

## THE GOSPEL IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

ERIC ORTLUND\*

Out of many difficulties in the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes, surely one of the most vexing is whether and/or in what way the gospel is expressed. While biblical books in both Testaments will differently express God's forgiveness and redemption of his people and restoration of sinners to life in his presence, it would be troubling indeed if a canonical book had nothing to say about these great biblical themes. But it is exactly this troubling possibility that faces the reader of Ecclesiastes: one finds nothing corresponding to (for instance) the Passover (Exodus 12) or the death of the Servant (Isaiah 53), texts which easily intersect with the presentation of the cross of Christ in the NT. Indeed, when Qohelet<sup>1</sup> does address different subjects, such as wisdom or money or work, he hardly seems to have much good to say about them at all.

A common response within Christian interpretation of Ecclesiastes is to understand Qohelet's insistence on vanity or meaninglessness as a conclusion about life without God: the negative or apparently pessimistic sections of the book count as Qohelet taking a secular worldview to its inevitable conclusion.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult, after all, when reading Qohelet's opening salvo in 1:2, not to think of Paul's promise in 1 Cor 15:58 that our labor in the Lord is *not* in vain. Tremper Longman presents a stronger version of this approach in his commentary.<sup>3</sup> Longman understands Qohelet to be entirely skeptical, such that he contradicts the normative teaching of Scripture. According to his position, the epilogue in 12:9–14 warns the son about the dangers of Qohelet's position.<sup>4</sup> By analogy, Eccl 1:12–12:7 is like the speech of the adulteress in Proverbs—it is communicated by the wise father only to inoculate the son against it. According to Longman, the gospel is present in the

\* Eric Ortlund is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Briarcrest College and Seminary, 510 College Drive, Caronport, SK S0H 0S0, Canada.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Fox has helpfully distinguished the “editor” who speaks in 1:1–2, 7:27, 12:8–14, and “Qohelet,” a literary persona by means of which the author can express shocking ideas we are inclined to resist (see “Frame-narrative and composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 [1977] 83–106 and *A Time to Tear Down and A Time To Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 363–77).

<sup>2</sup> In different ways, this reading is given in (for example) Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985) 93; Daniel Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 283; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the OT Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 78–97; Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011) 72–76.

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 276, 280–81.

book only in the sense that Qohelet describes that from which Jesus Christ saves us.<sup>5</sup>

While I am in sympathy with the above “majority view” on Ecclesiastes, it is not free of problems. After all, the above-quoted passage from Paul is found in a context describing the resurrection and the life of the world to come—an “above the sun” perspective. Qohelet, by way of contrast, focuses on life under the sun (1:3). That is the sphere of vanity. As a result, Eccl 1:2 and 1 Cor 15:58 should not be pitted against each other. Indeed, the last verse of the book assures us of a judgment of every deed, both positive and negative, which cannot happen during life under the sun (12:14)—a perspective not dissimilar to Paul’s.

More importantly, Qohelet demonstrably does not speak from a secular position, or about life without God. From Qohelet’s perspective, all of life is a gift from God (2:24; 5:17; 8:15; 9:9). He insists that God is in control of all of human existence (3:11; 8:17; 11:5) and that he will judge every human being (3:17; 11:9). Qohelet’s honest wrestling with the delays and temporal inconsistencies of God’s judgment (7:15; 8:10, 14) cannot dislodge his belief that judgment will happen (8:12). Furthermore, wisdom and righteousness are, according to Qohelet, unqualifiedly better than their opposites (2:12–14); folly or sin is never recommended (7:17). This hardly counts as a description of life without God—a skeptic or cynic would never make such claims. Nor is it entirely accurate to say that Christ delivers us from the frustration or vanity which Qohelet describes. While this is of course true in an ultimate sense—it is inconceivable to think of the new creation being subjected to frustration—it does not follow that those trusting Christ are delivered in this life from the frustrations Qohelet describes. (Similarly, I doubt that anyone would claim that faith in Christ delivers us from experiencing the frustration of creation in this present life as Paul describes them in Rom 8:18–23.) And it is this present life, life “under the sun,” which is Qohelet’s subject. He insists that God has imposed a certain “twistedness” on creation (1:15; 7:13–14) from which righteousness and wisdom, although good and necessary, do not deliver us (e.g. 8:14): Qohelet teaches us that the earthly results one might legitimately expect from a righteous life do not always obtain (e.g. 8:14; 9:2). Qohelet’s diagnosis of a world subjected to *hebel* cannot be limited to those living independent of God. It is all mankind, righteous and wicked on whom he focuses (this universal perspective is evident throughout, but see especially 1:3, 1:14, 7:2). Qohelet does not speak about life without God, but of the life of both sinner and saint under the sun, and God’s strange manner of ordering (or, perhaps better, “frustrating”) our lives.

The sharper versions of this more common reading of Ecclesiastes, such as Longman’s, generate further difficulties. It is strange, for instance, that twelve entire chapters are given only for the purpose of furnishing a negative example for the son. If that was the goal, surely there are simpler ways to achieve it? And what of the orthodox claims which Qohelet makes? It also strains the plain sense of the epilogist’s comments in 12:9–14 to take it as a condemnation of Qohelet’s ideas.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 39–40.

Most crucial for Longman's reading of the evaluation in these verses as negative is the first clause of v. 12, which Longman translates as, "Furthermore, of these, my son, be warned."<sup>6</sup> On this reading, the הַמָּה in this verse refers to the claims of Qohelet, which the son has just heard. But this incorrectly translates the phrase יִתֵּר מִן which begins the verse, which is defined as "more than."<sup>7</sup> The father is warning the son about texts or teachings other than or beyond the ones he has just received.

These few paragraphs in no way exhaust the intricacies of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes or the issues involved in recent scholarly work on the book. They do, however, show that Qohelet does not neatly fit into the category of skeptic, nor is his book easily read as a description only of life without God. But if this is the case, how can one read Qohelet in a way which brings it closer to normative biblical theology—especially with regard to the gospel—without flattening its distinctive contribution? Consideration of two short passages, 9:7–10 and 7:15–18, will help to show a way forward. Since the latter passage more explicitly expresses the contours of the gospel, it will be discussed first.

### I. GOD ALREADY APPROVES (9:7–10)

Go, eat with joy your bread, and drink with a good heart your wine,	לֵךְ אֵכֵל בְּשִׂמְחָה לַחֲמֵד וּשְׂתֵה בְּלִבְטוֹב יִינֵךְ
for God already approves of your work.	כִּי כִבֵּר רָצָה הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ
Let your clothes be white all the time, nor let oil be lacking on your head.	בְּכָל־עֵת יִהְיוּ בְּגָדֶיךָ לְבָנִים וְשֶׁמֶן עַל־רֹאשְׁךָ אֲלֵי־חֶסֶר
Enjoy life with the wife whom you love	רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אַהַבְתָּ
all the days of your vain life which God gives you under the sun, all your vain days.	כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הַבְּלָד אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ תַּחַת כָּל יְמֵי הַבְּלָד הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
For this is your portion in life and in your labor in which you labor under the sun.	כִּי הוּא חֶלְקְךָ בַחַיִּים וּבַעֲמֻלָּךְ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה עֹמֵל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
Everything which your hand finds to do, do in your strength,	כָּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכַחַד עֲשֵׂה
for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol	כִּי אֵין מַעֲשֶׂה וְחִשְׁבוֹן וְדַעַת וְחִכְמָה בְּשְׂאוֹל
where you are going.	אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הֹלֵךְ שָׁמָּה:

It is the single word "already" (כִּבֵּר) which is of greatest significance for the present discussion—but in order to appreciate the surprising dimensions of God's prior delight in our work, we must consider the passage as a whole and its contribu-

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Ecclesiastes* 276.

<sup>7</sup> See HALOT 404, BDB 452; cf. Esth 6:6. The phrase has the same meaning in post-biblical Hebrew: see Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (repr. New York: Judaica, 1989) 572, as well as C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 38. In his commentary on this verse, Longman does not discuss these issues or justify his translation (*Book of Ecclesiastes* 280–81).

tion to and harmony with Qohelet's larger agenda. The reader will notice that twice Qohelet refers to the days of our vanity (הבל) in his call to unrestrained joy (v. 9). Without this word (and without, of course, v. 10b), this passage might be understood as a harmless and unsurprising call to enjoy God's gifts of life, work, and marriage—a call made not infrequently elsewhere in the OT (e.g. Deut 12:7). But the qualification of God's gift of life (v. 9) as *hebel* connects this passage to Qohelet's larger theme and his unique contribution to the canon.<sup>8</sup>

But what this larger theme is—what Qohelet means by referring to the divine gift of life and opportunity as *hebel*—is by no means clear. The word has been translating in varying ways, including “breath,” “fleeting,” “vanity,” “meaningless,” “absurdity,” and “enigmatic.”<sup>9</sup> Outside of Qohelet, the Hebrew word is not ambiguous. It takes on three distinct senses: first, breath, and, by extension, something fleeting or impermanent;<sup>10</sup> second, by natural extension, something in vain, pointless, empty, or deceitful;<sup>11</sup> third, idols.<sup>12</sup> Qohelet's use of the word overlaps with its use outside Ecclesiastes at some points, but he also deploys it in unique ways. An important example of the former is found in 11:10, where Qohelet calls us to enjoy life because it is *hebel*. Since this call is followed immediately by the surreal funeral procession of 12:1–5, the word should be translated according to the first definition listed above: just because life is fleeting, it should be enjoyed. (It may be noted that *hebel* cannot mean “meaningless” here, since the meaninglessness of life cannot count as a reason to enjoy it!)

Qohelet also stays within the established sense of the word when he speaks of certain things failing to achieve their purpose: “in vain” counts as a good translation of *hebel* at a number of points in the book. This is especially apparent when the word is paired with the phrase רעהוּת רֵיחַ, “chasing the wind”<sup>13</sup> (1:14, 2:11). This latter verse is especially instructive. It concludes Qohelet's impressive list of royal achievements (vv. 4–8), all of which were done in wisdom (v. 9) and much to his delight (v. 10)—but despite all this, Qohelet says he has been chasing the wind. His successes count as a loss on a deeper level. Qohelet apparently expected some result from these accomplishments which they failed to give. Since Qohelet soon turns to lament death, which erases all memory of the living (vv. 15–16), as well as the instability of his achievements as they pass to someone else (vv. 18–23), Qohelet seems to have been aiming in vv. 4–8 at some success which would outlast

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Daniel Fredericks justly names this passage a “critical juncture” in Ecclesiastes because of its concentration of key phrases, such as *hebel*, labor, portion, the phrase “under the sun,” and the status of life as God's gift (Daniel Fredericks and Daniel Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* [Apollos OT Commentary; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010] 210).

<sup>9</sup> See Fox, *Time to Tear Down* 27–42 for further references and discussion.

<sup>10</sup> See Isa 57:13 (parallel to רֵיחַ); Job 7:16; Ps 39:6, 62:10b, 78:33, 144:4; Prov 13:11, 21:6.

<sup>11</sup> See Job 9:29; 21:34; 27:12; 35:16; Ps 39:7; 62:10a; 94:11; Prov 31:30; Lam 4:17; Isa 30:7; 49:4; Jer 10:3, 15; 16:19; 23:16; 51:18; Zech 10:2.

<sup>12</sup> See Deut 32:12; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 17:15; Ps 31:7; 62:11; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; Jonah 2:9.

<sup>13</sup> As with *hebel*, this phrase is somewhat ambiguous and can be translated different ways, since a number of homophones in Hebrew and Aramaic share the root רעהוּת. Seow, however, helpfully compares Hos 12:2 and Prov 15:14 and understands the sense to be the pursuit or desire of something—thus, “pursuit of wind” (*Ecclesiastes* 121–22; HALOT 1265).

his own life—some permanent achievement which death could not erase. Because the gardens, parks and pools of vv. 4–8 cannot give this, all his accomplishments are *hebel*—“in vain.” In fact, Qohelet consigns all human labor to this vanity (1:2–3). In these cases, *hebel* cannot be translated as “fleeting,” for the works which Qohelet says are *hebel* will outlive him. Nor is Qohelet’s failure “meaningless” or “incomprehensible;” his failure has a meaning which he comprehends all too well. Qohelet’s labor and wisdom are rather “in vain” in the sense of failing to achieve their purpose (see also 2:1–2, 15–16, 23; 3:19; 5:6; 6:2, 4, 11–12; 7:6).

One way in which Qohelet goes beyond the use of *hebel* elsewhere in the OT is when he uses the word to point to some disproportion, most noticeably in the unjust treatment of the righteous (7:15; 8:10, 14). Saints being treated as if they were sinners and vice-versa is not fleeting, nor meaningless; nor is it precisely “in vain.” It is contrary to every reasonable expectation and thus “absurd” (see further 2:19, 21, 26; 4:4, 7–8, 16; 11:8).<sup>14</sup>

As a result, Qohelet’s use of the word *hebel* can be classed under three headings: he thinks of life under the sun as fleeting, “in vain” in the sense that all our achievements are wiped away, and “absurd” in the sense of being subject to incongruities, moral and otherwise. Returning to 9:7–10, we see that any of these three definitions for *hebel* fit nicely in this summary statement of Qohelet’s wisdom. First, since the grave is very much on Qohelet’s mind (vv. 4–6, 10), it would make sense for him to call us to enjoy our lives because they are gone so soon. At the same time, the references to our work (*מַעֲשֵׂה* in v. 7<sup>15</sup> and *עָמַל* in v. 9) connect with Qohelet’s sensitivity to the vanity of human accomplishment—no matter how hard we labor, the impact of our lives dies with us (v. 6). And surely there is a hint of absurdity in the disproportion between the decades we spend working and our emotional investment in our work, and its end in the grave?

Despite its joyful tone, this is not an easy passage to read (cf. 12:11). It also makes Qohelet’s claim that all of life is a gift from God, and to be enjoyed as such, all the more surprising. This is hardly a conclusion we would draw on our own—I doubt anyone, when faced with how short and how useless our lives are (from an earthly perspective, at least) would be prompted to embrace them as gifts. But this is precisely Qohelet’s paradox: life is both in vain and to be enjoyed as a gift from God. Although full explication of this point would take us too far afield from the present argument, I understand Qohelet to present both sides of this paradox as necessary and mutually dependent. We cannot truly enjoy life unless we face its *hebel*-nature; without this, we labor for something we cannot achieve and miss out on the enjoyment of life (2:1–23, 4:4–6, 5:16, etc.).

<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, Michael Fox’s closely considered translation (*Time to Tear Down* 30–31). In contrast to Fox, however, I would not translate *hebel* uniformly in this way. Fox’s denial of any eschatological perspective to Ecclesiastes or any possibility of judgment after death (pp. 210, 331–32) certainly does give an absurd cast to Qohelet’s theological claims. But this denial does not sit well with the book as a whole (see 3:11; 12:7, 14).

<sup>15</sup> Qohelet not infrequently uses *מַעֲשֵׂה* to refer to human labor and industry (see, e.g., 2:4, 11, 17; 4:4; 5:5). Verse 7 is not, in other words, a *carte blanche* approval of any human action (Longman wonders about this in *Book of Ecclesiastes* 229); it is rather an approval of all different kinds of human work.

Our surprise at this passage is deepened when Qohelet tells us that God delights in our vain work (רצה, v. 7). He smiles as he gives us this gift, prior to and irrespective of what we accomplish. God's manner of dealing with humans under the sun is according to grace—according to gift (נתן, v. 9)—not according to works—accomplishment or individual merit. Our lives and labors are acceptable to him *before* (קבר) we accomplish anything, and despite the fact that whatever we do accomplish is soon erased. Although the forgiveness of sins or substitutionary sacrifice is not in view in this passage, the same basic proportions of God's favor according to grace, irrespective of personal achievement (religious or otherwise), is evident. This is one important way in which Qohelet's wise teaching on the subjection of creation to frustration intersects with larger biblical themes of grace and unmerited favor. We do not earn his favor. The lives and opportunities we have—gone so soon!—are gifts, given happily irrespective of outcome or achievement. Qohelet's wisdom amounts to guiding us in how best and most deeply to engage with an existence subject to futility (1:15; 7:13). While recognition of this all-pervasive *hebel* would naturally lead many to disengage with life, Qohelet assures us of the unmerited favor of God as we live and work, and God's grace/gift as the ground of the possibility of working and celebrating as we do live. In other words, God's prior, unmerited favor transforms despair into opportunity.

Even allowing the harmony between this statement of Qohelet's wisdom and larger biblical themes of grace, a pointed disproportion exists between the larger context of Eccl 9:7–10 and the presentation of the gospel in other parts of the Bible. Qohelet relentlessly focuses on the grave in vv. 4–6 and 10b. He will not let us look away from our quickly-approaching end and the way it erases the total effect of a human life (v. 6). How can this passage be read together with the promise of eternal life (John 3:14–16; Rom 6:23) and heavenly reward (Matt 16:27)?

This raises the difficult issue of Qohelet's view of the afterlife. Qohelet—along with much of the OT—does not have much to say about life in God's presence after death, and what comments are made are not easy to interpret. For instance, he questions whether the human spirit ascends after death in 3:21.<sup>16</sup> Near the end of his text, Qohelet is more certain that the human spirit does ascend (12:7); but it is disputed whether this verse describes a reunion of the soul with God<sup>17</sup> or

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<sup>16</sup> The *qamets* and *patach* on the participles in v. 21 initially appear to be definite articles, which would make this verse an affirmation of the ascent of the רוּחַ after death. These vowels are often shortened, however, to make the *heb* into an interrogative (see GKC 100m), on the assumption that the Masoretes pointed the verse in such a way as to make it unambiguously orthodox. G. A. Barton, however, points out that the interrogative *heb* can take different vowels with a guttural (see Lev 10:19; Num 16:22; *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908] 112–13). In my opinion, v. 21 should be read as a question, since Qohelet's whole point is that human have no advantage over animals in their death (vv. 19–20): considered phenomenologically, there is nothing about human death which would naturally lead one to conclude that we survive after it. This is not to set 3:21 in contradiction with 12:7, however, for the latter is an article of faith, similar to the assertion he makes in 8:12–14.

<sup>17</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* 352. While I agree with this interpretation, I do so mostly because of other statements in OT wisdom literature which clearly hint at life after death in God's presence (see

only the dissolution of the body-spirit fusion and a return to a pre-life situation (cf. Gen 2:7; Ps 104:29–30).<sup>18</sup> In my opinion, Qohelet's reticence on this subject is not surprising; he does not want to allow his readers any escape or distraction from the hard truth of the vanity of our lives under the sun. Indeed, the one verse which affirms that the spirit of man returns to God after death is found in the context of a description of a funeral procession (12:1–6; see v. 5). Qohelet is guiding our attention to our own final resting place in this passage; it lies outside his purpose to explore what might happen after.

This is why we do not find in Qohelet the hope of redemption from Sheol and life in God's presence after death which Job and the psalmists express (see Job 19:26; Ps 16:10–11; 49:16; 73:24). Qohelet speaks of death and Sheol in a somewhat different sense from the psalmists: although the Psalmists not infrequently ask to be delivered from the abode of the dead,<sup>19</sup> Qohelet uses it to refer to that absolute, final boundary between the living and the dead. While certain psalms will pray about what happens after clinical death, Qohelet speaks of the grave in general as the final end of all life under the sun.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Qohelet is emphasizing in 9:4–10 that our earthly lives are our only chance to work and enjoy life—and if we are in ministry, our only chance to work for Christ's kingdom. This does not exclude a resurrection after death, nor should the doctrine of the resurrection weaken a Christian's resolution to live with all one's might, while we do live.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Qohelet's concentration on the nature of our existence under the sun should not be set in tension with the NT's teaching on the resurrection or the hints and hopes about life in God's presence after death in the OT. (Indeed, since the judgment of every secret which ends the book [12:14] manifestly does not occur during life under the sun, Ecclesiastes itself contextualizes Qohelet's teaching within the perspective of eschatological judgment.) After all, even the most vibrant hope in the resurrection cannot deny the reality of death as the limit of our opportunity to work and serve. And Qohelet assures us of God's unmerited, unearnable favor on our work, regardless of accomplishment, while we do live.

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below), not because of any clarity on this issue from Qohelet. Qohelet rigorously focuses on life under the sun.

<sup>18</sup> Longman, *Book of Ecclesiastes* 273; Fox, *Time to Tear Down* 331–32. Strictly speaking, of course, the OT never explicitly states that the נִשְׁמָה which animates man and beast is reabsorbed into God after death in such a way that human consciousness would not survive.

<sup>19</sup> See P. S. Johnston, "Death and Resurrection," in *The Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian Rosner; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 444.

<sup>20</sup> I am thankful to my brother, Gavin Ortlund, for helping me clarify my thoughts on this subject (private conversation).

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Resolutions," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Edward Hickman; 2 vols.; reprint; Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 1992) 1.xx.

## II. THAT RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH DOES NOT FEAR GOD (7:15–18)

Everything I have seen in my vain days:	אֶת־הַכֹּל רָאִיתִי בְיָמֵי הַבְּלִי
There is a righteous man perishing in his righteousness	יֵשׁ צְדִיק אֲבָד בְּצַדְקוֹ
and there is a wicked man living long in his evil.	וַיֵּשׁ רָשָׁע מְאֹרֵךְ בְּרַעְתּוֹ
Do not be overly righteous,	אַל־תִּהְיֶה צְדִיק הַרְבֵּה
nor be excessively wise;	וְאַל־תִּתְחַכֵּם יוֹתֵר
why should you be devastated?	לָמָּה תִּשׁוּמֵם
Do not be overly wicked, and do not be a fool;	אַל־תִּרְשַׁע הַרְבֵּה וְאַל־תִּהְיֶה סָכֵל
Why should you die before your time?	לָמָּה תָּמוּת בְּלֹא עֵתְךָ
It is good that you seize hold of this,	טוֹב אֲשֶׁר תִּאָּחַז בָּזֶה
and also from this you do not withhold your hand,	וְגַם־מִזֶּה אַל־תִּנָּחַת אֶת־יָדְךָ
for the one fearing God will come forth from both of them.	כִּי־יִרָא אֱלֹהִים יֵצֵא אֶת־כַּפְּלָם

This surprising and difficult passage has been read in a number of ways. Many commentators see in these verses an exhortation to moderation: Qohelet's wisdom would have us avoid excess in either piety or sin.<sup>22</sup> According to this reading, a little folly is acceptable because God's strange work of twisting life under the sun (7:13) makes this unavoidable. This explanation may, however, rely too much on the supposed influence of Greek ideals on the book (moderation being an important ideal in Hellenistic culture). Furthermore, "to condemn 'much' is not to approve of a little";<sup>23</sup> although Qohelet is sensitive to delays in judgment, he never gives the impression that only a little wickedness will escape it. Qohelet's discourse concerning wickedness and its judgment, whatever its complexities, never elsewhere involves the amount of wickedness. This reading also (as will be argued below) misinterprets the last clause of v. 18.

A second interpretation understands the target to be hypocrisy.<sup>24</sup> The hithpael of *חכם* in v. 16 would thus be translated "pretend to be wise."<sup>25</sup> However, the one other instance of this verb in this pattern does not have this meaning (Exod 1:10);

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* 255–57, and James Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 140–42.

<sup>23</sup> *A Time to Tear Down* 262.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 114; Walter Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Everyman's Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1979) 85–86; Wayne Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15–18," in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy Zuck; Baker: Grand Rapids, 1994) 301–13; John Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh. 7.16–17)," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. John Gammie; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978) 191–204.

<sup>25</sup> GKC 54.3.

furthermore, since the wicked of v. 17 are not only pretending in their wickedness, this reading destroys the parallel between vv. 16–17.<sup>26</sup>

Attention to the last verse of the passage provides a way forward. The most probable referents of the *בְּיָהוָה* ... *מִיָּה* are the excessive righteousness and wickedness of vv. 16–17. In speaking of seizing ahold of and not giving a slack hand to these, Qohelet is not asking for participation in the kind of righteousness and wickedness which has such disastrous results; he is rather calling for attention to his warning about them. When such attention is given, Qohelet promises the one fearing God will avoid the traps described in vv. 16–17—or, at least, that is how I would translate *יֵצֵא*. The phrase *יֵצֵא אֶת־כָּל־מִן* is admittedly unclear. Fox translates it according to its use in Rabbinic Hebrew as “do duty to,” i.e., to be moderate in both;<sup>27</sup> Seow translates “go forth with both of them.”<sup>28</sup> But these renderings are given as part of an interpretation in favor of moderation, which has been objected to above. It may be better to translate *יֵצֵא* as “escape” (1 Sam 14:41).<sup>29</sup> In other words, Qohelet is warning us against wickedness and a certain kind of righteousness which do not fear God.

This is admittedly surprising, since the fear of YHWH and righteousness are elsewhere in wisdom literature closely associated (e.g. Prov 1:2–3, 7). But it is of a piece with Qohelet’s larger theme. Because of God’s intractable twisting of life under the sun (7:13), righteousness does not always produce the earthly results one might reasonably expect (v. 15). Pious and wise living which ignores this may be astounded or shattered when it happens—in fact, since the root *שׁמם* can refer either to amazement or desolation, there may be a hint that such amazement can lead to an abandonment of righteousness altogether. Qohelet is, in other words, describing a kind of hyper-spirituality which does not take into account God’s strange work of warping life under the sun and preventing any larger, comprehensive perspective by which life under the sun might make sense (1:15, 3:11–14, 7:13–14, 8:16–17). This is a super-righteousness which does not fear God, but which exists only as a means to personal blessing. It assumes it can control life and attain certain results—and as a result, it is vulnerable before *hebel*. Didymus the Blind helpfully expresses the difference between these two kinds of righteousness by distinguishing between “an absolute righteousness” and “a righteousness which is righteous only for one[self].” While the latter can “get lost” within itself, the former does not trust in itself as its “own right.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, Didymus here distinguishes between righteousness which fears God and self-righteousness—a righteousness which exists for oneself.

A righteousness which demands nothing from God, which has no ulterior motive in obedience, which fears God even when it produces no earthly benefit,

<sup>26</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 253.

<sup>27</sup> *Time to Tear Down* 262.

<sup>28</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes* 253.

<sup>29</sup> HALOT 426.

<sup>30</sup> J. R. Wright, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005) 252.

sounds very much like the righteousness of faith as described in the NT. Even though the forgiveness of sins is not in focus in Ecc 7:15–18, the stance toward God which the God-fearer of 7:18 takes is the same as that of the righteousness of faith. Both demand nothing of God. Both are stripped of any pretense, any expectation of external benefit. Both treat with God for God's sake. In both, boasting of any kind is excluded (Rom 3:27, 1 Cor 1:29–31).

### III. CONCLUSION

If Ecclesiastes were the only book in the canon, we would be impoverished indeed in our knowledge of God's forgiveness and restoration of sinners. At the same time, Ecclesiastes makes a unique contribution to the canon. Nowhere else is the frustration of creation—and wise engagement with and enjoyment of life subjected to *hebel*—so thoroughly explored. The uniqueness of Qohelet's teaching and the shocking claims he makes should not lead us, however, to set his book in tension or contrast with other teachings about life in fellowship with the Creator and Redeemer God. Qohelet's wisdom to enjoy our vain lives is given within the context of God's prior, unmerited favor on our lives; and he urges upon us a species of piety which, instead of promising a blessed life for itself, fears God. Qohelet teaches us difficult, precious wisdom which we learn nowhere else in Scripture without contradicting the rest of the biblical counsel.<sup>31</sup>

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