

TO LOVE THIS EARTHLY LIFE



PATHWAYS THROUGH ECCLESIASTES

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INTRODUCTION

Emerson's famous dictum, "To be great is to be misunderstood," may well be applied to the author of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes. The fact that many commentators are left puzzled after reading the book is, perhaps, an indication that it is well worth exploring its contents. Someone who has been described as agnostic, atheist, conformist, conservative, determinist, epicurean, existentialist, fatalist, iconoclastic, nihilist, pessimist, radical, realist, skeptic, and stoic, sounds like an interesting person.¹ Of course, each of these labels could be examined, documented, and subjected to scrutiny, but it is probably better to admit there is something of the truth in all of them and, then, to set ourselves the task of pondering how it is that they can cheerfully coexist.

King Solomon's wisdom was apparently recorded in a book (cf. 1 Kgs 11:41). And so Qoheleth assigns to this wise ruler the role of being the putative author of this book that he is writing centuries later, although this pretense is not maintained beyond the second chapter. Probably this presumed authorship was a factor in the book's acceptance as canonical by a

1. See W. Vogels, "Performance vaine et performance saine chez Qoheleth," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 113 (1991): 363–69.

meeting of rabbis at Jamnia (Jabneh) in 90 AD.² The ancient Christian tradition seems also to have taken the ascription at its face value. About the year 240, Origen composed his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* and mentions in his prologue that Solomon was the author of three biblical books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.³ Progressively, since the Enlightenment, it has become clear that Solomon was not the author of the book; it belongs to a later period in Israel's history. Far from being part of institutional Israel, the work of a king or a priest or a recognized prophet, the book's author is a quintessential outsider.

Because of the variety of viewpoints expressed in the book, some scholars have postulated a plural authorship. Others, like Pope Gregory the Great, think that the author employed the device of *prosopopeia*, populating his text with different speakers, each expounding a different approach to the question.⁴ Neither of these solutions is necessary.⁵ The main part of the book is the work of a single author, although the epilogue is probably a redactional addition, possibly included with the intention of making it seem more conven-

2. The different arguments *pro* and *contra* are rehearsed in *Yadaim* 3.5. See *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 781–82.

3. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1957), 41.

4. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.4; *Sources Chrétiennes* 265, 26–32.

5. "There is, to be precise, an inner unity which can find expression otherwise than through a linear development of thought or through a logical progression in the thought process, namely through the unity of style and topic and theme, a unity which can make a work of literature into a whole and which can, in fact, give it the rank of a self-contained work of art." Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 227.

tional and, thereby, more acceptable for incorporation in an eventual canon.⁶

Following the example of other commentators, I will refer to the book by the term "Ecclesiastes," derived from the Greek; the author I will name as "Qoheleth," based on the Hebrew. The distinction is only a convenience. Both words refer to the *qahal* or assembly (*ecclesia*). By using this title, the author may be considered to be claiming to be a speaker, teacher, or preacher to the whole convocation of Israel. Qoheleth is not a name but a function which the author assigns to himself. He is one who gives a teaching to the people, written in the common idiom of his own day and addressed to his contemporaries.

The date most often assigned to Ecclesiastes by critical scholars is around 250 BC, that is, in the period of the Second Temple and during the Ptolemaic century. Little is known of what was happening in Palestine at this time. Apparently, it was a period of relative peace; tribute was paid to Egypt, and existing institutions functioned as previously. Under the Hellenistic Ptolemaic dynasty, the capital, Alexandria, was home to a significant Jewish diaspora, and would eventually produce a Greek translation of the Scriptures known as the Septuagint. Some of the issues with which Qoheleth was concerned he shared with Hellenistic thinkers, but there is no evidence to suggest direct linkage.

Experts tell us that the language of Ecclesiastes is typical of the period. It is a later form of Hebrew, with evidence of Aramaizing tendencies, sprinkled with words borrowed from Persian, and showing a familiarity with the vocabulary of all kinds of everyday realities, including the world of commerce. In a country located in the overlap of empires, a bastardized lingua

6. See Gerald T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1977): 182–89.

franca is to be expected. It is not the idiom of the schools or of a religious elite. It is ordinary language with a secular tinge. Furthermore, many of the references that we would anticipate finding in a book of the Bible are absent. The divine Tetragrammaton (YHWH) is not used. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not named, nor is Moses. The exodus is not referenced nor is the giving of the Law. The word *torah* is not found, although in the epilogue there is an admonition to keep the commandments (Eccl 12:13). Temple sacrifice is mentioned only dismissively (Eccl 5:1; 9:2). Rather than delivering a message from God, like the ancient prophets, Qoheleth describes what his own eyes have seen as the basis of further critical reflection. First-person use of the verb *r'h* "to see" is frequent (21 times) alongside the more general *yesh*, "there is" (15 times). What the book contains is not a series of esoteric abstractions but reflections on the commonplace experience of human life. It is the quality and depth of these reflections, not some certified membership of a specialized group, that mark the author as a sage (Eccl 12:9). The stance Qoheleth takes is similar to what Jeremiah had predicted, some three centuries earlier. The focus has moved away from traditional temple piety toward the autonomous use of human powers of observation and reasoning:

It will come to pass that, when you have increased and become many in the land, in those days—an oracle of the Lord—they will no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. It will not enter their hearts; they will not remember it. They will not seek it. And they will not make another one. (Jer 3:16)

This is to say that Qoheleth breathes an atmosphere different from what had prevailed in earlier centuries and the unsurprising result is a different kind of book.

From the time of the medieval Aristotelian Ibn Rushd (Averroës: 1126–1198), the task of interpretation has been con-

sidered to be a matter of translating symbolic discourse (for example, the Qur'an) into rational discourse. We would say moving it from right-brain categories into left-brain categories. This is the method that has been largely followed, especially in the West, and especially by those commentators who are more Aristotelian than Platonic, and closer to the school of Antioch than to that of Alexandria. Making sense of a poetic text by making it march to the tune of sequential logic enables it to deliver a clear message, but something is lost from the integrity of the text's meaning. In particular, the poetic appeal of a text may be diminished. Too much clarity may obscure the author's purpose in writing and, as a result, the authentic meaning may be missed.

A text that is puzzling needs to be approached from a different angle. Instead of beginning with the individual parts and trying to fit them together into a meaningful whole, perhaps it is wiser to begin with the whole. This is grasped intuitively on the basis of a comprehensive understanding of the complete text before undertaking a closer examination of the details. Of course, the whole that is perceived has constantly to be checked against the parts to ensure that the chance of rashly projecting meaning into the text is reduced.⁷ First we accept the text as a whole, then we look at its parts. Every conclusion needs to be checked against the text in its totality. Otherwise bizarre explanations flourish. Roland Murphy exclaims, "How many far-fetched theories have been hazarded by modern writers who are locked up in their own crippling presuppositions?"⁸

7. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 422: "The unfolding of the totality of meaning towards which understanding is directed, forces us to make conjectures and to take them back again. The self-cancellation of the interpretation makes it possible for the thing itself—the meaning of the text—to assert itself."

8. Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), lv–lvi. Among the dozen or so commentaries available to me, I have used

To many readers, the Book of Ecclesiastes appears like an unfinished jigsaw puzzle. Islands of meaning congeal, but the whole picture is not quickly apparent. In this case, incompleteness is not an imperfection. This is the dominant message of the book. Qoheleth wishes to communicate that there is no clear-cut and complete answer to the mysteries of life. The apparent disarray is reflective of reality. The medium is the message. Only God knows the whole story. This is not the negation of meaning. It is simply the affirmation that a total grasp of cosmic meaning is beyond the limited range of human understanding—in the same way that quantum physics surpasses the intellectual capacity of even the brightest kindergarten child. Qoheleth aims to stimulate in us a peevish frustration that is an incentive to further reflection and, indeed, further exasperation. “From one angle or another, everything that is said is true.”⁹ It is the thinking and reflection that are important, not the arrival at some “final” conclusion.

Sapiential writings serve a purpose different from that pursued by the words of the prophets. Generally, the prophets address themselves to a particular situation and either denounce abuses or recommend a change of heart. They seek to influence the actions of their hearers. The purveyors of wisdom take a step back from immediate issues. Their words are directed at modifying attitudes, inviting the people to reflection rather than to decision and action. They are not so grounded in the historical situation, and they have a more universal message.

this one as a default point of reference. See also, from the same author, “On Translating Ecclesiastes,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1991): 571–79, where the manifold difficulties involved in translating this book are noted and discussed.

9. W. Sibley Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 956.

Ecclesiastes has been described as “a notebook of ideas by a philosopher/theologian about the downside and upside of life.”¹⁰ The procedure followed by Qoheleth is not dissimilar from the approach embedded in Plato’s *Symposium*. In that case, different speakers casually circle around the theme of love, without ever arriving at apodictic conclusions. To make sense of the whole discussion, the potential commentator must attempt “to indicate how these various themes are interwoven with apparent naturalness so as to shed light reciprocally upon one another.”¹¹ Norbert Lohfink notes that “orderly logical concatenation is not the highest value in the kind of literature Qoheleth belongs to.”¹² The purpose of the work is to stimulate readers to reflect for themselves on what is said—not necessarily to reach definitive answers, but to become more convinced that the questions are real and, therefore, worth pondering. Qoheleth seeks not to rob us of our doubts and difficulties, but instead to help us view them differently, so that we are able to live with them and not be dismayed. His viewpoint reflects the paradox that is glimpsed in the saying, “If anything is really true, then its opposite is also true.”

In both form and content, Qoheleth shows himself to be something of an iconoclast. By this I do not mean that he had no respect for the sacred but, rather, that he was impatient with false claimants to sacredness. Those who easily attribute absolute value to what is not holy are demeaning true holiness. When an icon cannot bear the weight of the holiness attributed to it, whether it be a material representation or an institutional practice, it needs to be broken. This is an act of religion; it is not

10. Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” 957.

11. W. Hamilton, introduction to *The Symposium*, by Plato (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 9.

12. Norbert Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1990): 632.

anti-religious. According to C. S. Lewis, it is God who is the great iconoclast:

Images of the Holy easily become holy images—sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? . . . And most are offended by the iconoclasm, and blessed are those who are not.¹³

Understood in this context, Ecclesiastes is a supremely religious book. It refuses to attribute the qualities of God to any created reality, but insists on the contingency and precariousness of everything we encounter in the world around us. Furthermore, although Qoheleth's message has a unique and distinctive flavor, it is not unrelated to other parts of the Old Testament. For example, in the critical apparatus of the *New International Version* there are fifty-one marginal references to the Book of Proverbs and forty-one to the Book of Psalms, citing some thirty different psalms. It would seem that Ecclesiastes is not as much of an outlier as is sometimes assumed.

It is because of his characteristic propensity for deconstruction that Qoheleth has the capacity to speak powerfully to our generation. The Western Church in particular has been in the habit of wanting to maximize its dogmas and, thence, to analyze and define them in great detail. Parallel to this dogmatic expansion has been an ever-increasing and ever more detailed body of moral imperatives.¹⁴ As we might have ex-

13. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber, 1987), 55–56.

14. The confusion of ethics and morality is widespread. Traditional moral theology recognizes a distinction between the objective science of *ethics* and the subjective contribution to an action, meas-

pected, inherent credibility faded when teachings became distant from their origins, so that recourse to institutional coercion was required to support them. This has not been a strategy likely to win the hearts of those who have come of age in a period of high secularization. Such people have been encouraged to practice the art of deconstruction and to be suspicious of all power structures and systems of enforcement. It is probably no coincidence that the stronger the insistence on conformity, the weaker the sense of belonging has become. No doubt the drift away from formal Church adherence has been intensified by revelations of systemic misconduct in sections of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy and among a few religious high-fliers. The mass media has not failed to keep us well informed on such matters. What is especially tragic about this decline in active membership is that many of those who have stood apart from the institutional body never abandoned all elements of the faith they had previously received. They have become homeless believers, wandering sheep that find themselves outside the purview of their shepherds.¹⁵

Perhaps what is needed, in the face of expansionist tendencies within theology, is a trimmed-down body of doctrine that

ured by *morality*. In evaluating the moral character of an action, the intention of the actor must be taken into account. A person is not held accountable for an action done unintentionally. Nor can the conscience always be presumed to have absorbed the full weight of external precepts so that every action is necessarily carried out in full awareness of its ethical character. Despite the misuse of the notion of "situation ethics," the fact remains that moral perspective is shaped by socialization. Even after catechesis, a person's conscience may not be as finely tuned as one would hope. Fulminating against acts that a person conscientiously considers inoffensive simply leads to a loss of credibility. A subtler and more nuanced approach is needed.

15. This phenomenon is not confined to religious attachment. See Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

does not intrude into areas beyond its own competence. More fundamentally, perhaps, there may be scope for a move toward a more apophatic approach similar to that favored by the Eastern churches. This is a mode of theological discourse that seeks to maintain an aura of mystery, recognizing the limits of human intelligence when it comes to matters concerning the divinity, and directing itself more to wondering contemplation than to academic dialectic. It is sometimes termed “negative theology,” because it celebrates what we do not know about God. It emphasizes the transcendence and, hence, the comprehensive unknowability of God: God is eternal, beyond time and space; God is immutable, unchanging; God is uncaused; God is ungendered; God has no form or color. To look on the “face” of God is to die. We know much about God by faith, and perhaps, even by reason, but, at best, we see through a glass darkly. This darkness is a significant part of our data about God.

The task of untangling what we do know as a result of God’s self-revelation from its historically conditioned explanations and expansions is a formidable challenge. We receive the revelation encased in a shell that was suitable to its time, but it does not always adapt itself to the onrush of centuries. Disputes arise as to whether what is handed down in one time and place is the same as what others have received and believed. In trying to attain an unambiguous clarity of language, there is a constant danger of straining out gnats while swallowing camels. Here, as elsewhere, it is often wiser to pay more attention to the tides than to the eddies.

If we are so inclined, we may choose to see the Book of Ecclesiastes as a global critique of religious and philosophical ideology. It is an invitation to be somewhat reserved in our acceptance of the amplified generalizations included in what others tell us about the meaning of life. It calls us to recognize the limits of our knowledge and to remain within those limits; to make the most of what is possible for us without expending

energy on reaching for the stars in an effort to master them. For Qoheleth, seeking to understand everything would be regarded as *hubris*. Wisdom, for him, consists in staying within our own sphere of existence. Our task is to look around and observe what is happening, to reflect on its possible meanings, and to tailor our discourse and our behavior in accordance with what we have understood. He is confident that the good life is within everyone's reach, if only they pay attention. His approach is much more nuanced than that of mere empiricism, because he includes in his purview of reality the presence and action of God. It is because of this invisible influence on human affairs that they are not fully comprehensible to limited human powers of knowing. If God is at work in everything that happens, then the ultimate meaning of what takes place around us is beyond our powers to ascertain. If the world of space and time is said to be beset by "vanity," it is because *we* are unable to perceive more than its superficial characteristics.

If Ecclesiastes is a critique of ideology, it is also a critique of prejudice, which often exercises its influence below the threshold of consciousness. If our prejudices also are to be submitted to systematic doubt, then those cherished by Qoheleth himself should also be examined. Because he is not formulating laws or writing a philosophical treatise, Qoheleth, also referred to as the Preacher, speaks from personal experience and, in that process, inevitably reveals some of his own limitations and prejudices. It would not be in the spirit of Ecclesiastes to overlook these liabilities. They need to be faced. For example, there is one text in Ecclesiastes that is particularly problematic in today's climate of thought and feeling—not in its intended meaning but in its content and expression. It is amusing to watch commentators scurrying to find shelter rather than admit the obvious meaning of the text. We are referring to a passage that seems to betray a belief that women are morally inferior to men:

And I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is as nets and snares, and her hands, as bands: he that is good before God, shall be delivered from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her. Behold, saith the Preacher, this have I found, seeking one by one to find the count: And yet my soul seeketh, but I find it not: I have found one man of a thousand: but a woman among them all have I not found. Only lo! this have I found, that God hath made man righteous: but they have sought many inventions. (Eccl 7:26–29)

Is Qoheleth guilty of misogynistic tendencies, or is he just giving unthinking expression to the conventional prejudices of his time and class?¹⁶

There are two parts to the passage. The first expresses distaste for the fiercely seductive woman—with all the blame attaching to her, as if the male did not consent to be ensnared and bound. Yet we know that, on the contrary, seduction is a process whereby a stream of semi-conscious signals is exchanged between the parties. To claim a unilateral victimhood is to unreasonably deny complicity. It takes two to tangle! Qoheleth clearly views things from the male perspective and, as a result, his assessment of the situation is defective. And if the text is taken as a generalized statement of fact, it is clearly unfair. The interesting point he makes is that the degree of involvement in the process is an indicator of moral status; sinful men (and women) will fall into the trap; good men (and women) will escape.

16. It is perhaps worth noting that, of 405 citations of Ecclesiastes in seventeen Cistercian writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there is only a single citation of Eccl 7:28, and that was quoted only to refute it by reference to Prov 31:10–31, the story of the *mulier fortis*. See M. Casey, “Bernard and Ecclesiastes,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2021): 191–209.

The second part carries the discussion further. How many will remain innocent? One man in a thousand is his estimate. This grandiose statement is not based on statistical evidence. It is almost a joke. But then he continues by saying that even fewer women are so virtuous. It does not matter whether we are affronted or amused by this gratuitous assertion. It seems to me that Qoheleth would be the last one to insist that we agree to everything he says. As a rule, he does not present us with conclusions to accept but with elements of an argument so that we can begin to resolve the matter for ourselves. We are not compelled to accept his male chauvinistic prejudices any more than we have to believe, as he did, that the world is flat. The point that he is making is that few—be they men or women—are entirely guiltless.

He continues by affirming that this is not how it was meant to be. God made humankind (the word used is gender-inclusive) to be upright, but the simple life is not for most of us. It seems that we prefer to complicate things with our many schemes and dreams and, generally, to go our own way and attempt to fashion our own future. That is a thought well worth pondering. Too often we ignore objective data on the basis of subjective preferences. In addition, many of the troubles we experience derive from some form of inner conflict which complicates the choices we make and eventually leads to undesirable outcomes. If we were to sort out some of our inner conflicts and cleanse our vision, a lot of our external troubles would disappear.

It is worth noting that the ideal of gender equality probably has its origins in the teaching of Saint Paul, though in most subsequent centuries the relevance of his insight has been watered down to the point of disappearance. In our generation, we are acutely aware of the issues gender equality raises, and this tends to shape our response to ancient texts. The fact that Qoheleth's attitudes reflect the time and culture in which he

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lived should not surprise us, but it is important that this deficiency should not serve as a pretext for ignoring the abundant wisdom that this book embodies.

The title I have given this book, *To Love This Earthly Life*, may come as a surprise to some readers. Those who have only a slight acquaintance with Qoheleth sometimes regard him as a gloomy fellow. However, despite his robust iconoclasm, he is not a world-denier. His central point is, quite simply: Make the most of your life as it is, because it is the only one you will ever have; don't waste your energies on what does not matter. This means being mindful of the present moment and its potential. It will certainly not be all good. Every human situation is a variable combination of good and bad elements, not always in equal proportions. This is a matter of experience. Our attitude to life will depend on our choice of focus. If we allow ourselves to be invaded and dominated by negativity, our lives will be miserable and, probably, unproductive. We are best served by accepting our life as it is, and exerting every effort to make the most of it. This is reality. Living apart from reality is the road to madness. If we cannot love the reality we see, any love we profess toward what is unseen must be considered delusional. Our life is all that we have; it is not a rehearsal. So, let's get on with it.

As with a former book, I am using the Geneva Bible of 1562 as the default translation of Ecclesiastes; I have updated the spelling and occasionally made corrections to conform it more fully to the Hebrew original. My reasons for using this version are two. First, I wanted to distinguish the direct quotations of Ecclesiastes from my own words. Second, I hope that the slightly archaic language will invite readers to slow down, remembering that what they are reading comes from a distant culture and is over two thousand years old. Unfamiliarity has

the effect of making us pay closer attention and serves us as a reminder of the inherent foreignness of the text we are reading. We have to struggle to come to terms with it. Ecclesiastes was never intended as a rapid answer to questions; if we can take more time to ponder its implications so much the better. For some readers it may be productive to compare the Geneva text with a more contemporary version, perhaps wondering at the way similar meanings are conveyed by different words. The important thing is to spend time with the text, allowing it to circulate through our daily experiences until questions similar to those that Qoheleth poses begin to surface in our minds and cause us to direct our thoughts to finding some answers.

In the process of writing this book I have spent quite a lot of time in its company, reading the text in different versions, checking out commentaries and trying to go deeper into some of its mysteries. I have found this to be a helpful and stimulating study, one revealing as much about myself as about Ecclesiastes. My conclusion is that pondering the wisdom of Qoheleth will be most useful for persons of a mellower age, that is, people who have had a fair amount of life experience and have reached the point where they will appreciate thinking more deeply about it. Inevitably, there will be many moments in the experience of a lifetime that seemed significant at the time and that no longer have much urgency or importance—we recognize them as “vanity.” Their withdrawal into the background allows other elements of our history to assume a greater prominence. If we take Ecclesiastes seriously, it will probably seem like an invitation to rewrite our autobiography.

I have described the various themes discussed in this book as “pathways” through Ecclesiastes. The image is taken from the kind of notice often found at the entrance to national parks. If you want to see the waterfall, take this route. If you are interested in scenic views, take this trail. If you want a quick exposure to some of the most attractive features, follow

this path. Each trajectory winds its way through the total area in such a manner that it exposes the visitor to different and complementary aspects of the whole. Similarly, the topics or themes discussed here each follow a different path through the whole book and expose the reader to different components of Qoheleth's thought. No attempt is made at synthesis. We are invited to sit back and enjoy what the author has written, to listen to its echoes in our own experience and, perhaps, to be influenced by what he has written in formulating our own philosophy of life.

I suggest that this book be read slowly and gently in a mood of reflection. My approach has been somewhat circular, as is Ecclesiastes itself, approaching the same texts from different angles to bring out the multiple meanings that they sometimes contain. It will serve best if this book is read simultaneously with the text of Ecclesiastes and with the book of experience, testing everything that is written against one's personal experience. I am suggesting that readers interpret this book as being mostly about themselves—rather than as philosophical reflections on the outside world. It can become a mirror in which they will see themselves more clearly and, from that vision, derive a greater acceptance and love of this earthly life—in all its mixity¹⁷—as somehow coming from the beneficent hand of God, leading them ultimately into a more abundant life. .

17. Human life is composed of different elements; not all of them sit together comfortably and some seem mutually hostile, but all of them belong to life's integrity.