–13). He set out on a deliberate path to find life’s meaning in becoming rich, having great possessions, power and authority; and in his work, in education and in pleasure. His first reactions: I hated life, I hated all my toil, I turned and gave my heart to despair (2:17–20). His question: ‘What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun?’ (2:22, NIV). Not much! But he does not leave the reader in despair; his glorious final observation is:

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind (2:24–26).

After the gloominess of the first two chapters, at the end the mood has drastically changed. Not surprisingly, as God has entered the picture! His name is mentioned three times within a few verses. This is the first sounding of the ‘celebration of life’ theme in the book. Now the Preacher has a positive recommendation. He is saying loud and clear, ‘Listen to me! There is nothing better than this!’ In this passage he commends the joy of being together at table with family and friends, and the enjoyment in doing meaningful work. He then makes a theological observation: these things—eating and drinking together with family and friends—are creational gifts coming from the generous hand of God. We eat and drink and work in the presence of God himself; in fellowship with him life can be enjoyed to the full. To the sinner, however, whose acts are without reference to God, all his works are vanity.

Commenting on verse 24, Luther says:

This is the principal conclusion, in fact the point, of the whole book, which he [the Preacher] will often repeat. This is a remarkable passage, one that explains everything preceding and following it.⁸

⁶ *Hebel* is traditionally translated as ‘vanity’. It stands for ‘what is visible or recognizable, but unsubstantial, momentary, and profitless’. R. B. Y. Scott, quoted in Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 153.

⁷ Ardel B. Caneday, ‘Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?’ *The Grace Theological Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 1986, pp. 21–56. Page 43 quoted here.

⁸ James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes: A Book for Our Time*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2006, p. 19.

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Luther again sounds what he considers to be the theme of the entire book in his exposition of 5:20 where the Preacher says, ‘For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts’. Luther comments:

This is the conclusion of this entire book or argument . . . This statement is the interpreter of the entire book: Solomon [sic] intends to forbid vain anxieties, so that we may happily enjoy the things that are present and not care at all about the things that are in the future, lest we permit the present moment, our moment, to slip away.⁹

FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON, AND A TIME FOR EVERY MATTER UNDER HEAVEN

Those who see the first poem (1:4–11) negatively—the same old thing happening over and over again—may also see the second poem about seasons and times (3:1–8) as nothing but fate and beyond the control of man. But the whole passage is really a statement of the sovereignty of God in all things, and that we should shape our lives according to his purposes. Verse 17 appears to be a commentary on the poem, ‘I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work’. These times and seasons are not arbitrary but set.¹⁰ This is not a suggestion by the Preacher that man should resign himself passively, but that we will be judged according to how we react and live when in those times and seasons.

Immediately after his poem of the divine appointment of affairs which touch every person in this cursed world, the Preacher returns to the question he asked at the beginning of his first poem: What does a man gain for the efforts that he makes? This is now the third time he asks this question (1:3; 2:22). Man struggles for life’s meaning in an environment that taunts him with its paradoxes—birth and death, weeping and laughter, love and hate, war and peace, and so forth. The Preacher now for the second time counsels God’s people to enjoy life in spite of the inscrutable and enigmatic world in which they live. The question in 6:12—‘who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life?’—he answers most emphatically in 3:12–14. Twice he says, ‘I know’:

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. *I know* that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him (3:12–14, italics mine).

This is the second time that the Preacher tells us ‘there is nothing better’ than to happily celebrate life and enjoy all God’s good gifts. He is not suggesting to enjoy ‘wine, women and song’, he is counselling ‘all who stand in awe before him’, young and old alike (11:8–9), but especially the young ones:

⁹ James Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*: p. 19, cf. p. 33.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Wisdom of Koheleth: Studies in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2005, p. 35.

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Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment (11:9).

Rabbi Rab puts the matter rather provocatively in the Jerusalem Talmud when he asserts on the basis of this passage, ‘Every man must render account before God for all the good things which he beheld in his life and did not enjoy’.¹¹ This of course may come from Deuteronomy 28:47 where there will be judgement for those in Israel who did not serve the Lord joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything.

Israel had so thoroughly recognised Ecclesiastes’ worth and taken its message to heart that the book was incorporated into the Feast of Booths (or Tabernacles):

You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press. Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. Seven days you shall keep the festival to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate (Deut. 16:13–15).

Webb writes:

It is perhaps paradoxical that so sombre a book should be read at so joyous a festival, but it shows that Ecclesiastes has a vital role in relation to Israel’s explicitly religious life as well as in its wisdom teaching. It keeps joy anchored in reality by injecting the lessons of the wilderness into the celebration of harvest. For in the wilderness the Israelites learned about their human frailty: that their lives were a mere breath, and that to fear God and keep his commandments constituted the whole meaning of their existence. It was a lesson they needed to hear again in the context of harvest celebration, lest being able to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their work should be mistaken for an accomplishment rather than a gift, and lead them away from God rather than to him.¹²

Long before the Preacher wrote Ecclesiastes, Deuteronomy warned against this danger:

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God (Deut. 8:11–14).

Our Fleeting Life

The Preacher tells us that it is better to attend a funeral than a party (7:2); for it is at a funeral that we are reminded that one day each must die. Karl Barth wrote: ‘Some day a company of men will process out to a churchyard and lower a coffin and everyone will go home; but one will not come back, and that will be me.’¹³ Looking at our

¹¹ J. Kleinig, ‘Wisdom Literature’, Luther Seminary, North Adelaide, 1990, unpublished notes, p. 5.

¹² B. G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther* (NSBT 10), Apollos, Leicester, 2000, pp. 106f.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, pp. 117f., cited by Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, p. 84.

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fleeting life this way is good for the soul and a vital ingredient in true worship. It tends to make us treasure each day that we have. ‘This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps. 118:24). The Preacher counsels, ‘let the living take this to heart’ (Eccl. 7:2, JB).

Ecclesiastes has a lot more to say about the curse of death upon mankind:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again (3:19–20).

To him not to have a decent burial would be a great loss:

A man may beget a hundred children, and live many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life’s good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he (6:3).

The Preacher does not claim to know any details about life beyond death:

Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them? (3:21–22).

Reinhold Niebuhr once suggested that God has not chosen to reveal to us ‘either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell’.¹⁴ However, the Preacher is sure of certain things, firstly that ‘the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it’ (12:7) and secondly, that ‘God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil’ (12:14; cf. 3:17; 11:9).

Then in chapter 9 the Preacher once again reminds us of our coming death:

... the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone (9:2–3).

He began this section by acknowledging that everything is in God’s hands (9:1), but then emphasises again that we must all die. A traditional childhood bedtime prayer says, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’¹⁵ To him, however, life is lived in hope and is everything in any form; even the most humble life, even a dog’s life, is to be preferred to death: ‘a living dog is better than a dead lion’ (9:4).

If death is so near to us everyday, how then shall we live? The Preacher comes with many robust instructions to celebrate life. On previous occasions he gave his observations (2:24; 3:12–13) or even a commendation (8:15), but now in no uncertain terms he tells us that life is decidedly worth living:

¹⁴ Quoted by Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, p. 96.

¹⁵ The second line these days is, ‘May angels watch me through the night, and wake me with the morning light’.

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Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (9:7–10).

Note the imperatives: ‘Go, eat’, ‘drink’, ‘let be’, ‘do not let’, ‘enjoy’, ‘do’. These four verses offer the longest sequence of imperative verbs, the longest section of instructions in the entire book of Ecclesiastes. But more importantly these instructions are given a theological endorsement: ‘for God has long ago approved what you do’. Not surprisingly as he is the source of all the gifts of created life; bread and wine, festivity and work, marriage and love. Therefore ‘husbands and wives are instructed to enjoy each other every day of their lives together, while they can’.¹⁶

Bonhöffer writes:

I believe that we ought to love and trust God in our *lives* [his emphasis], and in all the good things that he sends us, that when the time comes (but not before!) we may go to him with love, trust, and joy. But, to put it plainly, for a man in his wife’s arms to be hankering after the other world is, in mild terms, a piece of bad taste, and not God’s will. We ought to find and love God in what he actually gives us; if it pleases him to allow us to enjoy some overwhelming earthly happiness, we must not try to be more pious than God himself and allow our happiness to be corrupted by presumption and arrogance, and by unbridled religious fantasy which is never satisfied with what God gives. God will see to it that the man who finds him in his earthly happiness and thanks him for it does not lack reminder that earthly things are transient, that it is good for him to attune his heart to what is eternal . . . But everything has its time, and the main thing is that we keep step with God, and do not keep pressing on a few steps ahead—nor keep dawdling a step behind.¹⁷

Iain Provan comments:

In focusing our attention on this life rather than the next, indeed, this book contributes to the correction of an all-too-frequent imbalance throughout the ages in Christian thinking, which has sometimes presented Christianity as if it were more a matter of waiting for something than a matter of living.¹⁸

The Preacher concludes this section (9:1–10) by repeating what he had said previously in 3:22: ‘So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?’ So work at it with enthusiasm!

THE FINAL MATTER

How then shall we live in this world that is aimless and meaningless as the result of the Creator’s curse upon it? The Preacher counsels:

¹⁶ J. Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, pp. 106f.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhöffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 168–9. Cited by Limburg, *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, p. 50.

¹⁸ I. Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, p. 42, quoted by Limburg in *Encountering Ecclesiastes*, p. 4.

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The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (12:13–14).

Those who take his counsel to heart ‘will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts’ (5:20).