

Two Themes in Ecclesiastes

By
J. Todd Renner
For
OT 512D – Old Testament Survey
31 October 2020

The puzzling book of Ecclesiastes contains two recurring themes that are the **vanity of life** and **humankind's response** to this vanity. Qoheleth, or the Preacher and narrator of the book, catalogs this “vanity” of life in myriad ways and often in contradiction to the wisdom literature contained elsewhere in the Old Testament. In my opinion, he does not stray into heterodoxy but rather points the reader to the source of wisdom. The LORD controls all and has blessed humankind with the ability to benefit not only from wisdom as traditionally applied, but also to thrive when life's circumstances turn proverbial wisdom upside down.

Interpretation Issues

Perhaps more than other books of the Old Testament, drawing conclusions from Ecclesiastes is influenced by the approach taken by the reader. In my own approach, I began with the Church's continued understanding of the origin of scripture as conveyed by St. Paul to St. Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16). Ecclesiastes has historically generated considerable discussion about whether it should even be included in the canon of scripture and the debate still rages among scholars in both Judaism and Christianity.¹ However, both rabbis and Church theologians continue to endorse the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the canon of scripture as “breathed out by God” for edification. Therefore, the question is how to reconcile its supposed inconsistencies with the rest of the Bible.

Choon Leong Seow endorses Michael V. Fox's approach in that Fox “views the contradictions as part and parcel of the book's message, arguing that ‘Qoheleth is not so much contradicting himself as *observing* contradictions in the world.’”² In other words, the apparent contradictions observed in Ecclesiastes are not editorial errors or mistakes in the interpretation of Qoheleth's observations of life but are actually part of the message of the entire book. In stating the “reality” of life, Qoheleth does not let the reader off easy with platitudes that seem to fall short but rather engages the contradictions and helps the reader accept them in the LORD'S economy.

¹ Choon Leong Seow, *Theology When Everything is Out of Control*, 237.

² *Ibid.*, 238.

Regarding Qoheleth, many commentators have suggested that he is not King Solomon even though the book describes him as “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1) and as someone very wise (1:16). I am agnostic on the issue and do not believe this detracts from nor enhances the understanding of the message.

Likewise, the concept of a “frame narrator” has been advanced to better understand why Ecclesiastes introduces Qoheleth in the third person (1:1) and again switches tense to the third person in the epilogue (12:9–14). This narrator “frames” the teachings in Ecclesiastes between these two passages. Some commentators have suggested the frame narrator added orthodox teaching to the end of Qoheleth’s teachings. Peter Enns clarifies the fault in seeing the frame narrator as someone who corrects Qoheleth’s heterodoxy.

There is no mystery here. The frame narrator is telling the readers what they are about to hear. The problems begin to arise, however, when we presume that the frame narrator’s words, even here, represent a negative evaluation rather than simply an attempt to express succinctly Qoheleth’s words.³

Whether the frame narrator is a separate author from Qoheleth does not really detract from his message as inspired by the Holy Spirit. The epilogue of 12:9–14 does not aggressively contradict the body of Ecclesiastes. Peter Enns’ view “is that the epilogue is in fundamental support of Qoheleth’s observations while at the same time offering a mild corrective.”⁴

Vanity Defined

The traditional translation of Qoheleth’s cry in 1:2 is: “... vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” The Hebrew word being translated in the passage is *hebel*. However, a scan of thirty-five different English Bible translations of the word *hebel* adds pointless, meaningless, futile, useless, smoke, and no purpose to the list of possible meanings. The Orthodox Jewish Bible gives up and simply uses *hevel*. Elsa Tamez says:

³ T.I. Longman, *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 125.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

... the Hebrew word *hebel*, which occurs thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes, cannot be translated as “vanity,” as was done in the Latin Vulgate followed by a wide array of other versions. The literal sense of the term (to sigh, to blow, to breeze) is impossible to translate. As Michael Fox says, it must be assigned a transferable significance. I agree with Fox's claim that the transferred significance falls squarely within the semantic scope of the word "absurd" in its oppressive or tragic sense.⁵

The point of discussing the difficulty of translating *hebel* is to acknowledge that Qoheleth is describing life as something more than just “vain.” The additional translations of to sigh, to blow, to breeze, or absurd mentioned above give deeper insight to his teaching. Seeing life as absurd could suggest that there is no meaning at all, but that is not quite what Qoheleth conveys when he applies *hebel* to the different observations he makes. The translations of to sigh, to blow, and to breeze suggest “ephemeral” or the concept that grasping the reality of life is difficult like grasping a sigh, a breeze, or smoke. I have continued to use “vanity” for lack of an exact translation and in deference to tradition. Qoheleth applies vanity to both life and the application of wisdom to life. Seeking certain outcomes from the application of wisdom can be absurd when compared with the reality of the outcomes generated.

Vanity Applied

To understand the concept of vanity in Ecclesiastes, it is helpful to see how Qoheleth applies it to different situations. According to Peter Enns:

Qohelet's main contention is not that life is ephemeral or worthless; rather, his cause of such distress is that there is not payoff in what one does. None of our activities result in any sort of ultimate benefit. Life as we experience it is “an affront to reason.”⁶

One application of the vanity of life is to the concept of work. Qoheleth sees our work as toiling for the benefit of others. It is worth quoting 2:18-23 in its entirety here.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the

⁵ Elsa Tamez, *Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery*, 251.

⁶ T.I. Longman, *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 129.

toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Continuing Peter Enns' line of thought regarding payoff for effort corresponds to the lack of gain Qoheleth finds in life's activities (1:3, 2:11, 3:9, and 5:16). Even when our efforts do yield gain, we cannot take it with us to the grave. Therefore, all our striving *for gain* is in vain.⁷ However, the vanity of life is not limited to human striving alone. Even nature's rhythm seems vain (1:2–11). The sun runs its course continually with no gain or change; it simply goes around and around (1:5). Likewise, the wind blows around and around in a continual circuit (1:6) and the rivers flow continually into the sea, but the sea never fills (1:7).

Qoheleth does not limit his application of vanity to the toilsome or the monotony of natural rhythm but also extends it to the good things of life. Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 discusses self-indulgence or enjoying all the pleasures of life. Qoheleth, in persona as Solomon, tells of pursuing pleasures as an intellectual exercise meant to enhance his wisdom (2:3). He brags of his great works like building houses, gardens, parks, etc. He gathers many possessions, including slaves and singers, but his final judgment on these activities concludes “all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (2:11).

In apparent contradiction to the book of Proverbs, Qoheleth even tackles the pursuit of wisdom as vain. He echoes Proverbs in saying that it is better to take the advice of a wise youth than an old and foolish king, but he ends the passage by saying that those who come after the wise youth will not rejoice in him. Qoheleth says that “this also is vanity and a striving after wind.” I said “apparent” contradiction because this passage demonstrates the core of Qoheleth's message. He encourages the reader to pursue wisdom and follow wise counsel, it is just that doing so does not seem to matter in the end. The wise youth is forgotten and the generations that follow seem bound to repeat the same mistakes as their ancestors. It is this ultimate outcome that Qoheleth finds vain or ephemeral.

⁷ T.I. Longman, *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 129.

“Macro Response” to the Vanity of Life

Humankind’s response to all the vanity Qoheleth observes in life comes in two parts. The first response (which I call the “macro response”) to the problem of meaninglessness is to **fear God and keep his commandments**. As Proverbs 1:7 admonishes, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Qoheleth states this very clearly in 3:9–15 and 5:1–7. The frame narrator also echoes and reinforces this point in 12:13 when he says to “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” This response is “macro” in its summation of our whole duty. The “big picture” response of humankind to life on earth is to know and fear (or respect) God. This response is entirely consistent with the law and the prophets and does not require further clarification.

“Micro Response” to the Vanity of Life

I call Qoheleth’s second response the “micro response.” It helps to make life a little easier and brings meaning in smaller ways to what might otherwise be considered vain, meaningless, or toilsome. This “micro response” to **eat, drink, and find enjoyment in toil** is found in 2:24–26, 3:12–13, 5:18–20, 7:14, 8:15, and 9:7, 9.⁸ The “micro response” could easily be misinterpreted as *carpe diem* except for Qoheleth’s inclusion of enjoying our work. Wasting away life by eating and drinking waiting on the inevitability of death is clearly not the Biblical standard. St. Paul raises this false comfort in his first epistle to the Corinthians (15:32). The addition of enjoying one’s work to the call to “eat, drink, and be merry” differentiates the “micro response” from a *carpe diem*-like response.

The Blessing of Work

We can easily understand the first two blessings of food and drink. Other than taking these blessings as ultimate things in the form of gluttony, rightly used their value is clearly understood. Work

⁸ *The ESV Study Bible*TM. 1195.

on the other hand is harder to understand as a blessing after the Fall. We know from Genesis 3 that *work* in the Garden is cursed when it becomes *labor* East of Eden. However, the Torah continues the LORD'S reclamation of creation when he blesses work by commanding the sabbath observation in the Decalogue.⁹

William P. Brown points out that:

In the biblical narrative, work begins as a blessing. Moreover, according to scripture, intellectual or spiritual reflection is not to be valued at the expense of physical toil. The Bible, unlike Greco-Roman tradition, knows no split between the manual and the mental, the life of the mind apart from that of the body.

The Old Testament's constructive view of work is lodged squarely in its high view of human identity, created, no less, in "the image of God" (Gen 1:26–27). Because human identity is endowed with royal dignity and cultic purpose, human work is invested with preeminent significance.¹⁰

How do we reconcile this high view of work when Qoheleth himself declaims the vanity of toil cited earlier? Hinckley G. Mitchell suggests that the vanity of toil is seeing worth in the thing done rather than in the doing of it.¹¹ He further clarifies Qoheleth's teaching on work:

It is, however, the profitlessness of labor to which the Preacher refers with most feeling. In 2:17 he says he "hated life" because the work done under the sun was grievous to him, in that it was all "vanity and strife after wind." The last clause must not be misunderstood. It does not mean that the work of the world is without results. The term used, as has been shown, is one that implies achievement. The thought is that the results achieved, in lieu of certain facts that are cited in the same connection, are not worth the exertion required to produce them.¹²

William P. Brown echoes the same concept as follows.

Under death's shadow, the problem with toil for Qoheleth runs much deeper than the inevitable devolution of one's legacy to others of questionable character and motives. The sage finds the very quest for achievement to be problematic. Indeed, his definition of toil is indelibly marked by the prospect of gain. To toil is to toil for gain. Qoheleth identifies three intractable problems with work as "toil" (*'āmāl*): it is devoid of real gain, bereft of rest, and motivated by envy.¹³

Common to Qoheleth's commendations is the indissoluble relationship established between enjoyment and work. Unlike gain, which is gleaned from one's labors, enjoyment is found amid the toiling.¹⁴

⁹ William P. Brown, *Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do: Qoheleth's Work Ethic*. 274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹¹ Hinckley G. Mitchell, "Work" in *Ecclesiastes*. 125.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

¹³ William P. Brown, *Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do: Qoheleth's Work Ethic*. 276.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

The “micro response” is summarized by Qoheleth in 9:7–9 below. He calls the reader to enjoy what he does while doing it rather than seeking after the thing it produces as this is the ultimate vanity.

Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Structure Enhances Meaning

The structure of Ecclesiastes also helps to make Qoheleth’s point by moving the reader from one insight to the next through three great cycles. It is like a monologue with Qoheleth despairing of the vanity of life and then talking himself back to orthodoxy in the appropriate responses. Ecclesiastes’ structure includes two “catalogs” of the vanities. They are what Qoheleth observes in life (1:4–2:26 and 3:16–4:16) and his observations of life described as “under the sun” (5:8–7:24 and 8:1–12:7).¹⁵ Like the never-ending course of the sun or the blowing of the wind, Ecclesiastes tracks through life’s vanities repeatedly and shows humankind’s appropriate response.

The first catalog of vanities (1:4–2:26) also includes the first “micro response” in 2:24–26. It then moves to the famous poem declaring that “for everything there is a season,” which suggests that all we experience in life is part of a continuing cycle and that no particular stage is permanent. This catalog of vanities is capped in 3:9–15 with the “macro response” to fear God.

Likewise, the second catalog of vanities (3:16–4:16) includes a “micro response” in 3:12–13 and is capped with yet another “macro response” to fear God (5:1–7).¹⁶

The third section of Ecclesiastes describing life “under the sun” (5:8 – 12:7) is split with the definition of the heart of the problem that is sin (7:25–29). Again, this section features three “micro responses” buried within the observations of the vanity seen under the sun in 7:14, 8:15, and 9:7, 9. As

¹⁵ *The ESV Study Bible*TM. 1196.

¹⁶ *The ESV Study Bible*TM. 1196.

mentioned earlier, the frame narrator completes the entire book with his final “macro response” admonition to “Fear God and keep his commandments” in 12:13.¹⁷

Conclusion

Far from being a heterodox and pessimistic denouncement of life, Ecclesiastes helps put the reality of what humankind experiences into its proper context. The failure of traditional wisdom literature to work out as “guaranteed promises” from the Lord is not life-ending. Qoheleth acknowledges that real injustices in life are thrown our way yet he puts them squarely in the economy of God and encourages his readers to find joy in the blessings the LORD showers on those whom he loves.

Thanks be to God!

¹⁷ Ibid., 1196.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, William P. “‘Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do’: Qoheleth’s Work Ethic.” *Interpretation* 55, no. 3 (July 2001): 271–84.
<http://search.ebscohost.com.nashotah.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip.cid&custid=s2735355&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000373375&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Longman, T.I. (2010). *Dictionary of the Old Testament—Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings: A compendium of contemporary biblical scholarship*. ProQuest
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com.nashotah.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=061210bb-4f7a-4448-89fd-38d6b2b43d48%40sdc-v-sessmgr02&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWNvb2tpZSxpcCxjcGlkNmN1c3RpZD1zMjcZNTM1NSZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=ATLA0001715776&db=rft>.
- Mitchell, Hinckley Gilbert Thomas. 1913. “‘Work’ in Ecclesiastes.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 32 (2): 123–38.
<http://search.ebscohost.com.nashotah.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip.cid&custid=s2735355&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001321591&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Seow, Choon Leong. 2001. “Theology When Everything Is out of Control.” *Interpretation* 55 (3): 237–49.
<http://search.ebscohost.com.nashotah.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie.ip.cid&custid=s2735355&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000373361&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Tamez, Elsa. “Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery.” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 55, no. 3 (2001): 250–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430005500303>.
- The ESV Study BibleTM, ESV[®] Bible*. Text Edition: 2011. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved.