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Editorial: Recovering the Message of Ecclesiastes for the Church Today

Stephen J. Wellum

How should we understand the book of Ecclesiastes? Should we view the book and its author as giving us God's wisdom regarding the affairs of life, or does it reflect a skeptical, fatalistic, and unorthodox understanding of life "under the sun?" Is the message of the book constructive, realistic, and crucial for us to grasp if we are truly going to live wisely as God's people today? Or does the message of Ecclesiastes reflect a more pessimistic outlook and thus something we should learn from only negatively? Ever since the book was first written and included in the canon of Scripture, the people of God have wrestled with these very questions and it seems, as many of our articles demonstrate, that these questions are still debated vigorously today.

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In fact, Ecclesiastes has received a mixed review throughout Jewish and Christian history. In the first century the Jewish community wrestled with whether to retain the book in the canon, which obviously they voted in the affirmative. By the fourth century many Christian readers handled the perceived negative message of the book by interpreting it allegorically. Thus, for example, Ecclesiastes 2:24—"A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink"—was interpreted as a reference to the Lord's Supper and not everyday human activities. Or, Ecclesiastes 4:12—"a cord of three strands is not quickly broken,"—was taken as a reference to the work of the Triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even though there is nothing in the context which warrants such a reading. In the contemporary era, critical readings of the book not only discount Solomon as its author, they also interpret the author as a kind of skeptic, agnostic, even fatalist when it comes to discerning the purpose and meaning of life. One common way of overcoming the negative outlook of the book is to distinguish between what the Teacher (Heb. "Qoheleth") says within the book from the overall author who frames the Teacher's pessimistic outlook with a theological epilogue (12:9-14)

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that reminds the reader to "Fear God and keep his commandments."

The problem, however, with interpreting Ecclesiastes in this negative way is twofold. First, it does not do justice to the fact that the people of God throughout the ages have recognized Ecclesiastes as Scripture, and more importantly, that God in his providence has led his people to put it in the canon. Given this fact, it is better to conclude that Ecclesiastes as *Scripture* has much to teach; we must then work harder on discerning its message without resorting to allegory or viewing it in a disparaging manner. Second, a careful reading of Ecclesiastes does not warrant the negative treatment it has received. In regard to this latter point, two further observations need to be made.

First, it is crucial to interpret rightly the word, *hebel*, or what has been variously translated, "vanity" (ESV, NRSV, NASB), "futility" (HCSB), and "meaninglessness" (NIV, NLT). As a number of our articles contend, these common ways of translating *hebel* are not helpful. Instead, a better translation is that of "vapor" which conveys a number of nuances depending upon the context, but it is clear that *hebel* does *not* teach that the author views life as mere vanity and futility. In the use of *hebel*, the Teacher is *not* affirming the meaninglessness of life; instead he is affirming that life lived under God's providential rule *in a fallen, sin-cursed world* is rarely understandable to us and hence incredibly elusive and often enigmatic, hence the need to trust the Lord and to walk before him obediently. This is certainly an important point to consider.

In other words, life lived "under heaven" (1:13, 2:3; 3:1), "on earth" (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2; 12:7), and more commonly, "under the sun" (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, etc.), is *not* simply speaking of the limitations of the Teacher's secular observations; it is speaking of how one attempts to understand and live life in a fallen, abnormal world, as God's creature, who is not given an exhaustive revelation of God's plan and purposes and who, in the end, must give an account to the Judge of all the earth (Gen 18:25). Precisely because we are creatures and not the Creator, and we live in this sin-cursed world reserved for judgment, life is often inscrutable to us. Even for believers who have uniquely experienced God's saving grace, we are not exempt from the "vapor" of life since we too live on this side of eternity. Sin and all of its effects upon the created order, including death, still affect us until Christ returns. We too experience simultaneously the joys of God's good gifts, the effects of sin's curse in our lives, and the truth that we do not know it all, especially in regard to God's providential ways which are often inscrutable. Whether we like it or not, this is simply a fact of life and Ecclesiastes more than any other canonical book not only reminds us of this truth, it also encourages us to trust, know, and reverentially fear God.

Second, it is also important to remember that Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. The purpose of this genre is to teach us how to live life skillfully as godly men and women. Its purpose is not to depress us; rather it intends to teach us how to live for his glory in the toughness of life. It teaches us to view everything "in light of eternity" (*sub species aeternitatis*) and to be circumspect about our lives. It reminds us how easily and foolishly we can become idolaters by treating our lives, careers, wealth, and pleasure as ends in themselves. Life "under the sun" is coming to an end; we will all stand before God's judgment throne no matter who we are. As such, we must learn to fear God, walk humbly with him, and grasp the things of this life very loosely. Furthermore, especially when we place Ecclesiastes in the larger storyline of Scripture, i.e., in light of the coming of Christ and his redemptive work, the lessons that Ecclesiastes teaches us must be applied in a greater way, as we learn anew to enjoy our lives, to work hard as God's gift to us, but also to realize that it is only what is done for Christ which ultimately lasts.

The vitally important message of Ecclesiastes must be recovered for the church today, even with greater urgency now that Christ has come. May this issue of *SBJT* in some small way enable us to do this, for the glory of Christ and the good of his church.

Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes

Jason S. DeRouchie

INTRODUCTION

Of the book of Ecclesiastes, James L. Crenshaw once wrote:

> Life is profitless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. Enjoy life if you can, advises the author, for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death. These views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the book of Proverbs.[2]

When put in this light, Ecclesiastes is a difficult read for the Christian.[3] In the quote above, Crenshaw suggests that this unique book represents an "intellectual crisis" in ancient Israel's wisdom tradition by which earlier optimistic claims are given a necessary corrective.[4]

Many have affirmed that Qoheleth (the Hebrew name for the writer of Ecclesiastes) is a skeptic, fatalist, and agnostic, who questions the benefits of wisdom and the meaningfulness of life.[5] For example, the conservative Tremper Longman III affirms that Qoheleth's message is wholly pessimistic and stands in contrast to the orthodox wisdom teaching of the rest of the Old Testament.[6] For Longman, the book includes two disparate voices, the main voice of Qoheleth providing a literary foil or contrast to the true message preserved in the epilogue's call to fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl 12:13-14): "Just as in the book of Job, most of the book of Ecclesiastes is composed of the nonorthodox speeches of the human participants of the book, speeches that are torn down and demolished in the end."[7] A number of well-known contemporary preachers have followed Longman's proposal in order to reconcile the challenging assertion that "*all* is vanity" (NASB, NRSV, ESV), "meaningless" (NIV, NIV11), or "futility" (HCSB).[8]

Not all scholars agree with this assessment. Indeed, a number of interpreters have tagged Qoheleth more positively as a "preacher of joy,"[9] a "godly sage,"[10] or an orthodox "realist."[11] While

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the message of Ecclesiastes is highly disputed,[12] every book in the Christian canon matters, and I am convinced that this book in particular bears distinct lasting significance in this increasingly broken world. We must wrestle with the orthodoxy of Qoheleth's teaching and consider whether the book witnesses divergent and even contradictory voices between the body and its epilogue and with the body itself.[13]

There are at least two issues interpreters often overlook that provide a lens for correctly understanding, evaluating, and applying the message of Ecclesiastes today: (1) the meaning of the Hebrew term *hebel*, which serves as an overarching motif within the book (*"All* is *hebel"* [1:2; 12:8; cf. 1:14; 2:17; 3:19]); and (2) the role and perspective of the epilogue (12:9-14) in relation to the rest of the book. While this study is devoted to the first of these issues, I hope the unity of the volume as a whole will become apparent in the discussion as we move toward synthesizing the book's lasting message. My prayer is that this fresh look at Ecclesiastes will faithfully disclose the book's teaching and motivate a new generation of "under-the-sun," curse-tasting believers to fear God and to look to him, the Creator-Shepherd, for satisfaction in this trying, suffering-filled, enigmatic world.

Fig. 1. The Structure of Ecclesiastes at a Glance[14]

Prologue (Eccl. 1:1)		
Qoheleth's Queries (1:2–12:8)	Indicative Motto: All is HEBEL (1:2)	Part 1
	Introductory Poem (1:3-11)	
	Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)	
	Qoheleth's Conclusions of Life (6:10-11:6)	Part 2
	Concluding Poem (11:7-12:7)	
	Indicative Motto: All is HEBEL (12:8)	
Epilogue (12:9-14)		

HEBEL IN ECCLESIASTES: AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

The noun *hebel* bears a base meaning of "breath, vapor, or wisp of air" and occurs seventy-three times in the Hebrew Masoretic Text, with over half of these (thirty-eight) occurring in Ecclesiastes.[15] Only three instances of the material sense of "vapor" are found in the Old Testament, and even these highlight the breath-like futility of wickedness (Ps 62:9[10]; Prov 21:6; Isa 57:13). All the rest of the occurrences are non-material and metaphorical, including all instances in Qoheleth.[16] The programmatic use of *hebel* as the thematic motto at both ends of the volume ("Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" [Eccl 1:2; cf. 12:8, ESV])[17] as well as its employment as a sustained conclusive refrain in Ecclesiastes suggests that a proper understanding of this term will in large measure uncover the meaning of the book.

A number of the occurrences outside of Ecclesiastes retain the sense of the "ephemeral" or "fleeting" (e.g., Job 7:16; Pss 39:6-7, 11-12; 144:4). In other instances, the noun denotes "valueless" or "inefficacy" (and so "vain"), in that something does not or cannot fulfill what it implicitly promises (e.g., Isa 30:7; 49:4; Job 9:29; Jer 10:2). Accordingly, *hebel* appears to mean "worthlessness" in a number of contexts where it parallels nouns like *tohu* "nothingness," *riq* "emptiness," and *loyoil* "it will not profit" (Isa 30:6, 7; 44:25; 49:4; 57:12; Jer 16:19). Furthermore, in contexts where *hebel* is aligned with nouns like *awen* "iniquity," *kazab* "lie," *maal* "unfaithfulness," and *seqer* "falsehood," it carries the sense of "deceit" (e.g., Zech 10:2; Ps 62:10; Job 21:34). As such, *hebel* is regularly used by extension to connote false gods (e.g., Deut 32:21; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer. 8:19; 10:8; 14:22; 16:19; Jonah 2:8[9]). Finally, in some texts *hebel* appears to express that which is senseless, foolish, or without thought, as when Elihu states that "Job opens his mouth in *empty talk* (*hebel*); he multiplies words without knowledge" (Job 35:16; cf. Jer. 10:3, 8; Ps 39:6[7]).[18]

In Ecclesiastes, the following various actions, situations, and events are judged *hebel* in Ecclesiastes:[19]

(1) Human behavior
  (a) toil and its products (Eccl 2:11; 2:18-26; 4:4, 7-8, 15; 5:10; 6:1-2)
  (b) pleasure (2:1; 6:9)
  (c) wisdom and growing wise (2:15; 7:15-16)
  (d) words (5:6-7; 6:10-11)
(2) Living beings and times in their lives (3:18-19; 6:12; 7:15-16; [9:1-2; 9:9;][20] 11:10)
(3) Divine behavior—events
  (a) divine justice (2:15, 26; 6:1-2; 8:10, 14)
  (b) "everything" (1:2, 14; 2:17; 6:3-4; 11:8-9; 12:8)

Over half of the occurrences of *hebel* are found in categories 1a and 3b.

Interpreters generally assign at least one of four distinct categories of meaning to *hebel* in these texts, all of which are at some level extensions of the uses elsewhere, but only the first two of which necessitate a negative reading. *Hebel* may denote that which is (1) "Vain, meaningless; futile";[21] (2) "Irrational, senseless, absurd";[22] (3) "Transient, temporary, fleeting, ephemeral";[23] (4) "Mysterious, incomprehensible, ungraspable, enigmatic."[24]

A number of interpreters of Ecclesiastes employ multiple senses when rendering *hebel*. Douglas B. Miller has observed, for example, that the *Modern Language Bible* renders *hebel* as futility; worthless; fruitless; useless; emptiness; profitless; follies; vain; unproductive; ineffective; passing; and transit."[25] Similarly, in his commentary, R. B. Y. Scott employs "breath," "vapor," "futility/futile," "empty/empty thing," "hollow mockery/thing," "transitory," "meaningless," "makes no sense," "anomalies," "oblivion," and "fleeting"—the common element being the lack of value.[26]

Arguing against this practice, however, is the fact that in the book-encompassing motto statements Qoheleth considers as *hebel* everything (*kol*) "under the sun" (1:2; 12:8; cf. 11:8). As such, Michael V. Fox is likely correct that interpreters must maintain continuity of meaning for all the book's *hebel* texts—at least those wherein conclusive judgments are made:[27]

> Qohelet's thematic declaration that everything is *hebel* and the formulaic character of the *hebel*-judgments show that for Qohelet there is a single dominant quality in the world and that this quality inheres in the particular *habalim* he identifies.... If Qohelet were saying, "X is transitory; Y is futile; Z is trivial," then the summary, "All is *hebel*" would be meaningless.... To do Qohelet justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or, failing that, to the great majority of them. Then the summary statement "all is *hebel*" can use the word in the sense established in the particulars.

GRIEF & GLADNESS—FAR FROM "MEANINGLESS" OR "ABSURD"

The dominant pejorative translation of *hebel* as "vanity" or "valuelessness" in English versions is likely owing to the influence of "vanity" in the 1611 King James Version, which took its lead from

Fig. 2. Categories of Meaning Assigned to *HEBEL* in Ecclesiastes

	Less Abstract	*More Abstract*
+ Negative view of HEBEL	(1) Vanity, meaninglessness (of things); futility (of actions) *"All things in this world are worthless, valueless, or profitless"*	(2) Irrationality, senselessness, absurdity *"All things in this world are counter-rational or a violation of reason"*
± Negative view of HEBEL	(3) Transience, temporariness, fleetingness, ephemerality *"All things in this world are brief"*	(4) Mystery, incomprehensibility, ungraspability, enigma *"All things in this world are not fully in humanity's power to comprehend"*

Jerome's use of *vanitas* in the Vulgate—a Latin term that limited the semantic range to a value statement such as "emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, vanity" but not "transitory" or "enigmatic."[28] The rendering of "vanity," "futility," or even "absurdity" induces many to read Qoheleth's words with a deprecatory slant, thus requiring great efforts to redeem or correct his theology.[29] However, at least three arguments stand against this reading.

First, if the traditional rendering of "worthlessness" is to color the use of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, one would expect that other words or phrases that denote "vanity," "meaninglessness," or the like would be found alongside the term in the book. However, Ecclesiastes is completely absent of any of the more negative words that accompany *hebel* outside of Ecclesiastes and thus give it a negative tone. Daniel C. Fredericks provides the following list of words that occur collectively nearly one hundred times outside of Ecclesiastes and that might have been expected in the book if *hebel* denotes "valueless": *'ayin* "nothing, naught"; *req* "empty, idle, worthless"; *riq* "emptiness"; *siwe'* "worthless, without result"; *tohu* "nothingness."[30]

Second, if everything being *hebel* signifies that "all is meaningless or absurd," when Qoheleth claims that "nothing is better than" (3:22; cf. 2:24; 3:12) or that "*x* is better than *y*" (4:9; 5:1; 7:1, 3, 8, 10; 9:4, 16-18), he would be asserting that one thing is more meaningless or more absurd than another. How is this possible?[31]

Third, and most importantly, if indeed *all* things "under the sun" are "meaningless" or "senseless," on what basis did Qoheleth expect people to find truth in his own argument, which is also made "under the sun"?[32] Was this sage truly so blind as to affirm the impossible relativism ("nothing has meaning") espoused by contemporary postmoderns or existentialists? Qoheleth's own teaching would not suggest so, for his queries are fully grounded in metaphysical reality (i.e., the quest for knowing truth) and express a highly developed (even orthodox) understanding about God, humanity, and the role of each in this world.[33]

Qoheleth testified, "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven" (2:13). His programmatic question was, "What does man gain (*yitron*) by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3).[34] In the end, Qoheleth became convinced that "all was *hebel* and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11). Such truths pained the sage as he wrestled to understand what today is often called "the problem of evil."[35] Indeed, he tagged much in this life "evil, trouble" (9:3; cf. 4:3; 9:12; 11:2), "grievous evil" (5:13, 16; 6:2; cf. 2:17), "great evil" (2:21), and "unhappy business" (1:13; 4:8)—all declarations that affirm a standard of truth and a conviction that the universe needs "straightening" (1:14-15; 7:13; cf. 7:29).[36] One would not say such things if one was convinced that life was of no consequence, pointless, or futile. Pain or offense testifies to one's innate sense of meaning and purposefulness, whether accurate or misguided.

Qoheleth's conclusion regarding no advantage was qualified by the phrase "under the sun" (2:11), which is shorthand for *the restricted sphere of activities he was privileged to observe* without any bracketing out of God or his providential role.[37] To be "under the sun" is to be identified to what is universally true for all humanity, believer and nonbeliever alike, throughout all time since the fall of mankind.[38] Significantly, while there was no gain "under the sun" (2:11), even in this beautiful yet broken passing life (3:11; 7:15), the wise—those who fear God—can experience gain (2:13) that will be enjoyed beyond God's promised future judgment (3:17; 7:12, 18-19; 8:12-13; cf. 12:13-14; Ps. 73:23-26). "There is more gain (*yitron*) in wisdom than in folly" (2:13), "wisdom preserves the life of him who has it" (7:12), and "the one who fears God shall come out" (7:18).

In this age, *all* humans (and not just rebel unbelievers) are scathed by the vexing realities of the curse (1:14-15; 7:13) and by the creaturely limitations of not *fully* being able to know "what God

has done from the beginning to the end" (3:11; cf. 8:17), both with respect to the present (6:12; 9:1, 12; 11:5) and to the future (2:19; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14; 11:2). Nevertheless, such challenges can themselves be means of grace—gifts of the Creator designed to show us our place (3:18), to motivate fear of him (3:14), and to free us truly to enjoy moments of life in this vexing world (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7, 9-10; 11:8-9).[39] This supreme Overseer of all not only gives mankind its toilsome life (5:18; 8:15; 9:9) and "unhappy business" (1:3; 3:9) but also grants to some people tastes of wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:26).[40] God alone supplies the power to delight in wealth, possessions, and honor (5:19; 6:2), and he alone grants the ability to eat, drink, and take pleasure in toil (3:13; 5:19). He "makes everything" (11:5), and therefore humanity's call is to surrender dependently to the one who governs all, fearing him in a way that fuels persevering trust in God through pain and pleasure unto eternal salvation (7:12, 18; 11:9; 12:13-14). "Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God" (8:12-13).

Intriguingly, Qoheleth's frustrations do not appear to have been limited to the "problem of evil." He also struggled with the "problem of good"—namely, how God could allow some things to work out as one would expect in this crooked world.[41] Qoheleth recognized the true nature of mankind ("there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" [7:20; cf. 4:4; 7:29; 9:3]) and the global impact of the curse ("Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked" [7:13 with 11:5]). As such, to him what was *hebel* included not only times when life appeared "unfair," as when "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" (2:21), but also when justice was followed, as when "to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is *hebel* and a striving after wind" (2:26). Similarly, the sweetness of fresh mercies at dawn and of pleasures during cloud-cast skies was as much *hebel* (11:7-8) as the unjust gain of the wicked (8:14).

Qoheleth was neither a relativist nor a skeptic; he was an orthodox realist and godly sage. He did not dismiss life as inconsequential or even counter-rational but instead called his readers to use the very pains and pleasures of life as generators of dependence (i.e., fear) in one Supreme Creator, whose judgments are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable (12:1; cf. Rom 11:33).[42] As observed by Graham S. Ogden, because Qoheleth applies *hebel* to both negative and positive situations, "the traditional rendering 'vanity' is most inappropriate."[43]

INSCRUTABLE REPETITIVENESS—FAR FROM "TEMPORARY"

While likely not pointing to any "meaninglessness" or "absurdity" in life, could *hebel* for Qoheleth have signaled life's "temporary, fleeting" nature? Kathleen A. Farmer argues for this reading by noting how frequently the phrase *reut-ruah* "striving after wind" (ESV) stands as a virtual equivalent to *hebel* (Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9).[44] Specifically, the use of *ruah* "wind" suggests to her that the material referent of "vapor" or "breath" serves as a pointer to the ephemeral that should color our understanding of *hebel* in each instance.[45] She fails to consider enough, however, that the parallel with *hebel* is not simply *ruah* "wind" but the phrase *reut-ruah*, the significance of which will be addressed below.

Daniel C. Fredericks also views "temporary" as the principle sense of *hebel*. He identifies a number of conceptual and lexical parallels between Ecclesiastes and other biblical wisdom material related to life's brevity,[46] and he then overviews how

the concept of time plays a central role in Qoheleth's queries.[47] For example, each of the three poetic sections (1:4-11; 3:1-8; 12:2-7) address the unchanging cycles of "every matter under heaven" (3:1) so that it can be said, "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). Following a repetitive course are not only inanimate natural phenomena like the sun, wind, and water (1:5-7) but also humans, both generationally and individually, in their movement through life to its end (1:4; 2:12, 18; 12:2-7). The fleeting nature of human existence climaxing in death itself (2:16; 3:2-3; 5:15-16; 6:3-6; 7:1-4, 15, 17; 7:26; 8:8, 13; 9:3-6, 10; 12:7) calls for every person to discern carefully the perfect timing of one's activity, be it planting or plucking, weeping or laughing, loving or hating (3:1-8). With such truths in mind, Fredericks renders the overarching motto of 1:2: "'Breath of breaths,' said Qoheleth, 'Breath of breaths. Everything is temporary!'"[48]

No one can question Qoheleth's interest in the temporal sphere. A number of arguments, however, suggest that his use of the time motif (one of many in the book)[49] served less to stress life's brevity and more to identify the *enigma* of life's repetitive nature and of each generation's relative insignificance in the scope of history.[50]

First, Qoheleth is emphatic that the sustained flipping and emptying of the hourglass is merely one means by which God creates unanswerable questions that in turn generate God-dependence. After observing God's call on mankind to live wisely in all seasons of life (3:1-10), Qoheleth clarified the point of his temporal observations (3:11): "God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Each individual has a sense of infinity within yet lacks an ultimate grasp of creation's history from start to finish. "You do not know the work of God who makes everything" (11:5). While the past is rarely remembered (1:11; 2:16; 9:5, 15), God chooses to recycle what has been (3:15). Yet he does so in a way that the present is not fully understood (6:12; 9:1, 12) and the future remains unknown (2:19; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14; 11:2, 6). "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out" (8:17). The Lord alone holds the keys to this cursed world, and even one's ability to eat, drink, and find joy in toil is fully dependent on God (3:12-13; cf. 2:26; 5:19; 6:2).[51] In the Apostle Paul's words, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor 4:7).

Why would God orchestrate an inscrutably repetitive world where everything from beginning to end is established and unchanging and where mankind lacks full understanding and stands unswervingly reliant on the Creator for everything? "God has done it, so that people fear before him.... I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts" (3:14, 19). Only those who recognize they are creatures can "Remember your Creator" (12:1), and only those who fear God (the wise) persevere through the present age in light of the future judgment (11:9; 12:13-14; cf. 3:17; 7:12, 18; 8:12-13).

Second, as highlighted in a number of the statements that parallel Qoheleth's *hebel*-conclusions, his judgments focus not on life's brevity but on the bitter lack of gain under the sun.[52] Human existence in this age is mysteriously and vexingly ungraspable and perplexing. For example, in 4:7-8 we read: "Again, I saw *hebel* under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, 'For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is *hebel* and an unhappy business." This text describes the workaholic businessman, who ever climbs the corporate ladder while never finding contentment or joy. The language of "no end," "never satisfied," and "never asks" all point to a reality that is anything but temporary.[53] Furthermore, far from providing a word of encouragement, this *hebel*-situation is also an "unhappy business." Shouldn't one find comfort rather than

pain if the point was to stress the brevity of an unsatisfied life?[54]

Similarly, in 2:14-17 and 9:3, Qoheleth lamented over a troublesome fact—namely, that wise and fool alike are corrupt and die, passing from memory. Such weighty thoughts gave rise not only to the declaration of *hebel* but also to grief and to the hating of this life (2:15, 17). Likewise, in 2:18-23, the leaving of one's wealth to another who never worked for it is not simply *hebel* (2:19, 21, 23) but a "great evil" (2:21) that leads to a lifetime of "sorrow" and "vexation," "despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun" (2:20, 23). Finally, to have wealth, possessions, and honor and yet not be enabled to enjoy them is both *hebel* and "a grievous evil" (6:2). Rather than celebrating the fleeting nature of pain, Qoheleth is frustrated with realities in life that he cannot understand—realities that from the perspective of a human lifetime are far from transient.[55]

UNSEARCHABLE RICHES—LIFE'S "ENIGMAS" AS A GENERATOR FOR GODLINESS

"Light is sweet [not meaningless or absurd], and it is pleasant for the eyes to the see the sun. So if a person lives many years [far from brief], let him rejoice in them all [far from meaningless or absurd]; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many [not few and fleeting]. All that comes is enigma (*hebel*)." (11:7-8)

When Qoheleth asserted that "all" in creation was *hebel* (1:2; 12:8), I believe he meant that nothing in the universe this side of eternity was fully understandable, whether bad or good. The point here is *not* that truth is "unknowable" or "unintelligible" but that reality is "unfathomable." "Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:33). These words of Paul echo Qoheleth's conclusions: "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun" (Eccl 8:17; cf. 11:5). Qoheleth's initial quest was to understand the work of God in space and time, but the result was frustration, as more knowledge raised more questions. "I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:17-18).

Everything in this time-bound, curse-influenced creation bears a level of *enigma*, meaning that life "under the sun" is frustratingly perplexing, puzzling, or incomprehensible, though still with meaning and significance.[56] While able to know and understand some truths, realities like the repetitive character of life and nature (1:4-7, 9-10), the soul's inability to be satisfied (1:8), and the failure of every new generation to learn from the past (1:11) make existence in this present age "wearisome" at best (1:8; cf. 8:17; Ps. 73:16).

No one is free from this burden, whether rebel or remnant. Indeed, a relationship with the Creator only increases the questions. Nevertheless, it also offers warranted expectation of future salvation on the other side of judgment. This is what Qoheleth meant when he said, "there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11) but "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly" (2:13). For in fearing God one is able to delight even amidst life's perplexities and to find persevering hope in eschatological justice, confident that the Creator is still on the throne and that he knows what he is doing. In Qoheleth's words, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work" (2:17). Similarly, it is those who fear God who will persevere, for "wisdom preserves the life of him who has it" (7:12; cf. 7:18). And again, "It will be well with those who fear God … but it will not be well with the wicked" (8:12-13). Life's enigmas serve as generators of godliness, unsearchable riches for those enabled to use them rightly (2:26; 3:13; 5:19; 6:2). "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring

you into judgment.... Remember your Creator" (11:9; 12:1).

In what appears to be an intentional affirmation of Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments, the Apostle Paul stated these truths this way (Rom 8:20-21, NIV11): "The creation was subjected to frustration (*mataiotēs*) not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."[57] In the present, we suffer, "groaning inwardly" and often not even knowing how to pray (8:23, 26); but all this painful, enigmatic experience is necessary in order to move us to glory (8:17; cf. Acts 14:22). And in that future day, the one in whom "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Jas 1:17) will "wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.... No longer will there be anything accursed" (Rev 21:4; 22:3; cf. Isa 26:8).

THE SEARCH FOR THE UNSEARCHABLE IN ECCLESIASTES

A yet unstated support for reading *hebel* as "enigma" needs now to be noted. It relates to the recurring phrase *reut-ruah* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and the parallel *rayon-ruah* (1:17; 4:16),[58] both of which are regularly appended to Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments, bearing the same contexts and referents. While Qoheleth retains two different phrases, it is difficult to distinguish them, so the English versions render them equivalently as "a striving after wind" (RSV, NASB, ESV), "a chasing after the wind" (NIV, NRSV, NIV11), "grasping for the wind" (NKJV), and "a pursuit of the wind" (HCSB).[59] Scholars agree that the forms *reut* and *rayon* derive from the Semitic root *r'h*, but there is question as to whether they are Hebrew meaning "shepherding, grazing" or borrowed from Aramaic meaning "desire, will; thought."[60] In the former, "wind" is seen as an objective genitive, as in Proverbs 15:14 where "the mouths of fools will shepherd/graze on [*yireh*] folly" or Hosea 12:1[2] where Ephraim's attempt at international alliances is described as "herding/feeding on wind [*roeh-ruah*] and pursuing the east wind." Here Qoheleth's point would be that in this enigmatic world, attempts to grasp or control God's ways are as impossible as herding the wind.[61] If from Aramaic, "wind" is either viewed descriptively as "windy thoughts," meaning unsubstantial, gainless, ineffectual, or ungraspable mental activity,[62] or subjectively as "wind's desire," connoting random fleetingness.[63]

At least two factors should be kept in mind when assessing the meaning of these phrases: (1) the possibility of distinct though overlapping meanings and (2) the meaning and function of any other occurrences of the root *r'h* in the book. First, while the two phrases are similar and occur in comparable context, the fact that they are different may suggest related but different meanings. Help may be found in assessing the few texts where the phrases are *not* linked with *hebel* judgments. Each phrase is used alone once (1:17; 4:6), and in 2:22 the related phrase *rayon libbo* occurs.

Fruitless Thoughts

We begin with 1:17-18: "I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but *raybon-ruah*. For in much wisdom is much vexation (*ka'as*), and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (*mak'ob*)." According to Qoheleth, one's growth in wisdom is always accompanied by torment and pain, likely due to increased questions that arise with more knowledge. Because the whole of this experience is equated to *rayon-ruah*, the phrase could easily mean either "shepherding of wind" (i.e., making sense of all God's world is impossible) or "thoughts of wind" (i.e., mental wrestlings are ineffective at putting together all of God's world).

Support for the latter option is suggested by the parallel use of *rayon libbo* in 2:22-23, a text with a number of lexical parallels to 1:17-18. "What has a man from all the toil and *rayon* of heart (*leb*) with

which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow (pl. of *mak'ob*) and his work is a vexation (*ka'as*). Even in the night his heart (*leb*) does not rest. This also is *hebel*." With *rayon-ruah*, the sage appears to address internal mental wrestlings that disturb during the day and keep one awake at night. While the phrase could express "a shepherding of one's heart" (i.e., trying to get one's mind under control), the description parallels closely the use of the Aramaic *rayon leb* in Daniel 2:30, where the king's perplexing and mysterious dreams of the night are referred to as *rayon libbak* "thoughts of your mind."[64] I suggest, therefore, that *rayon-ruah* in Ecclesiastes 1:17 and 4:16 means "windy thoughts" or "disturbing thoughts that are ineffectual, bearing no gain."[65] The close alignment with enigma is clear. "When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claim to know, he cannot find it out" (8:16-17).

Shepherding Wind & the One Shepherd

The more common parallel phrase to *hebel* in Ecclesiastes is *reut-ruah*, occurring alone in only one of its seven uses (4:6): "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and *reut-ruah*." The contrast of one portion of "calm" (i.e., wealth earned peacefully and without strain) with a double portion of toil and *reut-ruah* suggests that the latter grouping points to frustrating, laborious activity. While a meaning comparable to *rayon-ruah* "thought of wind" is possible here, the formal distinction of *reut-ruah* makes plausible a difference in meaning—namely, "a shepherding of wind," which on every account would be a straining, fruitless task. This interpretation of *reut-ruah* is rendered more likely in light of the way the connection with the Hebrew root *r'h* "shepherding, grazing" would contribute to the overarching message of the book. This moves us to our second issue that must be addressed when assessing the meaning of the phrases accompanying *hebel*—namely, other occurrences of *r'h* in Ecclesiastes.

Besides the nine combined instances of *reut* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and *rayon* (1:17; 4:16) in the book, the only other occurrence of *r'h* is in 12:11 where the words of the wise are said to be "given by one Shepherd [*ro'eh 'ehad*]."[66] While no other scholar of whom I am aware has connected the sustained refrain *reut-ruah* with the mention of shepherd in the epilogue, I hope to show how this link is an important part of the book's artistry and lasting message.

Most English versions render the substantival participle *ro'eh* with the capitalized "Shepherd," pointing to the translators's identification of this shepherd with Yahweh, Israel's one God (e.g., RSV, NIV, NASB, ESV, HSCB but not NRSV, NIV11). While affirming the likelihood of this reading, R. N. Whybray could find no clear reason why the "shepherd" epithet in relation to God or the emphasis on his "oneness" would be used in this context.[67] In light of this dilemma, Michael V. Fox argued that *ro'eh 'ehad* in 12:11 pointed not to Yahweh but to "a herdsman," with the adjective *'ehad* serving as an indefinite article rather than as the number "one." Fox set forth his case as follows: (1) The epithet "shepherd" is never used by itself for God and always points to him as provider and protector, roles not relevant in this context; (2) the specific teachings of the sages are never said to be given directly from God; (3) it is not the words of wisdom but the "goads" and "nails" that are "given"; and (4) the emphatic use of *'ehad* as "one" would make the second half of verse 11 "a theological declaration of monotheism divorced from its context."[68]

While a number of commentators follow Fox (e.g., Seow, Longman, Krüger, Ogden [2nd ed.]), the case for identifying *ro'eh* with Yahweh is stronger than some believe. First, the rarity with which *'ehad* functions as an indefinite article along with the fact that alleged instances are almost

solely limited to the Former Prophets gives initial caution to such a use in the compact epilogue of 12:9-14.[69] Furthermore, the definitive presence of *'ehad* most naturally points to a "singular identification" and not a general, indefinite rendering "a shepherd."[70]

Second, if there is anything that the sorrowing, broken, and perplexed person needs, it is someone who is both willing and able to help, whether through provision or protection, service or guardianship. To say that the "shepherd" metaphor is not relevant in Ecclesiastes is to miss both the problem and the solution raised in this book.

Third, "shepherd" was a common divine epithet in the ancient world, and it is used of Yahweh elsewhere by Jacob (Gen 48:15; 49:24), by David (Ps 23:1), and with respect to the remnant of future Israel (Ps 80:1[2]; Jer 31:10). The Lord is also portrayed as a caring shepherd who watches over the welfare of his flock, his chosen people (Isa 40:11; Ps 28:9). The imagery is applied to his leading them out of danger's way in Egypt and settling them safely in the Promised Land (Ps 78:52-55; cf. Exod 15:13, 17), and it is also used for the second exodus, the great redemption of the righteous remnant from exile (Isa 40:11; 49:9-13; Jer 23:1-8; 31:8-14).[71]

The implication in all of these texts is that the reason Yahweh is an able and faithful provider and protector of his own is because he is also the true leader of the universe, from whom, through whom, and to whom all things exist (cf. Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17). For Qoheleth, all observable reality is considered to be "the work of God," all of which has been made crooked by divine decree (Eccl 1:15; 7:13; cf. Gen 3:17; Rom 8:20).[72] "He has made everything" for which there is a season (Eccl 3:1, 11; 11:5). He gives life (5:18; 8:15; 9:9); he gives mankind its "unhappy business" with which to be busy (1:13; 3:9); and he gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to whom he pleases, withholding it from others (2:26). To some he gives wealth, possessions, and honor but not the power to delight in them, whereas he enables others to eat, drink, and find pleasure, even in the toils of life (3:13; 5:19; 6:2). For Qoheleth, God is the "Creator" (12:1), who will judge all actions in his time (3:17; 11:19; cf. 12:14). As such, an assertion in the book's epilogue that this is indeed the Shepherd-Leader of all is by no means foreign to the context.[73] Indeed, it is uniquely suited to stress his role both as leader and helper.

Fourth, the subjects of 12:11 are the "words of the wise" and the "collected sayings," and therefore the most likely understood subject of the verb *nitt'nu* "they are given" (Niphal *qatal* 3mp *ntn*) in 12:11b are these wisdom compilations, not the "goads" or "nails." Furthermore, throughout the book, God, the Creator of all (12:1), is portrayed as the great "giver" (1:13; 2:26; 3:10-11; 5:18-19) from whom even wisdom comes (2:26).[74] Elsewhere, Job states explicitly that, while wisdom is "hidden from the eyes of all living," "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.... He saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out" (Job 28:20, 23, 27). Similarly, Solomon declared, "Yahweh gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov 2:6), and personified wisdom asserted itself to be linked with God at the beginning of his work (8:22; cf. vv. 22-31). With these truths, Scripture teaches a close association between the wise words of the sages and the divine source of that wisdom (see 1 Kgs 3:12, 28). All these factors suggest that indeed the "one Shepherd" is God who gives words to the wise.

Fifth, a climactic "theological declaration of monotheism" is neither distracting nor divorced from the context but is directly linked to Qoheleth's purpose through the book. A number of scholars have noted the close tie between Deuteronomy and the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, making it not far fetched that 12:11 alludes to *yhwh 'ehad* in Deuteronomy 6:4.[75] Moreover, as an aged man, this sage had grown to appreciate mankind's God-wrought inability to grasp fully the Creator's universal purposes, for it was through a recognition of these limitations that God-dependence would

lead to joy in this age and in the age to come. Far from being a "protest against God,"[76] Qoheleth's declarations of universal enigma ("all is *hebel*!") push readers to look through their questions to the *one* who alone governs all things. In the end, the only people that will be preserved are those who fear God (7:12, 18; 8:12-13; 11:8)—the one, sole architect and builder of this broken yet beautiful world (3:11 with 1:15 and 7:13). And this is exactly the point of the book's final verses: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).

We live in a crooked world that cannot with any level of human effort be made straight (1:15; 7:13). It is cursed, making the kindnesses of God sometime difficult to visualize. "How is he working good in this?" Consider all the various things that mark our lives: unstable jobs, orphans, judicial corruption, blown tires, broken legs, sex-trafficking, leaky faucets, divine sovereignty vs. human responsibility, failed adoptions, monthly bills, envy, project deadlines, rainy vacations, broken marriages, chronic back pain, pride, pornography, slippery roads, severed relationships, selfishness, racism, bee stings, abortion, and the ever present death of loved ones (or ourselves). This is our world.

We cry, "Why us? Why her? Why this hard? Why this way? Why this long?" Yet, like Job, we hear no answer. We gain no clarity—only more vexation. Our growth in wisdom only raises more questions, as our attempts to comprehend fully what God is doing or why he is doing it always reach dead ends, at least at some level.

All is indeed *hebel*. Both our creatureliness and the curse make life an enigma, as puzzling and frustrating as trying to guide the sea-breezes onto a different course. But while *reut-ruah* "a shepherding of wind" is impossible for us, there is *ro'eh 'ehad* "one Shepherd" who oversees and orchestrates all, including the wind's courses (1:6). What literary artistry the wise sage used to bring us to God. In him we can trust, for as the one Shepherd of all, he is both able and willing to protect and provide for all who fear him. Though we are not in control, he is; and even though life continues to be puzzling, we can receive life as a gift and find joy, resting in the arms of him who makes all puzzles for our good and his glory.

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes shows up in the first half of the Writings, the third main division of Jesus' Bible (Luke 24:44).[77] Following the context of sustained darkness highlighted in the history and prophetic commentary of the Prophets, the loyal remnant of Yahweh needed clarity on how to maintain their faith, even amidst life's sufferings and perplexities. The final form of the Writings gave voice and guidance to this faithful few, still in "slavery" (Ezra 9:8-9), who remained resolute in their confidence that Yahweh was on the throne and would one day right all wrongs through a royal redeemer.[78] Specifically, following the Messiah-oriented narrative preface in Ruth, the rest of the Former Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations) are devoted to clarifying *how those hoping in God's kingdom were to live*, having lives characterized by wisdom, waiting, and worship.

Into this context, Ecclesiastes gives its voice: "Ultimate enigma, says the Preacher, ultimate enigma! All is an enigma." That life is unsatisfying, fleeting, and troublesome creates high levels of puzzlement, mystery, and even vexation for the believer and non-believer alike. "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (7:13). "I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun" (8:17). Far too often the bright purposes and kindnesses of God are dimmed from vision behind cloudy skies, whether due to ignorance (3:11; 11:5), injustice and oppression (4:1), discontentment (4:8; 6:2), financial loss (5:13), unexpected trial (9:12;

11:2), persistent battle with sin (9:3), the sheer monotony of life's repetitions (1:4-11), the fleeting nature of wisdom, skill, and wealth (2:21; 5:16), or the fact that one's life is simply forgotten after death (2:14-16). The curse has created a world where rebel and remnant alike experience both birth *and* death, love *and* hate, peace *and* war (3:2, 8). This is the nature of life "under the sun." How is one to respond under these all-pervasive enigmas?

Some stay oppressed, striving helplessly under life's conundrums and remaining tormented and unsatisfied. Others, however, hear Qoheleth's cry of "enigma" as a rallying call to battle their innate tendencies toward self-reliance and to see it replaced with radical God-dependence.[79] Stated differently, God uses the very crooked, perplexing, and inscrutable nature of this world as the means for breaking humanity's pride and passion to control in order to replace them with reverent fear of God. "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, *so that* people fear before him" (3:14; cf. 3:18).

While all Qoheleth's queries proved to him that "there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (2:11), even in this cursed world he asserted "there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness" (2:13). Why? It is because those who fear God today are enabled to enjoy this world as a gift of the Creator and therefore as a channel for worship (2:24-25; 6:1-2; 11:8; 12:1). It is also because those who walk in wisdom today, living in light of the future judgment, will escape the wrath that will one day fall on the wicked (3:17; 7:12, 18-19; 8:12-13; cf. 12:13-14). The fear of God leads to the approval of God, which frees you and me to delight in today as we hope for tomorrow. "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do" (9:7; cf. 2:26; 7:26). "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment…. Remember your Creator" (11:9; 12:1).

Every bit of God's workings in this cursed world includes levels of unsearchableness—"riches and wisdom and knowledge" vast and deep and "judgments and … ways" that are beyond finding out (Rom 11:33-36). "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" (11:34). Qoheleth's call is to turn from striving against God's providence toward trusting the God who is in control and who is both willing and able to help all who fear him. This is the goal of Ecclesiastes: that believers feeling the weight of the curse and the burden of life's enigmas would turn their eyes toward God, resting in his purposes and delighting whenever possible in his beautiful, disfigured world. In this alone will one find lasting gain unto eternity.[80]

Our incapacity to shepherd or control reality should humble us in a way that generates a righteous fear of the one who has been effectively shepherding all things for all time. And because he is the Shepherd—the provider and protector of all who fear him, we can rest confidently that "behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face."

Those living during the initial restoration would have readily affirmed Qoheleth's assessment of life's enigmas (*hebel*) and of the believing remnant's inability to "shepherd" reality (*reut-ruah*, Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). They would have also been comforted in the reminder that their God was the *ro'eh 'ehad* "one Shepherd" of the universe, both faithful and able to provide and to protect (12:11). Finally, they likely would have been reminded of the promised *ro'eh 'ehad* in the line of David, the Messianic deliver who would right all wrongs and establish global peace once and for all (Ezek 34:23; 37:24; cf. 2 Sam 5:2; John 10:16). Far from a book of pessimism or fatalism, Ecclesiastes is a hopeful book that addresses head-on the realities of life in this age and does so in a way that nurtures hope for the next. May we be bold enough to preach such good news!

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs
And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.[81]

~William Cowper (1731–1800)~

ENDNOTES

[1]In preparation for the writing of this essay, God in Christ has graciously manifest his faithfulness to me through friends and family. I wish to thank my former colleague Dr. Ardel Caneday and my student Jesse Scheumann for their help on this paper. I have learned much from both of them regarding the message of Ecclesiastes, and our conversations and their writings have greatly influenced the final form of this essay. I also want to thank my wife and children, for in our journey together through life's enigmas they have maintained a steady satisfaction in God's worth, for which I am humbled and grateful to our great Shepherd.

[2]James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 23. Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 584, 588.

[3]The English title Ecclesiastes is derived from the Greek *Ekklēsiastes* (via the Latin Vulgate *Liber Ecclesiastes*), which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *qohelet* (Qoheleth), the title given to the main speaker of the book and the appellative I will use to refer to him throughout this work. The term Qoheleth is a Qal fs participle meaning "one who assembles" and is best understood as an official title that may have later doubled as a proper name (see James L. Crenshaw, "Ecclesiastes, Book of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992] 2:271-72). While most scholars, liberal and conservative alike, now favor a late date for Ecclesiastes, I am still persuaded that Qoheleth was most likely King Solomon and written toward the end of his life. For arguments to this end, see Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1994), 528-37; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (New American Commenary; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 254-67; Daniel C. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs* (ed. Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes; Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 31-36, cf. 58-61 and idem, *Qohelet's Language* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 3; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1988).

[4]A little known fact likely of interest to readers of this journal is that before receiving his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in 1964, James L. Crenshaw received his B.D. in 1960 from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In the world of Old Testament wisdom studies, Crenshaw's scholarship is highly revered, but many of his present theological views would not align with *The Baptist Faith and Message* 2000.

[5]E.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 192.

[6]Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32-36; cf. Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Intro-*

duction to the Old Testament (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 284-87. Longman (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 36) agrees with Crenshaw's assertion that Israel's "skeptics" like Qoheleth "denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth" (Crenshaw, "Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events* [ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: KTAV, 1980], 15).

[7]Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 38. Douglas Stuart affirms this "foil" interpretation in his well-used, evangelical introduction to biblical interpretation (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 214): "[Qoheleth's perspective] is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result."

[8]For example, in the last of nine sermons on the book of Ecclesiastes, Kevin DeYoung, Senior Pastor at University Reformed Church in Lansing, MI, summarized his view of the unorthodox Qoheleth in this way: "He is searching, confused, contradictory, cynical, and his conclusion is very clear.... 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'.... Life under the sun is purposeless, meaningless, empty, and pointless.... Qoheleth is a tricky figure to understand.... Here is someone who is just frankly confused. He gets some stuff right, and he also gets some stuff wrong. He has strengths and weakness.... Good at seeing through the superficialities of life; good at seeing the vanity and contradictions of our existence; but bad at finding meaning and redemption." Kevin DeYoung, "The End of the Matter," [cited 24 September 2011]. Online: http://www.universityreformedchurch.org/teachin/sermons.html?sermon_id=84. Like Longman before him, DeYoung sees the final verses as a corrective from father to son on a better way of looking at life—a way directed by God and not apart from him. Similarly, in an attempt to reconcile some potential conclusions drawn from Qoheleth's teaching, John Piper, Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, has asserted: "The writer of Ecclesiastes is speaking the words of a despairing man, not a man of faith.... This is bleak theology in Ecclesiastes, not admirable theology." John Piper, "What Would You Say to Someone Who Uses Ecclesiastes to Say That Abortion is a Better Alternative than the Life Awaiting Some Babies," [cited 9 September 2011]. Online: http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/what-would-you-say-to-someone-who-uses-ecclesiastes-to-say-that-abortion-is-a-better-alternative-than-the-life-awaiting-some-babies. In personal dialog regarding this statement, Pastor John did note that he holds his views on Ecclesiastes lightly, for he understands this book less than any other in the Bible.

[9]R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87-98; cf. Agustinus Gianto, "The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet," *Biblica* 73 (1992): 528-32; Norbert Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17-19—Revelation by Joy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* [*CBQ*]52 (1990): 625-35; Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1999).

[10]Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 21-56; Robert V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* (1996): 85-112, and page 87 for the title "godly sage."

[11]Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 40-41; cf. idem, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life* (The Biblical Seminary 18; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 95. Similarly, in Whybray's later commentary (*Ecclesiastes* [New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 24-28), he departs from the title "Preacher of Joy" to speak of Qoheleth instead as a "realist": "Qoheleth's religious faith was all the stronger for his refusal to shut his eyes to the bad things in life and for his unflinching realism.... It is only the person who has taken full account of the vanities of this world and faced up to them who is free to receive the divine gift of joy in simple things.... Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist ... will remain a matter of opinion; what is certain is that he was a realist" (24-25, 28).

[12]For an overview of the history of interpretation, see Svend Holm-Nielsen, "On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity." *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974) 168-77; Roland E. Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 331-37; Craig A. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (Analecta Biblica 39; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), 1-205; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 21-43; Eric S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Tremper Longman III, "Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 140-49.

[13]Some helpful studies by two who do see "contradictions" in the book but who see them being handled quite differently are Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 71, BLS 18 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989); idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1-26; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 237-54.

[14]Adapted from Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 322-25; cf. idem, "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 38-51; idem, "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 45 (1983): 32-43. Wright observes that Ecclesiastes contains exactly 222 poetic verses, with the argument shifting directly in the middle: 111 occurring from 1:1-6:9 and 111 from 6:10-12:14. See also Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?", 31-34; James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 313-14, 319. For a helpful and unfavorable critique of Wright's numerology, see Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1997], 44-46.

[15]Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *HALOT Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 237. The initial aspirated "h" followed by the spirant "v" sound suggests that the word is probably onomatopoeic, which means it is spoken by the exhalation of "breath" that the word itself denotes (see K. Seybold, "*hebhel*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* [*TDOT*] (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck et al.; trans. John T. Willis et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 3:314; Fredericks, *Coping with Transcience*, 12). Qoheleth may use it poetically to express a sigh over the frustratingly enigmatic, ineffectual, or ungraspable nature of human life in this cursed world. For *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, see 1:2 (5 times), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (2 times); 9:9 (2 times); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (3 times). While some argue that the *hakkol* at the beginning of 9:2 should be read as *hebel* and perhaps conclude 9:1 (cf. Septuagint [LXX] and Vulgate), the Masoretic Text [MT] is perfectly clear as it stands (so Dominique Barthélemy, et al., ed., *Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project: Volume 3: Poetical Books* [Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1977], 586; contrast Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *Journal of Biblical Literature* [*JBL*] 105 [1986]: 424, n.31). It is also possible that the Hebrew phrase *kol y'me hebleka* in 9:9 is secondary, seeing as it is absent in many Hebrew manuscripts and the Latin Vulgate (see Barthélemy, *Preliminary and Interim Report*, 3:588). This latter possibility would render the number of *hebel* judgments in Ecclesiastes at thirty-seven, a likely total in light of the artistic and apparently intentional numerology at work in the volume (e.g., thirty-seven multiplied by three is 111, matching the exact number of verses in each half of the book). For more on the intriguing use of numbers in Ecclesiastes, see the three articles by A. G. Wright or the synthesis by J. M. Hamilton listed in footnote 13.

[16]Daniel C. Fredericks, "הֶבֶל," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [*NIDOTTE*] (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:1005.

[17]The idiomatic phrase *hebel hebalim* "breath of breaths" expresses the superlative and may be translated "ulti-

mate breath" or "utterly breath." For a more nuanced translation of *hebel* within Ecclesiastes, see below. For similar uses of the superlative see *qodes qadasim* "holy of holies" in Exodus 29:37, *seme hassamayin* "the heaven of heavens" in 1 Kings 8:27; and *sir hassirim* "Song of Songs" in Song 1:1.

[18] For more on *hebel* outside of Ecclesiastes, see the commentaries along with Seybold, "*hebhel*," 3:313-20; Fredericks, "הֶבֶל," 1:1005-06; and Gordon H. Johnston, "הֶבֶל," *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:1003-05.

[19] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 415.

[20] See footnote 14 above.

[21] So all major English translations. Derek Kidner asserts that Qoheleth's use of *hebel* signals that the "sum total" of life is "zero … pointless … utter futility" (*The Message of Ecclesiastes* [The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976], 22. See also Robert Davidson, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon* (Daily Study Bible; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1986), 8-9; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 61-65.

[22] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 409-27; idem, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 29-46; idem, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 30-31; idem, *Ecclesiastes* (Jewish Publication Soceity Bible Commentary; Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), xix. Following Fox's appropriation of "absurd," Garrett defines *hebel* as "an active violation of what ought to be the moral order … an offense to reason" (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 283).

[23] Kathleen A. Farmer (*Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, ITC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 145) asserts that *hebel* refers to "lack of permanence rather than lack of worth or value. A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it. However, it is not something one can hang on to for long. It is air like, fleeting, transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless." The most sustained case for this reading has been made by Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 11-32; idem, "Ecclesiastes," 23-31, 70. Within this category would also likely fall C. S. Knopf's proposal "ceaseless change" ("The Optimism of Koheleth," *JBL* 49 [1930]: 196).

[24] Building off arguments by W. E. Staples, who renders *hebel* as "mystery" ("The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 95-104; idem, "Vanity of Vanities," *CJT* 1 [1955]: 141-56), Graham S. Ogden has strongly argued for the translation of "enigma," meaning "human life, in its many facets, is … not fully within our power to comprehend" (*Qoheleth* [2nd ed.; Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007], 32, cf. 21-26; idem, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *The Bible Translator* 38, no. 3 [1987]: 301-07). He is followed by Bartholomew (*Reading Ecclesiastes*, 166, n.109; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 106-07) and, in a highly convincing essay, by McCabe ("The Message of Ecclesiastes," 85-112). Roland Murphy believes *hebel* means "'absurd' in the sense of incomprehensible," but he translates with "vanity" as a catch-word (*Ecclesiastes*, Word [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992], lix. Similarly, Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 59-60, 102; cf. 47) translates with "vanity" but holds Qoheleth "does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension…. What is *hebel* cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually. It cannot be controlled." So too Iain Provan concludes: "Qoheleth has in mind … the elusive nature of reality, that is, the way in which it resists our attempts to capture it and contain it, to grasp hold of it and control it" (*Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs* [New International Version Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 52). Douglas Wilson's proposal "inscrutable repetitiveness" also likely falls into this category (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 18).

[25] Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of* Hebel *in Qohelet's Work* (Academia Biblica 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 8.

[26] Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, as observed by Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 8. Most scholars who take a multi-sense approach to *hebel* are less broad. For example, Michael A. Eaton states that Qoheleth's use of *hebel* includes the ideas of brevity, unreliability, and futility: "All is untrustworthy, unsubstantial; no endeavour will in itself bring per-

manent satisfaction; the greatest joys are fleeting" (*Ecclesiastes*, [Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (*TOTC*); Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976], 56). Similarly, Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 57), Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, 36), and Thomas Krüger (*Qoheleth*, [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004], 42, cf. 3) all argue that *hebel* generally means "futility" but sometimes "fleeting."

[27]Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 35-36. Of the thirty-eight occurrences of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, all but the following are included in statements of judgment: 6:4, 11, 12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10.

[28]See D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 630.

[29]Michael V. Fox synthesizes Qoheleth's perspective as follows: "Qoheleth is not a 'person of faith,'" and "'all is absurd' is ultimately a protest against God" (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 34, 49).

[30]Fredericks, *Coping with Transcience*, 28. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the fact that Ecclesiastes does not contain the "contextual markers" does call into question the reading of "meaninglessness" or the like.

[31]So Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 48.

[32]Douglas Wilson has rightfully asserted (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 15-16): "If Solomon were arguing the absolute meaninglessness of absolutely everything, then why should we trust his argument? It too is under the sun. How could anything, or any word, *mean* utter meaninglessness? Whenever anyone announces that there is no such thing as truth, a listener should always wonder if the speaker believes his expression to be *true*. Solomon is a wiser man than to fall into the idiocy of modern existential relativism. So vanity in this book does not mean final and ultimate absurdity; something else is in view." Cf. Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 48-49.

[33]So Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 50. As will be shown, Fox's identification of Qoheleth's *hebel* statements with the existentialism of Albert Camus seems fully unjustified (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 8-11).

[34]The Hebrew root *ytr* occurs only in Ecclesiastes, ten times as the noun *yitron* (1:3; 2:11, 13[2 times]; 3:9; 5:9[8], 16[15]; 7:12; 10:10, 11), one time as the noun *motar* (3:19), and seven times as the participle *yoter* (6:8, 11; 7:11), which is sometimes used as an adverb (2:15; 7:16; 12:9, 12). The root appears mean "gain" or "advantage," in the sense of the profit that is left over after a commercial enterprise, though never in Ecclesiastes with a material sense. For a helpful overview of this term in Ecclesiastes, see Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 27-30.

[35]In addition to the LXX's uses of *ponēros* in Ecclesiastes, the MT uses the adjective *ra'* in 4:3 (*zēlos*) and 7:3 (*kakia*). In some passages the word "evil" has in view "moral evil," as in 8:3, 11, 12 and 12:14, but in the majority of passages, unless one is bent to read Qoheleth pejoratively, the word does not refer to "moral evil" but to God's curse upon his whole creation that intensifies humanity's struggle to understand reality. In the words of Graham S. Ogden, "Throughout Qoheleth, *ra'* describes any painful or traumatic situation, rather one which is morally corrupt or evil" (*Qoheleth*, 23). Against this, Longman prefers to translate all uses as "[moral] evil" that Qoheleth attributed to God. Because Longman believes that Qoheleth bears an "acerbic attitude" toward God, he thinks that "evil is a translation more in keeping with Qohelet's subtle criticism of God throughout the book" (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 80). Cf. David W. Baker, "רעע," *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1154-58,.

[36]For an overview of how Genesis 1-3 shapes the backdrop to Qoheleth's understanding of life "under the sun," see Charles C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960): 256-63; Roy B. Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 46-56; D. M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3," *Themelios* 19 (1994): 5-8; cf. Walter Zimmerli, who asserted that Old Testament wisdom is shaped "within the framework of a theology of creation" ("The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* [1964]: 148).

[37]The prepositional phrase "under the sun" occurs twenty-nine times throughout Ecclesiastes. "Under the sun" means the same as "under heaven" (1:13; 2:3; 31) and "on earth" (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2). It does

not suggest that Qoheleth engages in "natural theology," nor does it portray a world absent of God so as to contrast it with a more heavenly perspective. The latter view has been developed by Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44-45, who asserts that Ecclesiastes "defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative…. The Preacher's point is that what is to be seen with sheer pessimism 'under the sun' may be seen differently in the light of faith in the generosity of God." Similarly, Longman contends that "under the sun," "under heaven," and "on earth" indicate an exclusion of the God of Scripture from all Qoheleth's considerations (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 66): "In brief, Qohelet's frequent use of the phrase under the sun highlights the restricted scope of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning." To take "under the sun," "under heaven," and "on earth" in this way misreads how Qoheleth actually uses the phrases. Instead of restricting his worldview, the phrases indicate the realm where the activities observed take place, namely, "under heaven" or "on the earth." Such is clear in Ecclesiastes 1:13-14, which read, "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *hebel* and a striving after wind." Never does Qoheleth use the phrase "under the sun" or parallel phrase to bracket out God and his providential role from his inquiry. The phrases circumscribe the realm of all that Qoheleth observed in contrast to that realm over which God's reign known to opposition. For more on this, see Caneday, "Qoheleth," 26; H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974): 67.

[38]So too Caneday, "Qoheleth," 28-31. He writes of Qoheleth (30): "He looked upon the world and all of life from the vantage point of a genuine OT believer who well understood not only the reality of the curse of God placed upon life 'under the sun,' but also its pervasive effect upon everything 'under heaven.' It is just such a world and life that Qoheleth depicts in vivid terms."

[39]R. L. Schultz ("Ecclesiastes," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al.; (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000], 214) has insightfully suggested that Qoheleth's encouragement to "eat, drink, and enjoy your work" refers directly to the fulfillment of the covenant promises of national blessing, as described in 1 Kings 4:20: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy."

[40]Qoheleth does not deny that mankind can know truth. His frustration is that we cannot know *all* truth. Our wisdom and knowledge is finite, not omniscient like the Creator's. On the limits of human wisdom, see Ecclesiastes 7:23-24; 8:17.

[41]David defined the problem of God's goodness as follows: "[Yahweh] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps 103:10). Ezra put it this way: "You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved" (Ezra 9:13). How is such mercy justified?

[42]Garrett's view is similar (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 278): "The Teacher tells his readers how to live in the world as it really is instead of living in a world of false hope. In short, Ecclesiastes urges its readers to recognize that they are mortal. They must abandon all illusions of self-importance, face death and life squarely, and accept with fear and trembling their dependence on God."

[43]Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 54.

[44]Fox writes (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 45): "It is difficult to distinguish the contextual meaning of *reut-ruah* from that of *hebel*, since in all but two of the nine times that the former occurs it is appended to a *hebel*-judgment and has precisely the same contexts and referents…. In the context there is no sharp and consistent difference."

[45]Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?* 143-46.

[46]Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, esp. 11-32; idem, "Ecclesiastes," 23-30. Along with the use *hebel* and "shadow" in Ecclesiastes 6:12 and Psalm 144:3-4 (cf. Ps. 39:5), he parallels phrases like "a few days" (Eccl. 2:3; 5:17; 6:12) with Job 14:2, 5 (also with "shadow") and 16:22 and links Qoheleth's frequent

use of "wind," as in the phrase "striving after wind" (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9) with uses of wind as transient outside the book (e.g., Isa 57:13; Job 7:6-7).

[47]Cf. Richard L. Schulz, "A Sense of Timing: A Neglected Aspect of Qoheleth's Wisdom," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients* (ed. R. L. Troxel et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns), 257-67.

[48]Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 65.

[49]Douglas B. Miller has synthesized the three main spheres of Qoheleth's wrestlings as "insubstantiality, transience, and foulness" (*Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 15; cf. idem, "Qoheleth's Symbolic Use of *Hebel*," *JBL* 117 [1998]: 437-54). Miller helpfully connects these to Qoheleth's use of *hebel* but fails to see the common thread in each is their creation of life's enigmas (cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 106). For a more developed assessment of Miller's proposal, see the article by A. B. Caneday in this issue of *SBJT*.

[50]Douglas Wilson defines *hebel* as "inscrutable repetitiveness," addressing the painful, even unexplainable cyclical nature of all life (*Joy at the End of the Tether*, 18): "You washed the dishes last night, and there they are again. You changed the oil in your car three months ago, and now you are doing it *again*. All is vanity. This shirt was clean yesterday." While Wilson is correct that the Qoheleth was vexed by the inexplainable nature of the cycles of life, wrestling with issues of time was but one of the "inscrutables" with which Qoheleth struggled.

[51]In contrast to the majority of translations, Ecclesiastes 2:24 reads not "There is nothing better" but "There is no good in man that he should eat and drink and see his soul good in his toil; also this I see that it is from the hand of God." The Hebrew *min*-comparative is found in 3:22 but a different preposition is used in 2:24; 3:12; and 8:15.

[52]For a similar overview of the following texts, see Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 22-24; idem, "'Vanity" It Certainly Is Not," 302-04; Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 12-13.

[53]For more on this theme, see Robert K. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic': A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14-28.

[54]In his interpretation of Ecclesiastes 4:8, Fredericks places the *hebel*-judgment (a positive statement of brevity) up against the statement of tragic pain ("Ecclesiastes," 135). However, because the same reality is portrayed first as *hebel* and then as an "unhappy business," it seems likely that the two designations are working with rather than against one another. It is noteworthy that when *hebel* is followed by "striving after wind" Fredericks does see both phrases working together, the latter clarifying the former (28).

[55]In fairness to this position, one of the *hebel* texts that initially seems to favor a reading of "temporary" is Ecclesiastes 6:12, which Fredericks parallels with Psalm 144:3-4 (ibid., 23). Fredericks views the phrases "the few days," "his *hebel* life," "like a shadow," and "after him" to be "'magnifiers' of the transience of experiences in life and of life itself" (164). In light of the lexical similarities between this verse and Psalm 144:3-4, a rendering of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes 6:12 as anything but "fleeting" may be hard pressed (so Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 6). In response, apart from the alleged parallel, it is noteworthy that a rendering as "enigma" makes good sense in 6:12, especially in light of the unanswered questions that bookend the statement: "Who knows?" and "Who can tell?" Furthermore, the parallel text in 8:13 suggests that Qoheleth may in fact be using "shadow" not as a marker of transience but as something one cannot get away from when living "under the sun" (that is, in the light of the sun, shadows are always present). The text reads, "It will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God." While in this age "a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life" (8:12), in the future God will render judgment upon the wicked in such a way that he will *not* "prolong his days like a shadow" (8:13). If "shadow" means "fleeting" in 8:13, it renders "prolong his days" nonsensical. However, if for Qoheleth "shadow" here expresses an ever-present companion that one cannot separate from in this life, the text makes sense: God's future judgment will *end* the life of the wicked under the sun—all shadows disappearing. When 6:12 is read in this light, *hebel*

makes more sense as *enigma* rather than *transient*. I paraphrase: "For *who knows* what is good for man while he lives the few days of his *enigmatic* life, which he performs like a shadow (that will not let go)! For *who can tell* man what will be after him under the sun?" In this broken, twisted age under the sun, mankind cannot get away from his ever-increasing number of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions. Why me? Why this hard? Why this long? God rarely clarifies such matters, thus graciously putting us in a position to receive his help, for he "opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet 5:5; cf. 2 Cor. 1:8-9; 12:9).

[56]In his excellent article ("The Message of Ecclesiastes," 92), Robert V. McCabe tags *hebel* "frustrating enigma." The addition of "frustrating," however, seems superfluous, for "enigma" is itself the source or provocation of frustration. Fox helpfully distinguishes that which is incomprehensible from that which is absurd as follows (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 34): "'Incomprehensible" indicates that the meaning of a phenomenon is opaque to human intellect but allows for, and may ever suggest, that it is actually meaningful and significant. To call something 'absurd,' on the other hand, is to claim some knowledge about its quality: the fact that it *is* contrary to reason—perhaps only to human reason, but that is the only reason we have access to, unless one appeals to revelation."

[57]The NIV11 rendering of *mataiotēs* as "frustration" (so too NIV) is better than the more common "futility" found in other versions (NASB, NRSV, ESV, HCSB, NKJV). If Paul's point was that life is "futile," "in vain," or "for nothing" he would have likely chose *eikē*, as in "unless you believed *in* vain" (1 Cor 15:2; cf. Rom. 13:4), or *kenos*, as in "his grace toward me was not *in vain*" or "our preaching is *in vain*" (1 Cor 15:10, 14).

[58]The closely related *rayon libbo* "striving of his heart" occurs in 2:22.

[59]The KJV's rendering "vexation of spirit" is likely due to a mistaken identification of *reut* and *rayon* with the root *r''* "badness" rather than *r'h* "shepherding, pursuit" or "desire, will, thought."

[60]*BDB*, 944-46; *HALOT*, 1265-66; *CDCH*, 426. The Aramaic form *reut* means "will, desire" (of a king or God) in Ezra 5:17 and 7:18, whereas the plural of the Aramaic *ra'yon* denotes frustrating, perplexing, or incomprehensible "thoughts" throughout Daniel (2:29-30; 4:16; 5:6, 10; 7:28).

[61]So Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 24: "What Qoheleth describes is the attempt to bring the wind under control, to make it blow in a certain direction according to the dictates of the shepherd. From this perspective we see it as a delightful idiomatic phrase for attempting the impossible." Garrett prefers "a chasing after the wind" and asserts: "You can never catch it; but if you do catch it, you do not have anything anyway" (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 289).

[62]Fox prefers this reading (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 42-45; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, xx).

[63]So Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 53: "I translate *reut-ruah* ... as 'the wind's desire' or 'the whim of the wind', connoting the brevity of life and its experiences, which are like the unpredictable wind's desire. The wind periodically changes from north to south, east to west, downward, upward, around, and even temporarily becomes absolutely still."

[64]As observed by Fox (*A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 45-46), the term *rayon* is frequent in Daniel, always referring to "a confused, disturbing thought, either in a dream (2:29, 30) or in response to a dream (4:16; 5:6, 10; 7:28)."

[65]Cf. ibid.

[66]I am not including the feminine substantival adjective *ra'a* "evil," for it derives from the root *r''*.

[67]Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 172. Longman writes, "To put stress on the oneness of God ... seems totally out of place since this issue has not bee raised in the book" (*Ecclesiastes*, 279).

[68]Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 325-26; cf. idem, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 102-03; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

[69]See E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), §125b; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (rev. ed.; Subsidia Biblica 27;

Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), §137u-v. Cf. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 368.

[70]So Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 248.

[71]Cf. Sirach 18:13. See G. Wallis, "רָעָה," in *TDOT* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck et al.; trans. David E. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Louis Jonker, "ר ע ה," in *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1138-43. Cornelius, "רעָה/רעֵה," in *NIDOTTE* (ed. Willem VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1143-44.

[72]For a developed discussion of God's oversight over both natural and moral evil, yet in a way that he never sins, see John Piper, "Is God Less Glorious Because He Ordained That Evil Be? Jonathan Edwards on the Divine Decrees," in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (rev. and exp.; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 335-52. Disappointedly, this appendix was removed from the 2011 edition; however, an earlier version of this essay can still be found at http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/is-god-less-glorious-because-he-ordained-that-evil-be.

[73]G. Wallis observes that in both ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, the notion of the gods being guardian shepherds of the universe in general and of all people in particular was very common ("רָעָה," 13:548-49).

[74]Fox, who is followed by Longman, has strongly argued that the epilogue and body stand at odds, the latter correcting the former ("Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth," 96-106; cf. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 15-20, 29-40, 274-84; G. T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qohelet as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 [1977]: 182-89; G. H. Wilson, "'The Words of the Wise': The Intent and Significance of Qoheleth 12:9-14," *JBL* [1984]: 175-92). In contrast, I believe a strong case can be made for viewing the epilogue and body as unified in theology and viewpoint. On this, see Andrew G. Shead, "Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically," *Tydale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 67-91; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 139-71; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 362-73; Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 243-52.

[75]See Wilson, "The Words of the Wise," 175-92; Schultz, "Ecclesiastes," 211-15; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 368, n.45.

[76]So Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 49.

[77]For examples of the three-fold division Law, Prophets, Writings outside Scripture, see the prologue to Ben Sirah and 4QMMT C.10 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The canonical arrangement of the Old Testament that I follow comes from the most ancient complete listing of the Jewish canonical books, which dates to around the time when the New Testament was being formed (*Baba Bathra* 14b; ca. A.D. 50). For arguments favoring this approach, see R. T. Beckwith, "The Canon of Scripture," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 31-32; idem, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Stephen G. Dempster, "From Many Texts to One: The Formation of the Hebrew Bible," in *The World of the Arameans: Studies in Honour of Paul-Eugene Dion* (ed. M. Daviau and M. Weigl; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 324; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001) 19-56; cf. idem, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 51).

[78]For the development of this theme, see Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 191-227; Jason S. DeRouchie, ed., *What the Old Testament Authors Really Cared About* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming in 2012). To read Ecclesiastes in light of its final form placement in the Writings does not dissuade the fact that I believe Solomon to most likely be the author of this material (see footnote 2). My attempt here is to encourage reading the Old Testament as one intentionally crafted whole as it now comes to us, not simply as books but as a single book that serves as a foundation for the fulfillment found in Christ and the New Testament.

[79]We pray, "Lord, enable us to hear and learn from you, just as you have promised make happen in the New Covenant" (see John 6:44-45; Isa 54:13; Jer 31:34; cf. Deut 29:4; Rom 11:8).

[80]Similarly, Caneday states of Qoheleth, "He directs the reader's focus away from an attempt to understand the providence and toward enjoyment of life as

a gift of God" ("Qoheleth," 33).

[81]William Cowper, "Conflict: Light Shining Out of Darkness," in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper* (ed. William Michael Rossetti; London: William Collins, Sons and Co., n.d.), 292. This hymn now goes by the title, "God Moves in Mysterious Ways" and was one of the last poems Cowper ever wrote. For a brief biographical sketch of this tormented man and his work, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 81-119; the above poem is on pp. 83-84.

"Everything Is Vapor": Grasping for Meaning Under the Sun

A. B. Caneday

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that many, even Christians, receive Qoheleth's (the Hebrew name for the writer of Ecclesiastes) plainly stated portrayal of all that occurs under the sun as "vapor" as skepticism or unorthodoxy that requires caution, needs chastening, or is unworthy of canonicity apart from a prologue that some orthodox "frame narrator" adds for theological correction.[1] For religious individuals, retreat to theodicy, a defense of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil, is an understandable human reaction. Such a reaction seems reasonable when confronted with the stark enigmas of life under the sun, whether confrontation comes by way of evils of this world befalling one's personal realm of experience or by candid rehearsal of this world's evils by another, such as Qoheleth.

One need not be an intentional participant in Pollyanna's "The Glad Game" to react viscerally to Qoheleth's worldview, to distance oneself from it, or to label it skepticism or unorthodoxy. Perhaps Qoheleth's observations concerning death elicit the strongest revulsion that leads readers to indict Qoheleth with unorthodoxy (2:12-17; 3:16-22; 7:1-6; 9:1-6; 12:1-7).[2] Witness how people, even Christians, repress grief and sorrow. Euphemisms mute grim reality. Even for Christians, funerals have become celebrations of the deceased rather than ceremonies of mourning the death of a loved one. For it is unnerving and distressing to come face to face with the pervasiveness, perversity, and profundity of the curse with which the Creator inflicted his own creation on account of human rebellion. So, when Qoheleth's austere observations concerning all things that occur under the sun confront readers, an impulse to retreat to some plausible avoidance mechanism is understandable even if unacceptable, unwarranted, and inexcusable.

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Does the fact that Qoheleth's worldview clashes with one's own give warrant to judge his, which is in the canon, as unorthodox and one's own as orthodox, though not canonized? Does not wisdom call for Qoheleth's readers to submit their worldview for assessment by his worldview rather than sit in judgment against his? Why does not Qoheleth's exaltation of God and abasement of humanity call for humility and for occupying one's mind with understanding why one's own beliefs are in need of adjustment rather than busying oneself with trying to explain how such an unorthodox book exists in the canon? What if Qoheleth's worldview enhances or completes the full range of the Bible's orthodox wisdom by confronting readers with the perplexing enigmas of life in this sin-cursed world where God, who already veils himself from his creatures lest he consume them (Exod 33:20-23), stands behind a frowning providence; a world where God's kingly will is not done as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10); where it rarely seems that the benevolent God who created all things has control over his own creation; and, where everything is subject to death, where the beauty of routines incites vexation, where wickedness drives out justice, where everything is subject to twisting and incompleteness?

REFLECTIONS UPON *HEBEL* AND GRASPING A HANDFUL OF AIR

Nearly three full decades ago a young ministry intern with his wife and two sons sustained waves of setbacks, afflictions, and anguish compressed in a few short years, sufficient for a lifetime. Life's storms pounded with incessant breakers. Economic stagflation depleted resources. Sudden unemployment taxed ingenuity. Petty pastoral jealousy thwarted vocational pursuits. Debilitating rheumatic fever with complications panged the body. Six hundred miles separated the young family from three parents/grandparents who suffered irreversible diseases that would terminate in untimely deaths. Infrequent long drives for brief visits had to suffice. Three funerals to mourn departed loved ones took place in less than a year. Acquaintances rebuffed lamentations of grief with trite consolation as they mouthed the familiar verse: "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom 8:28).[3] Discomfitted, friends pulled away. Aloneness intensified grief and affliction. Desire to reinvigorate vocational pursuits required a cross country move. A home sale incurred financial loss. Living on a shoestring too short failed to make ends meet.

To this Christian man others seemed either oblivious to suffering or ill at ease and quick to suppress the grief of those who suffered. He wondered to what extent he had behaved the same way toward others until waves of grief broke over him, transforming his perspective. Early during those turbulent years, with sensibilities rubbed raw by suffering, these acute travails drew him to Ecclesiastes to seek and to understand Qoheleth's counsel that he might anchor his faith in God's wisdom so that he could provide spiritual stability for his young family. This turn to Ecclesiastes came because a brief portion read in J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* some years earlier stuck in his memory. Packer offers a three-paragraph summary of the message of Ecclesiastes, the gist being,

> the real basis of wisdom is a frank acknowledgment that this world's course is enigmatic, that much of what happens is quite inexplicable to us, and that most occurrences "under the sun" bear no outward sign of a rational, moral God ordering them at all.... The God who rules it hides Himself. Rarely does this world look as if a beneficent Providence were running it. Rarely does it appear that there is a rational power behind it at all.[4]

What Packer states intrigued that young man, for it seemed so right.[5] Yet, as the young seminary graduate plunged deeply into reading Ecclesiastes and researching the scholars, he found that Packer stood almost alone.

Qoheleth preoccupied him for the next few years while serving as a pastor. He came to realize

that Packer rightly understood Qoheleth, that true wisdom acknowledges that grasping what takes place under the sun leaves one with a handful of air. All is vapor. Endeavoring to comprehend all that God does under heaven is alluring but elusive. Such comprehension dissipates like vapor or eludes like a butterfly. The more one chases it, the more it flies away, escaping one's grasp. If efforts to grasp all that God is doing under the sun is as substantive as grasping air, true wisdom takes the posture of self abasement before God who is in heaven (5:1ff) and contentment to accept what God ordains as fitting, acknowledged in an old hymn.

> Whater'er my God ordains is right;
> Holy his will abideth;
> I will be still whate'er he doth,
> And follow where he guideth:
> He is my God; Though dark my road,
> He holds me that I shall not fall:
> Wherefore to him I leave it all.[6]

So, with faith guarded by such hymns, as he engaged with Qoheleth in his quest, the young man came to understand that the notion that one can master life by reading God's providence is illusory. It is like seizing the wind, for God's grand scheme concerning what will befall each person cannot be discovered by adding one thing to another (7:27). Indeed, "all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Qoheleth and Paul agree, but belief in God who purposes all things and brings all things to pass under the sun does not give privileged insight to all that God is doing, nor does faith shield one from suffering or anesthetize grief and anguish.

As with Qoheleth, resignation to fate was no option for the young Christian man; for Qoheleth is no fatalist, but rather, he believes that everything that takes place under the sun comes to pass under God's immanent providence, for God will call everyone to account for their deeds. Qoheleth asserts that God "has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11). For Qoheleth, seeking to comprehend the incomprehensible leads him to affirm, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man" (3:12). This is not fatalism, nor is it hedonism. Rather, this is the behavior of faith in the God who is and who rewards those who seek him (cf. Heb. 11:6). Or, as Qoheleth expresses his faith without using the word *faith*, "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever, nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him" (3:14). This is not submission moved by terror; it is godly fear governed by belief that every human deed has consequences and moral significance under God's providence (7:18; 8:12-13). This, of course, is why Qoheleth sums up the message of his book: "The end of the matter, after all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).[7]

The young man discovered kinship in Qoheleth that he could not find among living peers. He took Qoheleth's forthright observations to heart. Qoheleth's laments became his own. He embraced the full measure of Qoheleth's thematic affirmation: "Vapor of vapors, says the Preacher, vapor of vapors! All is vapor." The man nourished his faith on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes and anchored his confidence in the God "in heaven" whose frowning providence upon humanity became the sustained intimate acquaintance of his young family. He learned that faith in God is not a sedative to deaden pains incurred in this sin cursed world. On the contrary, faith in God actually intensifies one's senses concerning the disparities, inequities, and travails, for this world is not as it first was fresh from the Creator's hand, nor is it what it shall yet be in the new creation.

From intensified anguish the young man, dis-

satisfied with most of the secondary resources he studied and read concerning Ecclesiastes, determined to record what he had found in becoming deeply acquainted with Qoheleth in the crucible of life. He published his first substantial essay, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?"[8] Having walked with Qoheleth for several years, he argues that far from being a skeptic, Qoheleth is a man of faith. He came to understand that Qoheleth "looked upon the world and all of life from the vantage point of a genuine OT believer who well understood not only the reality of the curse of God placed upon life 'under the sun,' but also its pervasive effect upon everything 'under heaven.' It is just such a world and life that Qoheleth depicts in vivid terms."[9]

He found that Qoheleth's *hebel*, though bearing a range of senses, including insubstantiality and transitoriness in its various contexts (even with occasional exclamations of vexation), primarily accents the need to learn how to live with evil, to accept that life in this cursed world entails an inscrutable and enigmatic labyrinth. This calls for neither abandoned resignation nor striving to gain mastery over what transpires under the sun, for the former entails fatalism not faith and the latter fails to apprehend that such striving leaves one with a handful of air. Rather, Ecclesiastes calls for obedient fear and humility before the Creator who purposes and brings to pass everything that occurs under the sun. False and illusory hopes of deciphering God's providence and thereby "shepherding the wind" should be replaced with confident enjoyment of the Creator's good gifts which he gives in the few years given that pass as a shadow.

Though far from offering the definitive word on how to read Ecclesiastes, the discipline of formulating such thoughts for others to read and engage had a deep shaping impact upon the young man's mind and spirit throughout his life that has passed as a shadow. Qoheleth's message has become his own lived out in a way much more profoundly than the inadequate utterances of it found in his essay of twenty-five years ago. Since then the literary irony, ingeniousness, and elusiveness of Qoheleth's use of "vapor," has become more profoundly apparent through reading scholars who have chased after elusive *hebel* to capture its meaning This essay, then, revisits an earlier rather youthful reflection upon Ecclesiastes to offer a modest effort, confirmed by life under the sun and chastened by age, to examine Qoheleth's elusive use of *hebel* by way of pondering the poetic prologue with his thematic affirmation that bookends the poem (1:2, 12-16) like it bounds the book (1:2, 12-15), and to do so without being left holding a handful of air.[10]

The *Hebel* Task God Assigns Humans in the World He Has Judged

God has assigned humans a task that incites us to employ wisdom to study and examine all that occurs under heaven as we follow Qoheleth's lead. This weighty burden occupies the mind that tries to comprehend that which transcends comprehension.[11] The enormity of the subject—all that takes place under the sun—prompts Qoheleth to announce, "Vapor of vapors, says Qoheleth, vapor of vapors! All is vapor" (1:2, 12:8). What does he mean by calling it *hebel*, "vapor," "breath," a "wisp of air"?

Among Bible versions and interpreters, the meaning of Qoheleth's use of "vapor" as his thematic refrain seems almost as difficult as grasping vapor, "chasing the wind" as Qoheleth expresses it. Bible translators and interpreters diverge widely on how to understand *hebel*. Yet, how Bible versions and commentators translate *hebel* largely determines whether they present Qoheleth as an orthodox or unorthodox sage.[12] Qoheleth's use of *hebel* and of "chasing the wind" tends to elude readers who become too easily satisfied with hastily and restrictively reducing the possible meanings to "everything is meaningless" or "everything is temporary."[13] The tendency has been to capture elusive *hebel* and to confine it within a singular and often pejorative meaning, whether "van-

ity" (ESV, NRSV, NASB), "futility" (HCSB), or "meaningless" (NIV, NLT). This is likely owing to the King James Version ("vanity") which in turn succumbed to the influence of the Latin Vulgate which may reflect the Septuagint's use of *mataiotēs*, which seems more restrictive than *hebel*.[14] By translating *hebel* as *vanitas* Jerome foreclosed the semantic range left open by *mataiotēs*, for *vanitas* describes the value of something as "emptiness, worthlessness, unreality, vanity, or boasting" but not "transitoriness" or similar senses.[15] The restricted semantic range of *vanitas* continues to influence English translations to opt for "vanity" or "meaningless" which induces many to read Ecclesiastes with a deprecatory slant. Vanity, meaninglessness, or futility all seem to present a much too negative view of life "under the sun." Thus, they fail to do justice to what seems to be Qoheleth's vintage use of *hebel* and to account for non-pejorative uses of the word throughout his reporting of discoveries made in his quest to fathom the unfathomable.[16]

Qoheleth's Poetic Prologue and *Hebel* as Literary Imagery

The prologue captures the tone, theme, and tempo of the whole book with its relentless rounds. In compressed form, the prologue mimics the world Qoheleth observes and depicts throughout the book, imitating its cadence as it recycles words, phrases, and themes. Thus, Qoheleth captures in literary form the movements of life under the sun. He offers readers a sense of the recurrent refrains of life under the sun with his own literary refrains.[17] It seems, however, that Qoheleth's greatest literary genius shows itself in his thematic refrain, "Vapor of vapors. Vapor of vapors! All is vapor," used as bookends, occurring at the beginning of the prologue (1:2) and immediately prior to the epilogue (12:8).

The poetic prologue which immediately follows Qoheleth's thematic refrain of 1:2 suggests that it is reasonable to infer that the thematic question (1:3) followed by summations (1:4-11) provides a compendium of the book's contents.[18] What led to Qoheleth's announced theme, "Vapor of vapors. Vapor of vapors! All is vapor" (1:2)? His propositional question, "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" materially poses the query modern philosophers ask abstractly, "What is the meaning or purpose of life?"[19] Qoheleth begins to establish his conclusion that "all is vapor" (1:2) by rehearsing the persistent cycles of the world and of humanity (1:4).

Life under the sun entails rhythmic routines of seasons and events—one generation is followed by another, the sun rises and sets with unbroken routine, the wind blows as it will through its journeys, waters ever move through their cycles from water to vapor to rain but never overflow the sea. Times and seasons, graciously given by God, provide regularity (cf. Gen 8:22), but predictability becomes human weariness that silences utterance (1:8). The appetites of the eye and of the ear are never satiated with this tedium of cycles because what takes place has occurred before, for nothing new occurs under the sun (1:9-10). Imitating the very subject it describes, as the prologue's poem commences, so the prologue cycles back to where it begins. Death, the intruder, sweeps away a generation to be forgotten, and death is the plight of the next generation among those who follow (1:11). The world persistently endures as its cycles methodically advance with no obviously perceived progression. Movement occurs without progress which parallels work without gain (1:3; 2:11, 13).

Qoheleth portrays the world as a place where both curse and grace are common to all. God's common grace is manifest in the world's methodical endurance and in the cycles of seasons (Gen 8:22) but also in the continuation of human life despite pain of childbirth and curse of death (Gen 9:1, 7). A generation passes from the earth forgotten as a new generation takes its place only to be replaced and forgotten in its own time (Eccl 1:4, 11). This is the realm under God's judgment that incites the exclamation, "Vapor of vapors, says

Qoheleth, vapor of vapors! All is vapor."[20]

Given the placement of the poetic prologue it is reasonable to infer that it begins to unravel the thematic refrain of *hebel* because immediately following the poem Qoheleth promptly returns to his *hebel* verdict as he explains, "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is *hebel* and a striving after wind." Human transitoriness (1:4) seems to be an integral element of what *hebel* entails without exhausting all the senses that *hebel* bears within Ecclesiastes. Additionally *hebel* seems closely associated with the taunting of human senses and so induces vexation. Routineness gives rise to words too full of weariness to be uttered (1:8a; cf. Rom 8:22). Appetites are fed but never satiated. Eyes cannot seize with satisfaction what they see, and sounds that fill the ears vanish into memories (1:8b). Death's pall spoils the routines with oblivion (1:4, 11). Thus, the poem begins to tease out the referents of the *hebel* imagery as entailing that which is insubstantial, fleeting, and out of kilter.

In 1:12-15 Qoheleth provides additional clues to decipher his verdict that "all is *hebel*." He restricts his verdict of *hebel* to the limitations of his search guided by wisdom. It is confined to "all that is done under heaven," a phrase that has two parallel expressions, "on earth" and "under the sun," with the latter dominating throughout Ecclesiastes.[21] Many wrongly exploit these synonymous phrases to indict Qoheleth as unorthodox by claiming that the phrases restrict Qoheleth's reasoning to "natural theology" that excludes faith in the God who reveals himself in Scripture.[22]

Life Under Heaven

Contortions and imperfections of life "under the sun" vex Qoheleth (1:12-15). Does this embitter him against God? For Qoheleth, who is "under heaven," is the Creator "in heaven" (5:2) an aloof and immoral despot?[23] No, Qoheleth holds no such belief concerning God the Creator. Qoheleth does not impute moral evil to God. Rather, the kinks and gaps of all that God does "under heaven" manifest his curse for human rebellion: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes" (7:29).

The phrases "under heaven," "on earth," and "under the sun" do not restrict the horizons of an unorthodox worldview of a bitter man who ascribes to God remoteness, detachment, and moral evil. Rather, "under heaven" (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) with its synonymous phrases, "on earth" (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2; 12:7) and "under the sun" (1:3, 9, 14; 2:11; etc.), declare the realm of Qoheleth's experiences and observations over which he declares, "all is vapor." "Under heaven," with its parallel phrases, bears an ominous tone as it does in other biblical texts. It evokes the judgment of the Creator who blighted the whole of his own creation with his curse on account of his rebellious creatures. In the beginning Adam dwelled and walked with God "under heaven," a realm that received the Creator's approval (Gen 1:9). Since Adam's rebellion "under heaven" bears ominous and threatening overtones concerning God's curse and judgment. Thus, in Genesis 6:17 "under heaven" conveys God's displeasure on account of sin. In this passage "under heaven" and "on earth" identify the realm of God's judgment: "For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath [*ruah*] of life *under heaven*. Everything that is *on the earth* shall die" (cf. 7:23). Likewise, "under heaven" is associated with the Lord's judgment upon the peoples that Israel will dispossess in taking the promised land (Exod 17:14; cf. Deut 7:24; 25:19).

Thus, "under heaven" is the realm that reflects God's anger, whether for specified sins or generally for human rebellion in the Garden (cf. Ps. 90:7-11). To dwell "under heaven" or "on earth" is to inhabit the place that is under the realm God inhabits, which is heaven. Thus, for Qoheleth, "under heaven," "on earth," and "under the sun" are

phrases that convey more than simply the boundary of his observations. Heaven is the abode of God, the Judge who is to be feared (Eccl 5:1-7), for everything that God does "under the sun" serves as foreboding harbingers of judgment yet to come (cf. Luke 13:1-5). Consequently, Qoheleth understands that God has assigned a task that entails odious conundrum because he has subjected his creation to disfigurement, distortion, deficiencies, and deformities that disclose his anger for human rebellion. Things twisted and missing (1:15) incite human inquiry but also render it impossible for humans to decipher the mystery of God's pattern and plan in his mingled common grace and common curse (7:27-28; 8:16-17).

Qoheleth's observations concern life's experiences in this cursed and sin ravaged world, which is what the phrases "under heaven" and "under the sun" indicate. So his verdict is over the whole realm where God's judgment for human rebellion renders everything "vapor," hebel. His uses of "under heaven," "on earth," and "under the sun" identify the earthly realm where God's judgment for human rebellion intractably stands in contrast to the way the world once was, at the beginning before Adam's transgression, and the way the world shall be, the realm where "neither moth nor rust destroys" and "thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt 6:19-20), the realm over which God's reign will know no opposition or contradiction as his dominion already takes place "in heaven" (cf. Matt 6:10).

Shepherding the Wind

Genesis 6:17 is also instructive concerning another of Qoheleth's phrases, "a chasing after wind" (1:14, *reut-ruah*, which uses *ruah* [*pneuma*, LXX], sometimes used as a synonym for *hebel* to mean "breath"). Already Qoheleth used *ruaḥ* with reference to wind that blows about in its own rounds when he states, "The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns" (1:6). Now Qoheleth's placement of "and a chasing after wind" (*ruaḥ*) immediately following *hebel* powerfully evokes the *airiness* or *vaporosity* of his thematic imagery but also its *elusiveness*. However one translates the phrase, Qoheleth's use of this evocative idiom suggests that *hebel* is something that cannot be grasped.[24] The phrase could be translated "shepherding the wind," an apt portrayal of striving to do the impossible.[25] Wherever Qoheleth uses the phrase "shepherding the wind," his observations address human endeavor and the lack of enduring benefit.[26] With regard to the interplay of "wind" (*ruah*) with *hebel*, of particular significance but also reflecting use in Genesis 6:17, Qoheleth states, "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath [*ruah*], and man has no advantage [*moṯar*] over the beasts, for all is vapor [*hebel*]. All go to one place. All are from the dust [*ʿapar*], and to the dust [*ʿapar*], all return" (Eccl 3:19-20; echoes of Gen 2:7; cf. Job 21:17-26).

Another crucial passage in Ecclesiastes concerning *ruah* in collocation with "on the earth" and with *hebel* is Ecclesiastes 12:7 where Qoheleth concludes his portrayal of aging, "and the dust [*ʿapar*], returns to the earth [*ha-ʾeres*] as it was, and the spirit [*ruah*] returns to God who gave it. *Vapor* of *vapors*, says the Preacher; all is *vapor*." Here are strong allusions to Genesis 2:7 and 3:17-19, even though Qoheleth uses *ruaḥ* for "spirit" instead of *nismah* (Gen 2:7) and *ha-ʾeres* instead of *ha-ʾaḏamah* (Gen 2:7, 3:19). Though Qoheleth uses synonyms to suit his literary purpose, it seems apparent that his beliefs derive in part from meditating upon the foreboding trajectory of the curse from its entrance in Eden through its catastrophic effects in the flood. Humans and animals alike are fragile as dust. Death casts a pall over everything Qoheleth observes. Thus, as suggested by the prologue's poem, confirmed within the body of his work, and in the epilogue, *insubstantiality* is one referent of Qoheleth's *hebel* imagery.

Besides the *fragility* or *insubstantiality* of human life the prologue's poem also introduces *brevity* or

transience (1:4, 11) which Qoheleth occasionally threads into the fabric of his book. For example, "For who knows what is good for a man while he lives the few days of his *vapor* [*hebel*] life, which he passes like a shadow[*sel*]? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?" (Eccl 6:12). Human life too soon dissipates like a vapor and passes like a shadow. Likewise, Qoheleth's lament over the fleeting period of youth gives *transience* as *hebel*'s referent (cf. 8:10-15). So, again, the prologue's poem and material within Qoheleth's book confirm that another referent of his *hebel* imagery is *transience*, *evaporation* or *dissipation* of vapor.

Even though Qoheleth's use of *hebel* may be elusive, he places his use of the theme imagery within contexts that provide texture, definition, and synonyms. In addition to phrases already considered that refer *hebel* imagery to insubstantiality and to transience, Qoheleth states, "And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy [*ra'*] business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with" (1:13).[27] Here, and in numerous passages, sometimes in close proximity to *hebel*, Qoheleth uses "evil" (*raʿ*, in the LXX, usually *ponēros*, variously translated as "evil," "unhappy," "grievous," "sad," and "disaster" in the ESV) with a sense akin to its use in the phrase, "the problem of *evil*" (1:13; 2:17; 4:3; 4:8; 5:15; 6:2; 9:3; 9:12; 11:2).[28] The preponderant use of this Hebrew word in Qoheleth does not refer to "moral evil" but to creation's contrariety to the way it came from God at its creation and formation (Gen. 1-2), so that now, under God's judgment with the infliction of sin's curse, "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (1:15; cf. 7:29).[29] Disparate distribution of wealth and poverty, inequities in justice, able bodies and strong minds offset with frail bodies and defective minds, missing limbs, maladies, and lives cut short all characterize life in this world where everything is marred with twists and deficits. Qoheleth regards this to be God's work of judgment by way of common curse: "Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (7:13). As God's work, of course, this does not refer to God's creational design over which he declared all things "good" (Gen 1:31), but it refers to his judgment upon creation on account of human sin. Humans cannot hammer out the kinks imposed by divine judgment nor can they insert pieces that are missing (1:15). All that transpires under the sun is a puzzle with pieces that defy assembly and with portions absent. As such, "evil," with its varied English translations in Ecclesiastes, represents Qoheleth's verdict concerning all that is an affront to his godly sense of what is just, proper, and befitting, even though he acknowledges that there is a time for every purpose under heaven, including everything that is odious in the juxtaposed opposites of his poem in 3:1-8.

A Wisp of Air

As contextual linkage of "shepherding the wind" with *hebel* signals Qoheleth's concern with the insubstantiality of human effort, so correlation of "evil" (*ra'*) with "vapor" (*hebel*) features things that are odious, loathsome, or foul.[30] Add to this, two synonyms, "vexation" (*kaʿas*, 11:10) and "sickness" (*holi*, 6:2) and two of "evil's" antipodes, "good" (*tob*, e.g., 2:1, 24) and "satisfy" (*saḇa'*, e.g., 4:8; 5:9; 6:2-4). Within their respective contexts these synonyms and contraries qualify *hebel's* referent to be *foulness* rather than insubstantiality or transience.[31] It is crucial to observe that Qoheleth uses "evil" (*ra'*) never equal to but only as a subset of "vapor" (*hebel*). This means that Qoheleth positively affirms "all is vapor" (1:2; 12:8), but he never says "all is evil."

Though everything is "vapor" in one sense or another and sometimes even in more than one sense, not everything is "vapor" in the same sense. Consequently, Qoheleth contends that certain things that are "vapor" are also "evil," but other things that are "vapor" he does not call "evil" but "good."[32]

Douglas Miller convincingly argues that Qohe-

leth uses "breath" or "vapor" as a single imagery or symbol that embodies multivalency (layers of meaning) with various referents that he teases out throughout his book including insubstantial-

Figure 1

ity, transitoriness, and foulness.[33] Two additional insights seem apropos to enhance Miller's instructive and persuasive proposal.

First, the onomatopoeic nature of *hebel* as the imitation of the sound it names in word form adds support to hearing *hebel*, a "wisp of air," as an apt single imagery with three referents—insubstantiality, ephemerality, and foulness.[34] As such, a sigh, a murmur, a groan, which entails exhalation, "*hebel*," is an act that captures Qoheleth's announced verdict over all things that reside under God's judgment ("under heaven").[35] It is all a wisp of air. Does Qoheleth allude to a sigh that expresses what utterance cannot: "All *words* are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it" (1:8)?[36]

Second, Qoheleth's use of *hebel* as a single but rich and full onomatopoeic imagery that aptly summarizes his verdict upon everything done under heaven, especially when pronounced, mimics what his quest has discovered, that it is insubstantial, transient, and even foul, expressed with a "wisp of air." It is all vapor. Qoheleth, who "taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care" who also "sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth" (12:9-10), ingeniously employs *hebel* as his thematic imagery woven throughout the fabric of his work with multiple referents, all eliciting incessant efforts to grasp *hebel* to solve the riddle, the grand enigma which eludes the wisest human (8:16-17). For anyone who claims to solve the enigma or to capture the elusive puzzle is left holding a handful of air.

Ironically, Qoheleth's verdict—"All is *hebel*!"—has itself become an elusive enigma chased after by generations of scholars, hence, "of making many books there is no end" (12:12). With the aid of a few biblical scholars, the elusiveness of *hebel's* meaning has come into fuller focus. In particular, Douglas Miller's insights on Qoheleth's symbolic use of *hebel* have been instructive and compelling but also evocative. He states, "To this purpose, Qohelet holds forth הבל both as a symbol and as a kind of puzzle. In just what ways, he challenges us, is life vapor? A matter has been hidden, and it is up to the reader to find it out."[37] The three referents of Qoheleth's *hebel* imagery—insubstantiality, transience, and foulness—form the intangible pieces of a puzzle, an enigma. Miller acknowledges that *hebel*, as a literary imagery, poses as a puzzle.[38] Hence, even though *hebel's* referent itself may not be "enigma," *hebel* as multivalent imagery referring to insubstantiality, transience, and foulness, functions as a kind of riddle or enigma. This confirms, while chastening with much greater fullness and clarity, my own youthful instincts that Qoheleth's *hebel* bears a flexibility that no single word can adequately capture for every contextual usage and that *hebel* does pose an enigma.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to popular interpretations of Ecclesiastes largely based on 2:24-25, Qoheleth does not rehearse all his observations in an attempt to show "the emptiness of a life lived apart from God."[39] Though one properly infers such a message from Scripture, it is not Qoheleth's thematic message. Also, contrary to another popular interpretation of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth does not preach that enjoyment of life nullifies life's enigmas or resolves life's problems. The wisdom to which Qoheleth calls readers is not that remembering the Creator,

fearing God, and keeping his commandments unlocks the enigmas of life for the righteous. To the contrary, Qoheleth observes, "There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing" (7:15). It is precisely this great inequity that prompts Qoheleth to declare, "I said that this also is vapor" and to announce, "So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of his life that God gives them under the sun" (8:14-15, NRSV). So, precisely because God's providence in this cursed world fills life with conundrums that consist of insubstantiality, transience, and odiousness Qoheleth encourages readers to enjoy life, which is God's gift, because "there is nothing better" (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9).[40] Qoheleth's counsel to enjoy life as God's gift which follows his candid observations concerning the enigmas done under the sun resembles neither Pollyanna's view of the world nor that of a bitter skeptic.

Humanity's quest to fathom the unfathomable entails inquiry that brings true creatural knowledge, insight, and understanding, which, however expansive or comprehensive one may think such creatural knowledge is, it falls immeasurably short of being exhaustive. Exhaustive knowledge of "all things that occur under the sun" (i.e., creation) belongs not to creatures whose knowledge is derived and learned by observing but belongs to the one who alone has original, innate, or unlearned knowledge, the Creator who made all things and subjected "all things under the sun" to sin's curse on account of Adam's rebellion. The Creator and Sustainer is the one Shepherd who provides wisdom for life "under the sun" (12:11).[41]

Attempts to grasp the pattern and plan of all that takes place under the sun is to try to grasp wind, for what one grasps dissipates as vapor, leaving one holding a handful of air. On the other hand, one who grasps Qoheleth's meaning of "vapor" is not disappointed but takes hold of wisdom which is to submit before God, the one Shepherd, with fear and obedience to dwell contentedly under heaven within the vapor of the Creator's enigmatic providence that envelopes all things with insubstantiality and transience and some things even with foulness. For, as Qoheleth's instruction in wisdom from the one Shepherd begins, wisdom that entrusts one to the Creator acknowledges concerning all things under the sun, "Everything is vapor!"

ENDNOTES

[1]For example, Sheppard and Wilson think that an editor appended the epilogue to connect Ecclesiastes with the canon (G. T. Sheppard, "The Epilogue to Qohelet as Theological Commentary," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 [1977]: 182-89; and G. Wilson, "'The Words of the Wise': The intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* [*JBL*] 103 [1984]: 175-92). Roland Murphy believes that the epilogue fails to represent the book accurately so that he oversimplifies its message (*Ecclesiastes*, [Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1992], lxv, 126). Michael Fox proposes that the epilogue places Qoheleth's dangerous words in a frame that makes it safe for orthodox readers to read him with tolerance without subverting their religious beliefs (*Qohelet and His Contradictions* [Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 71; Sheffield: Almond, 1989], 315ff). See also Tremper Longman III, *Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testmanet [*NICOT*]; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2-9, 57-59, 274-82; and Peter Enns, "Book of Ecclesiastes," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 124-29. Longman contends, "In my view, the body of the book contains the first-person speech of Qohelet; the prologue and epilogue contain the first-person speech of an unnamed speaker who refers to Qohelet in the third person, as another person whom he knows (e.g., 12:8-12)" (*Ecclesiastes*, 7).

[2]For example, concerning Eccl 3:16ff, Franz Delitzsch states, "If Koheleth had known of a future life … he

would have reached a better ultimatum" (Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes [trans. M. G. Easton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 262). On the same passage Longman states, "In short, this section is one of a number that indicate to us that Qohelet did not have a conception of the afterlife. Without such, he realizes that there is no place for divine retribution outside the present evil world. In other words, his observation extends beyond 'under the sun' to what takes place in the afterlife, but he concludes that there is nothing there" (*Ecclesiastes*, 128). Is it not curious that Longman earlier defines "under the sun" as "the restricted scope of his inquiry," yet now he equivocates to state that Qoheleth's "observation extends beyond 'under the sun' to what takes place in the afterlife"(66)? If, by definition, "under the sun" refers to a restricted worldview that "does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning," then, should not Longman's claim that Qoheleth's "observation extends beyond 'under the sun,'" by definition, mean that at least in 3:18 Qoheleth breaks the restrictions of his own worldview to allow "a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning"? Does not this equivocation expose a flaw in Longman's original defining of "under the sun"?

[3]Such abuse of Romans 8:28 does not consist in understanding the passage as referring to suffering. Indeed, the context makes it clear that the apostle Paul is referring to suffering when he says "all things work together for good." Abuse of Romans 8:28 consists in using its truth to mute or to quench biblically warranted lamentation concerning grief brought on by God's curse for human rebellion. Christians are subject to the vagaries of human emotion, including desire to suppress grief, whether their own or that of another, because mourning is discomfiting.

[4]J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1973), 94, 95. Drawing upon his instructive illustration from the electrical simulation of train movements at the York station, Packer makes the point that the mistake that many Christians make is to suppose that when God bestows wisdom he gives "a deepened insight into the providential meaning and purpose of events going on around us, an ability to see why God has done what He has done in a particular case, and what He is going to do next. People feel that if they were really walking close to God, so that He could impart wisdom to them freely, then they would, so to speak, find themselves in the signal-box; they would discern the real purpose of everything that happened to them, and it would be clear to them every moment how God was making all things work together for good. Such people spend much time poring over the book of providence, wondering why God should have allowed this or that to take place, whether they should take it as a sign to stop doing one thing and start doing another, or what they should deduce from it. If they end up baffled, the put it down to their own lack of spirituality" (92). Additionally, Theodore Plantinga, *Learning to Live with Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) provided significant wisdom and insight.

[5]Deep study of Ecclesiastes prompted thorough and critical reading of Harold S. Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981) and *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (New York: Summit, 1986). Despite the numerous defects of Kushner's view of God, his candid portrayal of human suffering confronts readers with courageous humane compassion. From within the crucible of suffering, critical engagement and rejection of Kushner's beliefs concerning God made for deep, attentive, and biblically guided assessment of "Open Theism," an "evangelical" version of Kushner's beliefs, that was beginning to emerge at that time under influence from Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review & Herald, 1980), reprinted as *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985). Clark Pinnock admits that he learned Open Theism from Rice whom he acknowledges in "God Limits His Knowledge," in Predestination & Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty & Human Freedom (eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 143-62.

[6]Samuel Rodigast, "Whate'er My God Ordains" in

Trinity Hymnal (trans. Catherine Winkworth; Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1962), 94. To avoid any lurking confusion, the word "right" in the first line—"Whate'er my God ordains is right"—does not mean "morally right" but what is "fitting" or "appropriate" to God's purposes.

[7]Unless otherwise indicated, the English Standard Version (ESV) translation is used throughout this essay. Where the ESV uses "vanity," this essay will alter the wording indicated with *italics*.

[8]Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* [*GTJ*] 7 (1986): 21-56. See also *idem*, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 81-113.

[9]Ibid, "Qoheleth," *GTJ* 7 (1986): 30; idem, "Qoheleth," *Reflecting with Solomon*, 90.

[10]This essay is offered with the hope that if wisdom is increased it may offer greater clarity concerning Qoheleth's message and correct previous shortcomings.

[11]The wording alters what was originally written which entails the turn of phrase—"comprehend the incomprehensible." This alteration aims at preventing readers from drawing the unwarranted inference from such purposeful word combinations as "comprehend the incomprehensible" or "fathom the unfathomable" that what is being argued is that God and his ways are so far beyond humans that they are "ineffable," "unutterable," or "unintelligible." As used throughout this essay, "incomprehensible" and "unfathomable" should not be confused with "ineffabile," "unintelligible," or "unknowable." What is "incomprehensible" or "unfathomable" is accessible to humans and can be known *truthfully* but not *exhaustively*. As used in this essay, what is "unintelligible" or "unknowable" is inaccessible to humans and cannot be known. The deliberate phrasing, "comprehend the incomprehensible," reflects that of the Apostle Paul who prayed that his letter recipients might "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). "Unknowability," "unintelligibility," and "ineffability" find no endorsement from either Paul or Qoheleth. Such notions derive from neither ancient Bible writer but from ancient pagan mystery cults. W. E. Staples actually argued that Qoheleth's use of *hebel* derives from the mystery cults, denoting what is "unfathomable, unknowable, or incomprehensible" ("The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 95-104, esp. 96; see also idem, "Vanity of Vanities," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 [1955]: 141-56, esp. 142). Take note that Staples incorrectly confounds the three terms as synonymous. Distinction of "incomprehensible" and "unfathomable," as Qoheleth's categories, from "ineffability," "unintelligible," or "unknowable" is notable given the dominating view advanced by James Crenshaw and followed in large measure by Tremper Longman III. Longman states, "My understanding of Qohelet's thought is closest to that articulated by James Crenshaw. He identified Qohelet as a prime representative of skepticism in Israel. He argued that Israel's skeptics severed a vital nerve at two distinct junctures. They denied God's goodness if not his very existence, and they portrayed men and women as powerless to acquire essential truth" (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 36). The notion that Qoheleth teaches that essential truth is inaccessible suggests that knowledge of God is "unknowable" if not "unintelligible."

[12]For example, Douglas B. Miller observes, "Because of its crucial use in the book, the approach taken to הבל dramatically shapes the way the entire book is understood. If, for example, the reader takes הבל in 1:2 to indicate 'meaningless' (so NIV), then this appears to be Qohelet's message about all of human experience as well, for then, 'All is meaningless" ("Qohelet's Symbolic Use of הבל," *JBL* 117 [1998]: 437).

[13]For example, Longman states that the debate resides here: "As Qohelet uses the term, and as the frame narrator picks it up and summarizes Qohelet's thought with it, does it signify that 'everything is meaningless' or that 'everything is temporary'" (*Ecclesiastes*, 62).

[14]Both *vanitas* and *mataiotēs* allow for broader senses than the English "vanity" denotes or connotes. *Mataiotēs* signifies "emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness" (*BDAG*, 621). Thus, because the

Greek term entails "transitoriness," it allows for a broader sense.

[15]See D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 630. For a different understanding of *vanitas* as including the sense "unsubstantial or illusory quality," see Robert V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* [*DBSJ*]1(1996): 90. He cites P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 2010.

[16]Concerning the meaning of *hebel*, in an earlier attempt to account for its rich and full nuances in Ecclesiastes, my previous essay was less than successful to avoid unintended ambiguity that invites some confusion that this essay endeavors to correct (see Caneday, "Qoheleth," 35-37. Cf. Shank who states, "an attempt to find a 'static' meaning of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes … fails to take note of the richness of the concept as used by Qoheleth" ("Qoheleth's World and Life View," 66). Among recent works on Ecclesiastes that have chastened and corrected my understanding are three essays in order of impact: (1) Douglas B. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Uses of הבל," *JBL* 117 (1998): 437-54; (2) Graham S. Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *The Bible Translator* 38, no. 3 (1987): 301-07; and (3) Robert V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes," *DBSJ* 1 (1996): 85-112.

[17]"Qoheleth involves the whole reader in an incessant movement of thought as he carefully weaves his various strands of thread into a multiform fabric, fully reflecting this world and life in it. His literary image reflects the harsh realities of this present world as he places side by side contradictory elements to portray the twisted, disjointed and disfigured form of this world (1:15; 7:13) (Caneday, "Qoheleth," 40).

[18]Ibid., 37.

[19]Ibid., 37-38.

[20]Graham Ogden has convincingly argued against the proclivity of English translations and the bent of many scholars that Qoheleth's use of *hebel* does not bear the sense "vanity" ("'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," 301-07.

[21]The prepositional phrase "under the sun" occurs 29 times throughout Ecclesiastes. "Under the sun" means the same as "under heaven" (1:13; 2:3; 31) and "on earth" (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2). Everywhere Qoheleth uses "under the sun" he employs it to describe the sphere where the activities he observes take place; never does he use the phrase, or parallel phrases, to bracket out God and his providential role from his inquiry. The phrases circumscribe the realm of all that Qoheleth observed where God's judgment for human rebellion rules in contrast to that realm over which God's reign knows no opposition (Caneday, "Qoheleth," 26). Cf. H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974): 67.

[22]For example, "Ecclesiastes is the book of man 'under the sun' reasoning about life. The philosophy it sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of the wisest man, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment" (*The New Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1967], 696). It does not suggest that Qoheleth engages in "natural theology" (cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], 42-43). Longman contends that "under the sun," "under heaven," and "on earth" indicate an exclusion of the God of Scripture from all Qoheleth's considerations: "In brief, Qohelet's frequent use of the phrase *under the sun* highlights the restricted scope of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning" (*Ecclesiastes*, 66). To take "under the sun," "under heaven," and "on earth" as "the restricted scope of his inquiry," as describing Qoheleth's belief system, is to misread how Qoheleth actually uses the phrases. Instead of restricting his worldview, the phrases indicate the realm where the activities observed take place, namely, "under heaven," "on the earth." Ecclesiastes 1:13-14 should suffice to make the point obvious that Qoheleth uses the phrases "under heaven" and "under the sun" in parallel as *the restricted sphere of activities he is privileged to observe*, not a bracketing God out of his inquiry.

[23]In Ecclesiastes 1:13 Longman explains that he prefers to translate רע as "evil" because he believes that Qoheleth bears an "acerbic attitude" toward God. Longman thinks that "*evil* is a translation more in keeping with Qohelet's subtle criticism of God throughout the book" (*Ecclesiastes*, 80). Likewise, on 2:17 Longman states, "I believe that Qoheleth here subtly accuses God of moral evil" (p. 100). See also his comments on 5:1, where he claims, "Qoheleth warns his readers to be cautious in approaching God with words because *God is in heaven and you are on earth*. We take this statement not as an assertion of divine power, but of divine distance, perhaps even of indifference" (Ibid., 151).

[24]The expression, "chasing the wind," is reminiscent of "harness the wind," a rather pretentious idiom since wind that fills the sails of ships or turns the blades of mills, though channeled is hardly harnessed, for wind has destroyed many.

[25]Graham Ogden suggests, "What Qoheleth describes is the attempt to bring the wind under control, to make it blow in a certain direction according to the dictates of the shepherd ... a delightful idiomatic phrase for attempting the impossible" (*Qoheleth* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007], 24; idem, *Qoheleth* [JSOT Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987], 21). As such, "shepherding the wind" has its counterpart in the contemporary expression, "herding cats," an idiom for attempting to control the uncontrollable.

[26]See Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; and 6:9. Cf. 1:17, where *hebel* does not occur, and 5:16. Miller observes, "Qohelet does not say that one cannot achieve pleasure, wisdom, or wealth, nor does he say that these things once achieved are necessarily gone quickly. Rather, he sees that people are working hard to achieve pleasure, wisdom, and wealth, but when they have them there is still no 'advantage' (see, e.g., Eccl 2:1-11)" ("Qohelet's Symbolic Use of הבל," 447, n. 37).

[27]In relation to *hebel* the word *ra'* functions like "shepherding the wind." Two patterns are discernible: (1) "all is/was *hebel* and . . ." (a) shepherding the wind (1:14; 2:11, 17), and (b) *ra'* (9:1-3); and (2) "this indeed is/was *hebel* and . . ." (a) shepherding the wind (2:26; 4:4, 16; 6:9), and (b) *ra'* (great evil, 2:21; unhappy business, 4:8; grievous evil, 6:2). See Miller, "Qoheleth's Symbolic Use of הבל," 449-50.

[28]In addition to the Septuagint's uses of *ponēros* in Ecclesiastes, the Masoretic Text uses רָע or רָעָה in 4:4 (*zēlos*) and 7:3 (*kakia*). In some passages the word "evil" has in view "moral evil," as in 8:3, 11, 12 and 12:14, but in the majority of passages, unless one is bent to read Qoheleth pejoratively, the word does not refer to "moral evil" but to God's curse upon his whole creation that intensifies the enigma.

[29]As we address "the problem of evil" we use the word "evil" to include "non-moral evils," calamities that befall humans, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, fires, tornadoes, economic collapses, airplane crashes, car wrecks, etc. Qoheleth also frequently uses the word "evil" in the same way, referring to "non-moral evils." See passages listed above.

[30]Miller, "Qoheleth's Symbolic Use of הבל," 450.

[31]These terms, including *ra'*, are used often in contexts without *hebel*. For example, see 4:1-3; 7:13-14; 8:1-9; 9:11-12; 10:5-7; 10:12-15; 11:1-6; 12:1. See Miller, "Qoheleth's Symbolic Use of הבל," 451, n. 51. On Qoheleth's uses of רָע and רָעָה in this sense of "odious" or "loathsome" and not as "moral evil," see David W. Baker, "רעע," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1154-58. Cf. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 19.

[32]Cf. Miller, "Qoheleth's Symbolic Use of לבה," 451.

[33]The statement above extrapolates Miller's concepts with my own wording preferences. Cf. Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use," 437-54. To "insubstantiality" and "transience," two well recognized figurative referents for *hebel*, Miller adds "foulness" reflecting הער/ער functioning as a synonym for *hebel* (449, more on this subsequently). Instead of "imagery," Miller prefers to identify *hebel* as a "literary symbol" or "image." I prefer to use the word "imagery" when considering the literary realm and "image" concerning the corporeal realm. He states, "Such symbols are well known in Israelite wisdom material as well as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. However, Qohelet did not choose

a symbol used previously in the tradition. He did not employ 'the way,' or 'the tree of life,' nor did he personify a characteristic, as do 'Lady Wisdom' and the 'Woman of Folly' in Proverbs 1-9. Rather, he chose to hold forth הבל a vapor or breath as his primary symbol" (444-45).

[34]Jason DeRouchie brought it to my attention that *hebel* (breath) when spoken entails the initial release of breath aspirating the initial "h" followed by the fricative "v" sound warrants identifying the word as an example of onomatopoeia, a word that sounds out what it represents (DeRouchie, Bethlehem College & Seminary, unpublished lecture notes, 2011). Cf. K. Seybold, "הבל *hebhel,*" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, et al.; trans. John T. Willis, et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:314.

[35]In light of this, it is intriguing to ponder Paul's threefold mention of "groaning" in Romans 8. In 8:22, creation *sustenazō*; in 8:23, believers *stenazō*; and in 8:26, the Spirit *hyperentunchanei stenagmois alalētois*.

[36]As with the Hebrew *hebel*, one may plausibly suggest, as some have, that the English "sigh" also imitates the sound that it identifies, forcing air through a constricted passage.

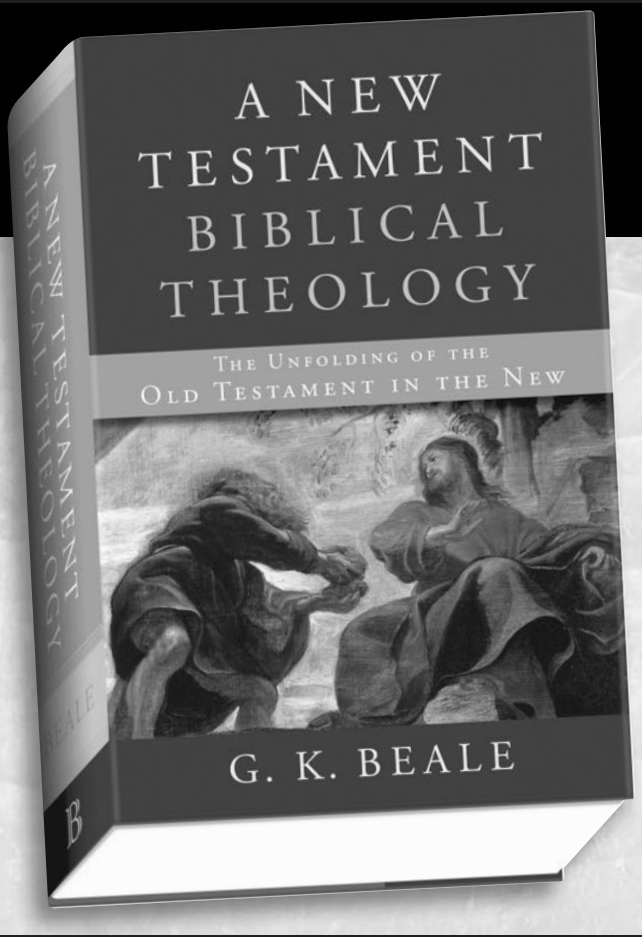
[37]Miller, "Qohelet's Symbolic Use of הבל," 454.

[38]See Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," 306-07.

[39]Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 200. See also Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 16.

[40]Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing Is Better'—Form," *JBL* 98 (1979): 339-50. Cf. *idem*, "Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *Vestus Testamentum* 34 (1984): 27-38.

[41]On One Shepherd, see Jason DeRouchie, "Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for *Breath* in Ecclesiastes," in this volume of *SBJT*.



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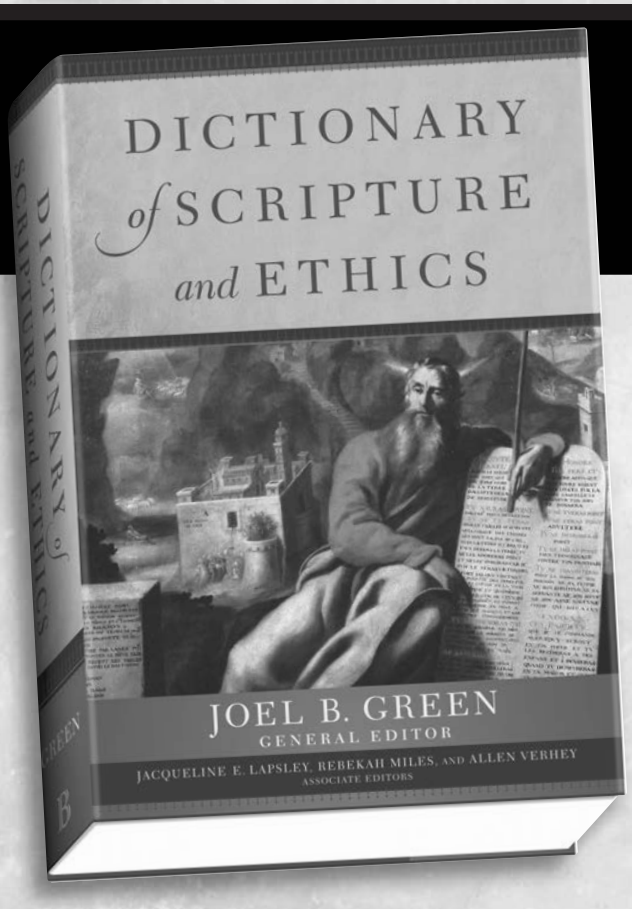

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Wisdom and its Literature in Biblical-Theological Context

Graeme Goldsworthy

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WISDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Every culture, ancient and modern, has developed its own wisdom, and recorded much of it in literature. Such wisdom can be based on human experience from which people learn what is in life and how to deal with it. There are written storehouses of wisdom from many different cultures in which human experiences are crystallized and typically abstracted from their original contexts to become aphorisms which can be applied in new situations that the inheritors of such wisdom think to be apt. This commonality itself constitutes one of the problems of Old Testament wisdom in that the radical distinction between revealed truth in the word of God and human musing and philosophizing seems to break down.

There is enough evidence from the Ancient Near East to support the view that Israel's wisdom was a part of a common human activity of learning about life and seeking to pass on the gathered wisdom to succeeding generations. We have Sumerian and Babylonian wisdom that is far older than anything that is in the Bible. The Egyptians also produced wisdom works, one of which—*Wisdom of Amenemope*—is generally considered to be the origin of part of the Book of Proverbs (Prov 22:17-23:11). There are examples of proverbial wisdom and the longer reflective creations emanating from Babylon and Egypt. Biblical Wisdom, as well as its foreign counterparts, can be more reflective and can be expressed in longer compositions that indicate a less spontaneous origin than the empirical aphorisms and proverbs. Like the Book of Job, reflective wisdom may be the basis of a long and complex composition that addresses some of the great problems of life.

SBJT 15.3 (2011): 42-55.

But, how is Israel's wisdom different? The many parallels to the forms of Israelite wisdom that are found among the compositions of Israel's neighbors may suggest a complete leveling of this phenomenon in the region. Obviously Israel's wisdom had much in common with that of her neighbors, and this is not surprising since they all belonged to the same humanity and lived in the same world. They faced the same matters of personal and social interaction, and they all had to learn to live, as far as possible, in harmony with the environment. When wisdom developed characteristic forms of expression, both oral and written, there may well have been some cross-fertilizing going on between nations. The writer of Kings reports that Solomon's wisdom caused some international excitement. Not only does Solomon surpass the foreigners in wisdom, but they come flocking from lands round about to hear his wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29-34). These interactions, along with Solomon's dialogue with the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-9), indicate that there existed some kind of common idiom and vocabulary. It seems they could talk to each other about what is real in life.

But Solomon's wisdom surpassed that of the people of the East and of Egypt so that he became famous among the nations (1 Kgs 4:30-31). What, then, made his wisdom superior? According to Proverbs 1:7, the basis of Solomon's wisdom was "the fear of the Lord." The aim of this article is to apply a method of biblical theology to the theme of wisdom in the Bible in order to give some understanding of the overall context within which any part of the identifiable wisdom literature falls.

WISDOM IN THE WRITING OF OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGIES

First, a brief survey of how others have handled wisdom as a part of the theology of the Bible is in order. A key player in the so-called American Biblical Theology Movement was George Ernest Wright. There is an oft-quoted statement of his that indicates a problem with the wisdom literature as part of an integrated biblical theology: "In any attempt to outline a discussion of Biblical faith it is the wisdom literature which offers the chief difficulty because it does not fit into the type of faith exhibited in the historic and prophetic literatures."[1] Wright does not deny the important distinctions between wisdom based on the fear of Yahweh and the wisdom of Israel's neighbors, but he nevertheless points to the difficulties created by the dissimilarities between the biblical wisdom books and the narratives involving salvation history along with the prophetic commentaries on the narratives. Since Wright expressed his view, based on his understanding of the nature and the primacy of salvation history, various proposals have been made as to how Wisdom can be understood and accommodated in biblical theology.[2]

In his Tyndale Lecture of 1965, D. A. Hubbard commented: "Of the Old Testament theologies with which our generation has been so abundantly blessed, only von Rad's has sought to do anything like justice to the wisdom movement."[3] A brief and selective survey of some of the Old Testament theologies written since the latter part of the nineteenth century shows something of the range of attitudes to wisdom as a part of the theological contribution of the Hebrew Scriptures.[4] Some of the differences, but not all, reflect differences in presuppositions concerning the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures.

Starting in the latter part of the nineteenth century, we note that Gustave Oehler (1873), a conservative, begins with wisdom as the attribute of God.[5] Although his treatment is relatively short, it is nevertheless an attempt to treat wisdom seriously as part of Old Testament theology. Essentially, wisdom is the subjective aspect of theology which seeks the implications of the Mosaic revelation as applied to the varied aspects of life in the world. It is only indirectly related to covenantal theology. By contrast, Hermann Schultz (1895), who was much more accepting of liberal thinking and was moving to a position of *Religionsgeschichte,* (history of religions) found wisdom of only passing interest with little to say about theology. [6]

After the heyday of *Religionsgeschechte* there was something of a revival of concern for the theology of the Old Testament in contrast to the history of Israel's religious thought. A leader in this was Walther Eichrodt (1933-39).[7] But his intention to describe the diverse aspects of a complex theological unity came unstuck most markedly in his treatment of wisdom. He has less trouble dealing with the overtly theological wisdom than he does with that which must be linked with a general theology of creation if it is to be theologized at all. Ludwig Koehler (1935-36)[8] gave the vague definition of Old Testament theology as the bringing together of ideas, thoughts, and concepts of the Old Testament "which are or can be important."[9] His summary treatment of wisdom suggests that he failed to find the relevant links within the Old Testament that would enable wisdom to be regarded as important.

Among the post-war offerings we have the excellent contribution of Theodorus C. Vriezen, first published in Dutch in 1949.[10] This work follows a basic God-Man-Salvation organization. Vriezen makes a clear distinction between the religion of Israel and the theology of the Old Testament. He is also concerned to see "the message of the Old Testament both in itself and in its relation to the New Testament."[11] Given these promising proposals, Vriezen's treatment of wisdom is disappointingly lean. In an introductory chapter he remarks on the tensions between the books of Job and Ecclesiastes and the eudemonistic trends in the book of Proverbs: tensions that are not resolved but only kept in equilibrium.

One of the most significant treatments of wisdom is found in the work of Gerhard von Rad (1957, 1960).[12] His presuppositions and method were somewhat innovative. He made a distinction between drawing a tolerably objective picture of the religion of Israel and the task of Old Testament theology. He also distinguished between the history of Israel as constructed by the faith of Israel and that recovered by critical scholarship. He found no actual unity in the Old Testament yet he had no real problem with wisdom as a subject on its own. In the section of his theology "Israel before Yahweh (Israel's answer)," and in his later work *Weisheit in Israel* (1970),[13] he gives brilliant analyses of the wisdom literature. But, if he had been content to forego his lengthy defense of the primacy of *Heilsgeschichte* he would not have had to go to such great lengths to justify his attention to wisdom. His awkward distinction between Israel's world of faith and Israel's assertions about Yahweh requires his apologetic for his treatment of Israel's response. Von Rad moved from wisdom as a response to Israel's creeds to wisdom as essentially a different method of theologizing from that of *Heilsgeschichte*. Charles Scobie aptly remarks: "We are left with the impression that von Rad has given us not one Old Testament Theology, but three – one of the historical traditions, one of the prophetic traditions and one of the Wisdom traditions."[14] But Scobie himself seemed at the same time to be looking at two theologies when he commented, "In particular, Wisdom challenges the often-held assumption that revelation in history is all that counts in biblical theology. Wisdom points to an alternate mode of revelation and of salvation."[15]

John L. McKenzie (1974)[16] defines the task of Old Testament theology as "the analysis of an experience through the study of the written record of that experience."[17] The unity of that experience is based on the unity of the group (Israel) and the divine being (Yahweh) that the group believed in. Wisdom then is described as a shared experience with other nations. McKenzie's approach is to describe what is found in biblical wisdom literature. He asserts that the Israelite scribes "affirmed that Yahweh himself was the original and primary wise one, from whom all wisdom was derived and imitated."[18] On the other hand he takes an evolutionary view that sees God-talk as a later aspect of wisdom. Having followed more the approach of tradition history, he points up the unresolved tensions in wisdom without attempting to resolve them. He refers to the attempts at understanding the unanswerable questions—as in Job—as anti-wisdom. By contrast, Bernhard Anderson moves

to a form of the canonical perspective.[19] Following what he refers to as "covenant trajectories,"[20] he includes wisdom in a section named "From Trials of Faith to Horizons of Hope." He is thus able to include the theology of wisdom as an emerging aspect of a theology of creation and order.

Walter Brueggemann, whose Old Testament theology Bernhard Anderson describes as "bipolar," proposes wisdom as complementary to the "core testimony." Thus, he asserts: "I propose, wisdom theology insists that the primary testimony in not everywhere adequate or effective." [21] Paul House, a conservative theologian, follows the unusual route of describing each book of the Old Testament in turn as eloquent of some attribute of God.[22] Thus, God is worth serving (Job), reveals wisdom (Proverbs), and defines meaningful living (Ecclesiastes). House seeks to overcome the potential for fragmentation by including in each chapter sections on the canonical synthesis of the book being treated.

Sidney Greidanus has been a leader in writing about the importance of preaching Christ from the Old Testament. It is pleasing to see that he does not ignore the wisdom literature in this. In fact he meets the subject head-on in an important study on preaching from Ecclesiastes.[23] Of all the wisdom material Qoheleth is surely the most difficult to fit into any simple schema of salvation history. While Greidanus has not produced an Old Testament theology as such, the question of the canonical unity of the Old Testament with the person and work of Christ is central to his work. He appears to agree with my own assessment of wisdom in general that it complements the perspective of salvation history and that it is "a theology of the redeemed man living in the world under God's rule."[24]

That there is great diversity in the wisdom literature and the points of view propounded is obvious. If wisdom is about what life consists of and how one can best live the authentic life, there is also a recognition of the limits of human wisdom and of the mysteries of life that no human wisdom can finally solve. There are at least three variables that affect the way wisdom is incorporated into the writing of biblical theologies: first, the descriptive definition of wisdom and its limits; second, the definition of biblical theology; and third, the method for doing biblical theology including the way a biblical theology is structured. For the purposes of this article I propose a method of doing a thematic study that involves assumptions about the theological nature of the Bible as the word of God, and which seeks to understand wisdom as a theme and a broadly based point of view within the Bible. I suspect that much of the difficulty experienced by many Old Testament theologians in dealing with wisdom is that, whatever their stated Christian presuppositions, their method in practice ignores the fact that wisdom is an essential part of the emerging Christology in the Bible.

If we start with the canon of Scripture, we must ask why the lack of historical narrative in the wisdom literature is seen to be a problem? Why is the assumption often made that the lack of redemptive history as the explicitly stated context of wisdom means that wisdom has some other foundation than the theology of covenant and redemption? From the point of view of a canonical biblical theology the wisdom books are important because they have been recognized by both synagogue and church as part of authoritative Scripture. From the point of view of a Christ-centered biblical theology, they are important because they are part of the Scripture that testifies to Christ. From the point of view of a redemptive-historical reading of biblical theology, they are important because wisdom is recognized as reflecting the overall thinking and worldview of the covenant people living the life of faith from day to day.

WISDOM IN BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

We Start and End with Christ

Christian biblical theology recognizes that the heart of the biblical message is the person and

work of Jesus Christ. The method of doing any kind of thematic biblical theology that I would advocate involves making contact with the theme first of all in relation to Jesus. Thus with the theme of wisdom we might start with some of those references that clearly show some recognition of Jesus as the ultimate wise man of Israel. For example:

> (1) And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).
> (2) The queen of the South . . . came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here (Matt 12:42).
> (3) "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock.... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.... And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. (Matt 7:24, 26, 28-29)
> (4) It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30, NIV).[25]
> (5) [Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

Perhaps the most significant statement of all is Paul's ministry manifesto:

> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:22-24).

Not only is the true locus of God's wisdom found in Christ, and him crucified, but such wisdom shows that all human wisdom is folly when it is not founded on Christ.

That Jesus is the locus of all wisdom is crucial to our investigation. We do not have a wisdom Jesus who is different from a salvation history Jesus. The Christology of wisdom is part of the total Christology of the New Testament.[26] Indeed, on reflection, we could add Wise Man to the traditional Christological offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. It is foundational to evangelical biblical theology that we recognize the unity of Scripture as established in the person and work of Jesus to whom all Scripture testifies. I suggest that we will find links between wisdom and salvation history in the Old Testament that foreshadow their ultimate unity in Christ.

We should be careful not to commit the error of supposing that "wisdom" is a word with a single and narrow semantic field. Does wisdom Christology in the New Testament reflect a connection with the wisdom nuances and conventional forms found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament? That Jesus used parables and proverbs to teach adds to the impression that the New Testament understands one aspect of its Christology to be a fulfillment of the Old Testament wisdom traditions. His conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount employs a typical wisdom contrast of opposites. These are an important feature of Proverbs where wise/righteous and foolish/wicked are constantly compared. The same technique is found in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

Our approach to biblical theology, then, is to search out the Old Testament antecedents to this aspect of Christology. Given that it is Christ who is the wise man who is made to be the wisdom of those who believe, I propose that we start in the Old Testament with antecedents to the messianic office of Jesus—the kings of Israel, particularly David and Solomon. This is an easy transition given that Solomon is predicated as the wise man *par excellence* and is also the covenanted son of David. It will then be necessary to examine the idea of wisdom going back to creation and then forward to the fulfillment in Christ. At the same time we should try to engage in a kind of lateral

thinking to see what other themes link with and enrich the understanding of wisdom.

I am therefore proposing a biblical-theological method in these stages:

> (1) Begin with the Christological clues that surround the person and work of Jesus as Israel's wise man.
> (2) Move back to the most prominent antecedents to this in the Old Testament, in this case in the messianic narratives of Israel's kingship.
> (3) Capitalize on the links between Solomon and the wisdom literature in order to gather criteria for identifying the distinctive characteristics of wisdom theology and literature.
> (4) Identify the antecedents to this in the pre-Solomonic narratives.
> (5) Move forward to identify wisdom theology in the three main stages of revelation, while also making any lateral thematic connections between wisdom and other aspects of biblical theology. The three stages of revelation are: (a) biblical history and especially covenant history from Abraham to its zenith with Solomon; (b) prophetic eschatology as it recapitulates salvation history and predicts its future fulfillment in the Day of the Lord; (c) the fulfillment in Christ of the typology of the previous two stages.[27]

The diagram on page 48 shows the essence of this approach.

David and Solomon

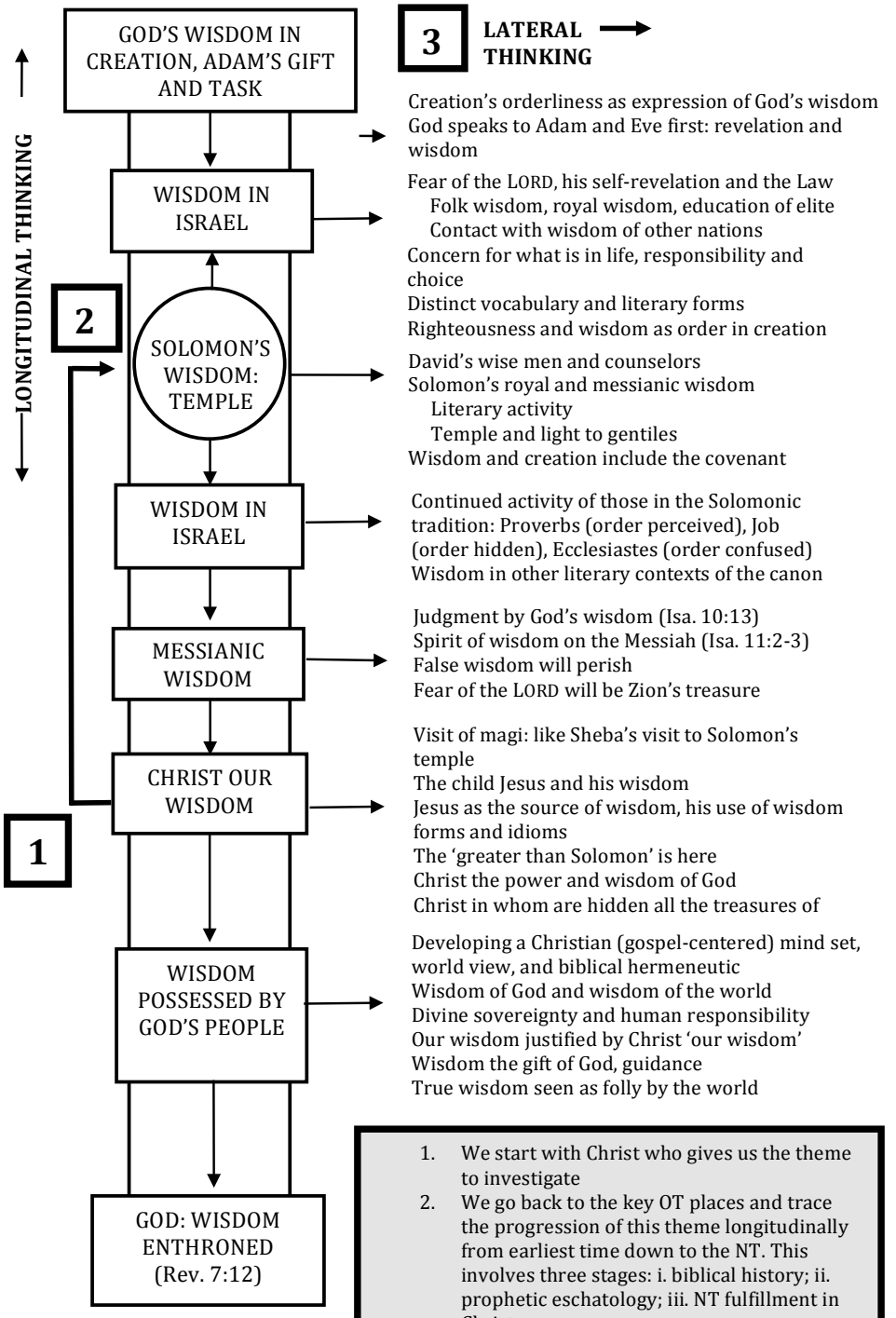
David and Solomon provide the obvious messianic antecedents to the Christology of wisdom. They also form the zenith of covenant grace in the course of the salvation history in the Old Testament. While Solomon has initial pride of place in the narrative accounts of wisdom in Israel, David is not without significance. Thus, while the prophet does not disappear from the scene during David's reign, we find a growing dependence on the counsel of advisors. Alongside of this is the emphasis on one's responsibility to choose what is wise and right. David's encounter with the wise woman of Tekoa indicates that a recognized class of sage was possibly already in existence. While the prophets still maintain their watch over the king and give needed rebukes and advice, there seems to be an increasing reliance on wise counsel for the running of the affairs of state. This is certainly true by the time we have David established as king in Jerusalem. Later texts will suggest that wise men had official recognition.

While wisdom activity continues after Solomon's fall and during the decline of the kingdom, 1 Kings 3-10 represents the high point in wisdom theology in relation to the covenant promises of God. From there we can try to pin down the characteristics that make wisdom an identifiable phenomenon expressed in characteristic genres. This will enable us then to search out the theological antecedents to the wisdom of the wisdom books. At the same time we can look for links between the teachings of wisdom and the more covenant-based parts of the Old Testament. Wisdom, as with any other concept or theme, can be looked at in the three revelatory stages of the biblical history, the prophetic eschatology, and the fulfillment in Christ.

I suggest that the undoubted accuracy of the observations about a lack of covenantal and redemptive history in the wisdom books is not an insurmountable problem. There has been much activity in the scholarly realms to demonstrate that the theological purview of wisdom is creation rather than covenant or redemptive history. It seems hard to argue with this until it is then suggested that somehow the sages of Israel actually were proposing an alternate worldview to that of the salvation history narratives. It is not feasible to suggest that the sages formed some kind of heretical clique that focused on creation, and that eschewed the idea of the covenant and the growing sense of redemptive history.

A good starting point for investigation into the roots of messianic wisdom is the wisdom pericope in 1 Kings 3-10. Some would argue that the Suc-

Exploring the biblical theology of wisdom



cession Narrative (2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kgs 1-2) is closely linked with the wisdom tradition.[28] However, I will concentrate on the texts concerning Solomon and his wisdom. When God appears to Solomon at Gibeon with the invitation "Ask what I shall give you," Solomon's request for an understanding mind so that he can govern his people well is not a spur of the moment brainwave unrelated to anything else. Significantly, he recognizes as his grounds for making such a request the fact that God has made covenant with David and has kept covenant faithfulness (*hesed*) with him. Thus, at the outset Solomon has made the important link between wisdom and covenant.

The next thing we can note in the narrative of 1 Kings 3-4 is the correlation between wisdom and the fulfilling of covenant blessings. The fact that Solomon is to be rewarded with his requested wisdom *and* riches and honor indicates that these latter gifts are not incompatible with wisdom. They epitomize existence in the land of plenty as God's blessing. Solomon's skill in dealing with the problem of the two prostitutes and the baby may seem to us to be a fairly ordinary piece of applied psychology. We are assured, however, that it was not so in those days. The people were in awe of the wisdom of God that was in Solomon (1 Kgs 3:28). Following this event, the list of officials (1 Kgs 4:1-19) sounds more like a telephone directory after the ripping yarn that precedes it! Yet making of lists is evidence of orderly administration and is a common feature of wisdom. The description of Solomon's rule and provisioning of the court are part of the package deal in 3:13.

In 1 Kings 4:20 and 29 the seashore metaphor is applied to the people, as it was in the promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17, and then to Solomon's wisdom. The extent of the land in 4:21 is applied to the extent of Solomon's wisdom in 4:30-31. The covenant blessing of dominion and rest in the land of plenty (4:25) is extended to Solomon's wisdom (4:32-33). "[E]very man under his vine and under his fig tree" is a phrase given eschatological significance in Micah 4:4. This oracle (Mic 4:1-5), which parallels Isaiah 2:2-4, relates to the restoration of the temple and Zion on the Day of the Lord. Solomon's composition of songs and proverbs about nature certainly links with the theme of creation, but so does the covenant promise of a fruitful land. The coming of the nations to Israel in response to Solomon's wisdom echoes the covenant promise which generates the idea of Israel as a light to the nations (Gen 12:3; Deut 4:6; 1 Kgs 4:34). This is followed by the coming of the queen of Sheba and foreshadows the magi's visit to the infant Jesus. In short, we observe that creation and covenant are not disparate perspectives. They are, in fact, inseparable.

The building of the temple is central to Solomon's wisdom, as the King of Tyre recognizes (1 Kgs 5:7, 12). Wisdom attributes are applied to people with practical skills, but it is surely significant that these skills belong to people engaged in constructing both the tabernacle and the temple (Exod 31:3; 1 Kgs 7:13). The account of the queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1-13) acts as a summary and inclusio for the wisdom pericope (1 Kgs 3:3-10:13). But the coming of the Gentiles to the light of Israel is a covenant thing (Gen 12:3; Isa 2:2-4; 42:6; Luke 2:29-32). These testimonies concerning Solomon and his wisdom point to his wisdom patronage that is acknowledged in Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Ecclesiastes 1:1; and Song of Solomon 1:1.[29] The evidence from these books provides the basis for the attempt to define what wisdom is, how it is to be recognized, and how it relates to the larger covenantal perspectives.

A way forward here is to note the vocabulary that is prominent in the wisdom books and narratives, and to observe the literary types that employ or are related to such wisdom words. Proverbs 1:2-5 provides a good list to start with: following the ESV we have wisdom, instruction, insight, wise dealing, righteousness, justice, equity, prudence, knowledge, discretion, learning, guidance. Clearly, some of these belong also to a wider context. Of wisdom forms, Proverbs 1:6 refers to the proverb (*mashal*), the saying (*melitzah*), and riddle (*hidah*).

It is not always clear what these terms refer to, but we can observe forms in Proverbs that establish themselves as typically wisdom. Three main forms are found. First, the single sentence proverbs are the most numerous. These often contain the contrast of opposites, various kinds of parallelism and, in many, the simple juxtaposition of things that go together.[30] Second, the longer instruction typically contains an address and summons to pay attention, exhortations to right behavior, and motive clauses supporting the exhortations. Third, the numerical sayings list things that belong together for reasons that can be brain-teasing, and follow the typical formula *n, n + 1*. Proverbs also contains some longer discourses including the words of Agur (Prov 30), the words of Lemuel (Prov 31:1-9) and the praise of the godly woman (Prov 31:10-31). Wisdom sayings range between short, one-sentence aphorisms to lengthy reflections on the mysteries of life.

The typical wisdom words in their literary contexts enable us to gain some idea of the concerns of wisdom as well as how these concerns were expressed. The theological problem has been seen as the lack of covenantal contexts and absence of salvation historical concerns within the wisdom books and sayings. The suggestion of a context of creation theology has much to commend it, but once again we must avoid assuming that differences between creation and covenant concerns signal separate, even alternative, theological perspectives. There are no grounds for taking God's revelation in nature to be supportive of a natural theology that runs parallel to prophetic revelation. Thus Solomon's wisdom expresses itself in concerns for nature (1 Kgs 4:32-33), as do many of the sayings in Proverbs. But, his wisdom also expresses itself in the building of the temple as the sanctuary of God. There are solid biblical-theological reasons for connecting this sanctuary with God's original sanctuary on Eden as the focus of his good creation. The creation connection is explicitly given in the literature itself, for example in Proverbs 8:22-31. Psalm 104 expresses the greatness of God in his role as Creator, not just at the beginning but also in his ongoing involvement in his creation: "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (Ps 104:24).

The commonality that exists between Israel's wisdom and that of its pagan neighbors is not absolute. Proverbs makes it clear that it is "the fear of Yahweh" that is the source of knowledge and wisdom. This phrase using either the verbal or substantive form of "fear" occurs some seventeen times in Proverbs. Some have wanted to discount the importance of this as a pointer to the covenant faith of the sages. I do not think it can be so easily dismissed. Yahweh is the covenant name of God (Exod 3:13-15). The fear of Yahweh is a phrase used consistently of reverent awe of the God who revealed himself in covenant to Abraham.[31] The least we can say is that the sages worshipped the same God and acknowledged the same covenant relationship as did Moses and David.

Creation

It is suggested by many scholars that the sages focused on a creation theology rather than a covenantal perspective.[32] If, however, W. Zimmerli is correct to view wisdom as an outgrowth of Genesis 1:28,[33] then wisdom cannot be contrasted with covenant. Proposing wisdom and covenant as an either/or suggests a kind of dualism in Israel's theology. If wisdom pays little attention to salvation history, the argument runs that it can still be theologized in the context of creation. But does not biblical theology show that *creation* to *new creation* is the broad framework that embraces the unity of the canon of Scripture? To put it another way, the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 form the presupposition to the theology of the fall, judgment, covenant, election, and salvation in Genesis 3-11 that, in turn, is the presupposition to the theology of covenant in Genesis 12-17, and then to the rest of the Bible. The emphasis on creation has usually gone hand in hand with the idea that the essence of wisdom is the concern for order. This

is an appealing concept and was boosted by comparisons made with wisdom in Israel's neighbors. The Egyptian concept of *Ma'at* is seen as providing a parallel concern for order in the world. There is no real need to go down that path in that it is clear that a sense of God's order pervades not only wisdom but the whole of biblical theology.[34] Roland Murphy has rightly pointed out that the quest for order is not explicit in Israel's wisdom.[35] Order is rather a scholarly construct to try to understand what lies behind wisdom's understanding of life and how to live it.

Solomon's nature concerns (1 Kgs 4:32-33) do suggest a link with the creation. Other themes in the wisdom literature also point in that direction. The six days of creation order the chaos of a formless and void world (Gen 1:2). That God speaks to Adam and Eve giving them a framework for life in the created order links revelation and the affirmation of their humanity subject to what is in essence the fear of the Lord. Eden, the probation, the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life, all have links with wisdom. The personification of wisdom as God's companion in the creation, as expressed in Proverbs 8:22-31, need not be seen as anything more than a poetic expression of the created order as reflecting God's wisdom.

Law and Wisdom

It is true that the virtual identity of law and wisdom is a late development that is given its main expression in Sirach. Roman Catholic scholars thus have in their deutero-canonical literature data which the Protestant canon does not include. We can, however, ask what impulses served this identification. Does the canonical literature give any grounds for this move? The nature of the wisdom literature, especially the empirical wisdom, may be distinguished from the prophetically revealed truth. While Proverbs is not the fine print to Sinai, this distinction does not invite complete separation. The revelation of God was the grounds for the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. Thus, when Moses is about to give the revised version of Sinai to the generation on the verge of entering Canaan, he urges obedience to the laws that God commands:

> Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him (Deut 4:6-7).

While empirical wisdom does not function as the law does, obedience to the law was foundational to Israel's wisdom.

When Stephen describes Moses as "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds," he appears to approve of this upbringing and its outcome (Acts 7:22). Yet it could never be said that Moses succumbed to a pagan mindset for, "he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter" (Heb 11:24). Ultimately the direct word of God would set him on a collision course against the Egyptians, yet his schooling in the royal wisdom schools that prepared young men to rule was obviously not in vain.

Revisiting Solomon

The antecedents to Solomon's wisdom, then, began at the creation of the human race. The word of God created according to God's wisdom. The first word to humans comes from God: he speaks first to give them the context of their existence. God is sovereign but, under his rule he entrusts man with dominion over the creation (Gen 1:28-31). The intellectual adventure of man stems from the cultural mandate to have dominion. After the fall, sinful man pursues this dominion but does so corruptly, and he refuses to acknowledge the ultimate truth of God imprinted in creation (Rom 1:18-23). Wisdom without God is ultimately foolishness (Rom 1:22). The worldview of the serpent was accepted by Adam and Eve and has turned

worldly wisdom into foolishness.

But the redeemed submit to the fear of the Lord; a template for the intellectual task of seeking to know what is in the authentic life and how to cope with its complexities. Practical wisdom at the level of daily life will often agree with godless sagacity. Godless wisdom, however, can never give answers that endure for eternity or point to the heavenly vision founded on God's truth. Wisdom in Israel, with its antecedents going back to the creation of humanity, reaches a high-point with David and Solomon. Why? If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom it is also its goal (Prov 2:1-6). And if the fear of the Lord is linked to the self-revelation of the God of the covenant and of the redemptive history of Israel, then we should not wonder if there is a clear correlation of the two.

To put it another way: David and Solomon mark the zenith of the revelation of the kingdom of God and the way into it in the first typological stage (biblical history). After the events of 1 Kings 10 there is no dimension of salvation or the kingdom that remains to be revealed. As Solomon's apostasy leads inexorably to destruction and exile, the prophets reveal various aspects of the Day of the Lord in which God will bring in his glorious and eternal kingdom while also meting out the ultimate judgment on evil. But the eschatology of the prophets is essentially a recapitulation and glorification of the dimensions of salvation history in Israel up to Solomon and the temple. Thus, the fear of Yahweh is given its fullest meaning at that point, and it is no surprise that wisdom should also have its flowering in this context.

The downside is that Solomon turns away from the fear of the Lord in 1 Kings 11. Was it that the boundary between Israelite and pagan wisdom was crossed as he engages in the very practices that much of Proverbs warns against? Did the commonality of wisdom in the cultural milieu of his day woo Solomon into forgetting the crucial differences between true wisdom and folly? Whatever the answer, it is clear that the covenant with David (2 Sam 7:8-16) figures prominently in the New Testament's consideration of this period. David, not Solomon, is the focus while Solomon barely rates a mention.

Wisdom and Prophetic Eschatology

Two perspectives on wisdom are found in the prophets. On the negative side there is evidence that Solomon was not alone in the degradation of wisdom. The prophets announce the confounding of a false wisdom that seems to have become institutionalized alongside corrupted kingships (Isa 29:13b-14; Jer 8:8-9). On the positive side is the announcement of the new messianic wisdom that will be revealed in the new rule of God's restored kingdom. The messianic figure in Isaiah will be the wonderful counselor.

> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
> and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
> and his name shall be called
> Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
> Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

> There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
> And a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
> And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
> the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
> the Spirit of counsel and might,
> the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord
> (Isa. 11:1-2).

This latter passage describes the coming Davidic scion as one filled with all the attributes of the wise man. His judgments in righteousness (Isa 11:3-5) go together with the renewal of nature (Isa 11:6-9). The wording is very similar to Proverbs 8:12-15 and uses a number of the same technical wisdom terms found in that poem that personifies wisdom.[36] It is difficult to sort out the different nuances of the word righteousness, but it is surely more than an ethical and moral concept. In Proverbs we see righteousness as a virtual synonym for wisdom. Isaiah points to a time when a king will

reign in righteousness (Isa 32:1), a time when fools will no more be called noble (Isa 32:5-6). Then God's Spirit is poured out from on high and justice and righteousness characterize the natural world (Isa 32:15-18). Again the vision is of the Lord's righteous and wise rule:

> The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high;
> he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,
> and he will be the stability of your times,
> abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
> the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure (Isa 33:5-6).

The tendency of some scholars to make a theology of creation to be the presupposition of wisdom, and to regard it as if creation were not integral to the whole covenant and redemptive historical structure of the Bible, is probably not helpful.

I can only mention here one final consideration. Many scholars have sought to identify wisdom influences in non-wisdom books of the Old Testament.[37] Insofar as these considerations are valid they serve to show the ease with which wisdom and other perspectives interacted without difficulty in the thinking of the saints of the Old Testament.

Beginning and Ending with Christ

The Christology of wisdom points to the relationship of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of his trusted creature: man. He is trusted in the sense of being redeemed from sin, dark ignorance, and death, to live once more in fellowship with God and to think, to use his God-given brains, to make decisions, and to act responsibly. Our brief survey of the biblical theology of wisdom has taken us back into the Old Testament antecedents to Christ our wisdom; the one whose word and Spirit is the ground for all true wisdom; the one who, as our wisdom, justifies our failures to think and act wisely in the way that the renewal of our minds demands. In Christ we find ourselves as fellow travelers with the faithful people of God in the Old Testament. Many of them lived their whole lives without ever seeing or hearing a great prophet like Moses or Isaiah; without ever being witness to one of the great signs and wonders of redemptive history; having no contact with God's miraculous deeds other than the recital of these things by their elders and by attending the rituals of the tabernacle or temple. Their lives were lived sometimes in humdrum sameness from day to day; sometimes facing the mysteries of suffering without answers. They sharpened their thinking in much the same way we do by contemplating the wisdom that came to be enshrined in the wisdom books of the canon. Their guiding light in prophetic revelation and the fear of the Lord was but a pale shadow of what we see in Jesus. But, it nevertheless pointed them to their Creator God who established order, judged sin, ruled sovereignly over the world, made them responsible for their actions, established his covenant of grace and salvation with his people, and led them towards the full light of Christ, our wisdom.

ENDNOTES

[1]G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Biblical Theology 8; London: SCM, 1952), 103.

[2]For example: D. A. Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1966): 3-33; R. C. Hill, "The Dimensions of Salvation History in the Wisdom Books," *Scripture: The Quarterly of the Catholic Biblical Association* 19 (1967): 97-106; Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Observations of the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Israelite Wisdom* (ed. in J. Gammie; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978), 44-57; John Goldingay, "The 'Salvation History' Perspective and the 'Wisdom' Perspective Within the Context of Biblical Theology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1979):194-207; Charles H. H. Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (1984): 43-48; Alan W. Jenks, "Theological Presuppositions of Israel's Wisdom Literature," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7, no. 1(1985): 43-75; R. E. Clements, "Wisdom and Old Testament Theology," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A.*

Emerton (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[3]Hubbard, "The Wisdom Movement and Israel's Covenant Faith," 4.

[4]A similar survey is found in Gary V. Smith, "Is There a Place for Job's Wisdom in Old Testament Theology," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 3-6.

[5]G. F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883).

[6]Hermann Schultz, *Old Testament Theology,* (trans. J. A. Paterson; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895).

[7]Walther Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments,* (3 vols.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1933-39).

[8]Ludwig Köhler, *Alttestamentliche Theologie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1935-36). The English translation is *Old Testament Theology* (London/Philadelphia: Lutterworth/Westminster), 1957.

[9]Ibid., 7 (English translation).

[10]T. C. Vriezen, *Hoofdlijnen der Theologie van het Oude Testament* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1949. The English translation is *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

[11]Ibid., 121 (English translation).

[12]Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1957-61). The English translation is *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh/New York: Oliver & Boyd/Harper & Row, 1962-65).

[13]Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970). The English translation is *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972).

[14]Scobie, "The Place of Wisdom in Biblical Theology," 44.

[15]Ibid., 47.

[16]John L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1974).

[17]Ibid., 29.

[18]Ibid., 209.

[19]Bernard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

[20]Ibid., 33.

[21]Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 335. In his *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1972), Brueggemann gives a spirited account of wisdom's world-affirming perspective which, he says, contrasts with the modern church's tendency to be world denying.

[22]Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). William Dumbrell has a similar approach in his *The Faith of Israel: Its Expression in the Books of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

[23]Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ From Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

[24]Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes,* 3-4, quoting Goldsworthy *Gospel and Wisdom,* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), 142. (Greidanus mistakenly references this as from *Gospel and Kingdom.)*

[25]The NIV stands closer to the Greek here than does ESV and is to be preferred.

[26]Wisdom Christology is discussed at some length in chapter six of James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980).

[27]This threefold schema of biblical revelation is the one that I have adopted as, in my opinion, the best way to get at the biblical theological structure of Scripture. I owe my understanding of it to my teacher, Donald Robinson.

[28]R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2* (Studies in Biblical Theology 9 [Second Series]; London: SCM, 1968).

[29]Not everyone agrees that Song of Songs is a wisdom book.

[30]An arrangement that is often obscured in most English translations that provide connectives that are not in the Hebrew.

[31]Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurch im Alten Testament* (*Analectia Biblica* 25; Rome: Papal Biblical Institute, 1965) examines the various nuances of 'The fear of the Lord' in its ethical, cultural, and cultic contexts in Israel.

[32]For example: Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Obersvations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie et al.; Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978); Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972); Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom*

and Creation: The Theology of the Wisdom Literature (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

[33]Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 118.

[34]Thus William Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pursues the notion as key to eschatology. So also H. H. Schmid, *Gerechtichkeit als Weltordnung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968) finds the meaning of "righteousness" in world order.

[35]Murphy, *The Tree of Life,* 115-18.

[36]See my *Gospel and Wisdom,* in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2000), 467.

[37]A useful survey is given in Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). See also the ninth chapter of my *Gospel and Wisdom*.

How to Preach Christ from Ecclesiastes

Sidney Greidanus

INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiastes is arguably the most relevant Bible book for our secular, materialistic culture. It addresses a long list of issues such as ignoring God, irreverent worship, the futility of pursuing pleasure and riches, human autonomy, individualism, the brevity of life and its anomalies, suffering, temptations, cutthroat competition, injustice, poverty, and oppression. It provides preaching texts focusing on fearing God and keeping his commandments, reverently worshiping God in his house, God's decree, judgment, providence, sovereignty, and transcendence, our dependence on God, trusting God, suffering and death, using wisdom, marriage, and work, contentment, cooperating with each other, justice, giving to the poor, the limitations of wisdom, risk taking, living with paradoxes, living with uncertainties, and the meaning and enjoyment of life. The book of Ecclesiastes offers much material by which one may produce powerfully relevant sermons.

But how do we preach Christ from Ecclesiastes? Most evangelicals will agree that Christian preaching is preaching Christ. When the selected preaching text is from the Old Testament, Christian preachers will still seek to preach Christ even as they do justice to the text in its Old Testament setting.

So how shall we preach Christ from the book of Ecclesiastes? In his *Lectures to My Students*, Spurgeon used a wonderfully vivid illustration. He said,

> Don't you know, young man, that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London? So from every text of Scripture there is a road to Christ. And my dear brother, your business is, when you get to a text, to say, now, what is the road to Christ? I have never found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if ever I do find one, I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savor of Christ in it.[1]

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SBJT 15.3 (2011): 56-61.

Not only is there a road to London from every village in England, there are usually several roads one can take. So it is with the ways in which preachers can move from the periphery of the Bible to its center, Jesus Christ.

The most common ways to move from an Old Testament text to Christ in the New Testament are the ways of promise-fulfillment and typology. But Ecclesiastes contains no promise of the coming Messiah, and it has only two possible types of Christ—the figure of "Solomon" in 1:12-2:26 and the "one shepherd" of 12:11. So how does one preach Christ from Ecclesiastes?

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

Jerome and the Church Fathers (and also Spurgeon on occasion) used allegorical interpretation to preach Christ from Ecclesiastes. For example, they understood "There is nothing better than to eat and drink" (Eccl 2:24) as eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper).[2] They interpreted the saying "One will lift the other" (Eccl 4:10) as Jesus lifting the other. They held that "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl 4:12) refers to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Matthew Henry's commentary applies the three-fold cord to a husband and wife who are joined by the Spirit of Christ).[3] The Church Fathers also employed more elaborate allegorical interpretation. For example, the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote about a "little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it.... Now there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city" (Eccl 9:14-15). The little city was understood as the church, the king that besieged it was the devil, and the poor wise man that delivered it was Jesus.

Today we cannot with integrity employ allegorical interpretation to preach Christ.[4] Allegorical interpretation is arbitrary and subjective. It also reads Christ back into the Old Testament (which is eisegesis) and subverts the intention of the biblical author. How, then, shall we preach Christ from Ecclesiastes?

DEFINITION OF PREACHING CHRIST

In researching the issue of preaching Christ from the Old Testament, it struck me that the common definition of "preaching Christ" as preaching the person and/or work of Christ is too narrow for Old Testament wisdom literature. Somewhere along the line we lost the *teaching* of Christ. In modern times this probably happened in the early 1900s when fundamentalists opposed the liberal Social Gospel preachers who emphasized the teachings of the prophets and of Jesus. In (over) reaction, the fundamentalists emphasized the fundamentals of Jesus' person (e.g., Son of God, Savior) and work (e.g., his miracles, atonement, and resurrection). Thus the common definition of preaching Christ became "to preach the person and/or work of Christ."[5] Especially with wisdom literature in mind, I broadened the definition of preaching Christ to, "preaching sermons which authentically integrate the message of the text with the climax of God's revelation in the person, work, and/or *teaching* of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament."[6]

My justification for this expansion was the plain fact that the New Testament highlights the importance of Jesus' teachings. Paul speaks of Jesus as "wisdom from God" (1 Cor 1:24, 30) and claims that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). Jesus himself, the wisdom teacher *par excellence*, said to his disciples, "If you continue in my word [my teaching], you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). Moreover, he commanded his disciples, "Go ... make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..., and *teaching* them to obey everything that *I have commanded you*" (Matt 28:19-20, emphasis mine). John writes, "Everyone who does not abide in the *teaching* of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the *teaching* has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9, emphasis mine).

To preach Christocentric sermons, therefore, we should seek to link the message of the preaching text to Jesus' person, work, or teachings. This

means that analogies between the teachings of Ecclesiastes and those of Jesus may become a major way for preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes.

LEGITIMATE WAYS TO MOVE TO CHRIST

Although not a textbook for biblical hermeneutics, the New Testament hints at seven legitimate ways to move from Old Testament texts to Jesus Christ in the New Testament. These ways are:

> (1) Redemptive-historical progression: following the progression of redemptive history as it moves forward from the text's historical setting to Jesus' first or second coming;
> (2) Promise-fulfillment: showing that the promise of a coming Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus' arrival;
> (3) Typology: moving from an Old Testament type prefiguring Jesus to the antitype, Jesus himself;
> (4) Analogy: noting the similarity between the teaching of the text and that of Jesus;
> (5) Longitudinal themes: tracing a theme of the text through the Old Testament to Jesus in the New Testament;
> (6) New Testament references: moving to New Testament quotations of or allusions to the preaching text or to Jesus' similar teachings; and
> (7) Contrast: noting the contrast between the message of the text and that of Jesus.[7]

To paraphrase Spurgeon, when we have selected a preaching text from the Old Testament, our business is to ask: Now what are the roads to Christ? Usually we will discover that there are several roads to Christ and that we have a choice of which ways to travel. Let me demonstrate concretely how this works.[8]

Ecclesiastes 4:7-16

Suppose we have selected as our preaching text Ecclesiastes 4:7-16. To do justice to the author's intention and also for the strongest link to Christ, we need to determine the theme (the "point" or "big idea") of the text. This preaching text contains three sub-units. The overall structure of the text is a simple chiasm, A–B–A'.

> (A) Anecdote of a solitary rich person whose life is vanity (4:7-8)
> (B) Proverb: "Two are better than one" (4:9-12)
> (A') Anecdote of a popular king whose life is vanity (4:13-16)

The Teacher (the writer of Ecclesiastes) shows that he intends to emphasize B not only by making it the focal point of the chiasm but also by supporting the proverb "two are better than one" with no less than three illustrations. Therefore we can formulate the textual theme of this text as follows: *Since working alone is futile, we ought to cooperate with others.* In view of the three supportive illustrations of this theme, the Teacher's goal is not merely to teach but *to persuade* his readers not to go it alone but to cooperate with others.

A good way to Christ in the New Testament is to use *longitudinal themes* supported by New Testament references. In Eden God declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:18). God created humans as social beings. They are made to work together and help each other. God gave Israel many laws requiring care for the neighbor, the climax being "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). The Teacher echoes this law in Ecclesiastes 4 by calling solitary living "vanity," futile, useless, and by illustrating in three ways that "two are better than one." Jesus acknowledged this wisdom by gathering disciples around him and sending them out "two by two" (Mark 6:7). He also said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20). Jesus also reiterated the love commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39).

One can also follow the way of *analogy* supported by New Testament references. Like the Old Testament Teacher, Jesus urged cooperation with

others. He not only commanded "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39) but also opposed greed—a form of selfishness that isolates us from one another. Jesus warned, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (Matt 6:19). He told the rich man, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Mark 10:21). Jesus' parable of the rich fool is similar to the Teacher's anecdote about the rich man (Eccl 4:7-8). The rich fool also had "ample goods laid up for many years." Apparently, he also had no companion ("second one") with whom to share his wealth, for God said to him, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, *whose* will they be?" (Luke 12:19-20; cf. Eccl 4:8, "For whom am I toiling?"). When a lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan who helped the man who had fallen "into the hands of robbers" (cf. Eccl 4:10). The neighbor was "the one who showed him mercy." Jesus drove his point home with the words, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:29, 37).

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Suppose our preaching text is Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. We must formulate a theme that covers all the points made in this passage: guarding your steps, listening, praying, fulfilling your vow, not calling your vow a mistake, and fearing God. All these components are held together by the theme of worshiping God in his temple. The imperatives "guard" and "fear" imply reverence for God. Therefore, the Teacher's theme can be formulated: *Worship God in his house with reverence!* The imperatives indicate that the Teacher's goal is to *urge* Israel to worship God in his house with reverence.

A good way to Jesus Christ in the New Testament is *analogy* supported by New Testament references. The Teacher urged Israel to worship God in his house with reverence because "God is in heaven, and you on earth." Even though Jesus taught us that God is our Father, he also taught us to remember that God is in heaven: "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven" (Matt 6:9). During his ministry on earth, Jesus also demonstrated his concern for reverent worship in the temple. When he found that the temple courts had been turned into a market place, he "drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple and said, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers'" (Matt 21:12-13).

With this text one can also use *analogies* between details of the Teacher's instructions and those of Jesus. The Teacher exhorts us, "let your words be few," because "God is in heaven, and you upon earth" (Eccl 5:2). Jesus similarly urged us to let our words be few: "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt 6:7-8). Also, as the Teacher instructed Israel to "fear God" (Eccl 5:7), so Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28).

One can also follow the way of *redemptive-historical progression* supported by New Testament references. In Old Testament times people were required to bring their sacrifices (Eccl 5:1) to the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus' coming brought about a major change with respect to the animal sacrifices and the place of worship. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-23). People can now worship the Father wherever they are gathered in Jesus' name (Matt 18:20). When Jesus died, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt 27:51). The way into God's presence was open again. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross ended the need for animal sacrifices once for all. Within forty

years of Jesus' death the temple was destroyed (A.D. 70) and the practice of sacrificing animals at the temple became impossible.

Paul also writes that through Christ Jesus we "have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:18). Hebrews encourages us similarly:

> Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:19-23).

With this passage one can also use the way of *contrast*. The Teacher said, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it" (Eccl 5:4). Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" and "blind guides" for teaching that one need not fulfill all vows (Matt 23:16-22). Jesus said, "Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool.... Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" (Matt 5:33-37).

Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14

Suppose our preaching text is Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:14. We can formulate the theme of this passage as follows: *Since God has sovereignly set the times, in times of adversity people should look for what is relatively good*. The Teacher's goal is *to encourage* suffering people to show their trust in the sovereign God by looking for what is relatively good in times of adversity.

A good way to move to Jesus in the New Testament is *longitudinal themes* supported by New Testament references. The Old Testament sees suffering mostly as God's punishment. Human disobedience resulted in Adam and Eve being driven out of Eden, pain in childbearing, toil to eke out a living, and death (Gen 3:16-19, 23). Suffering was mainly a negative experience for Israel. Yet there was also good in their suffering: God used it to bring Israel back into God's fold (see, e.g., Judg 3:7-30 and Isa 40:1-2). The Teacher also argues that there is a positive aspect to human suffering: people can look for what is relatively good in times of adversity. The New Testament continues this theme. Jesus calls those who suffer "blessed" (Luke 6:20-23), but he provides a different reason from that of the Teacher. Jesus points to the future that awaits: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you *will* laugh" (Luke 6:21, emphasis mine). Peter adds, "But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13).

One can also move to Christ by the way of *contrast*. Since the Teacher thought that death was the end of human life (Eccl 2:15-16; 3:19-21; 9:5), he advised people to look for what is relatively good in times of adversity. By contrast, the New Testament emphasizes that there is life beyond death: "Blessed are you when people hate you ... and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:22-23). Moreover, the Teacher instructs his readers to look for some good in times of adversity—in part because they do not know what the future holds. By contrast, Jesus and the New Testament teach us to look for the good in adversity because of what our future holds: the glory of being part of the perfect kingdom of God (Rom 8:18).

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

We shall use Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 as a final example. The inclusio of verses 1 and 6 ("Send out your bread upon the waters, for ... In the morning sow your seed, for ...") provides a major clue for determining the Teacher's theme which we can formulate as follows: *Since we do not know what God will prosper, use every opportunity to work boldly but wisely*. Noting the Teacher's imperatives, his goal was to *urge* his readers not to be paralyzed by their lack of knowledge but to use every opportunity to

work boldly but wisely.

A good way from this passage to Jesus Christ is *analogy* supported by New Testament references. As the Teacher urged his readers to use every opportunity to work, so Jesus urged his hearers to work diligently. Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). Jesus also told the Parable of the Talents in which the hard-working, risk-taking servants were rewarded while the lazy, play-it-safe servant was punished (Matt 25:14-30). Also, Paul speaks for "the Lord" when he tells the Ephesians: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy" (Eph 4:17, 21, 28).

Another analogy would focus on verse 6: as the Teacher urged his readers to sow their seed both morning and evening, "for you do not know which will prosper," so Jesus told his hearers the Parable of the Sower who sowed the seed liberally (on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil), not knowing which would prosper (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). As Christians we are to sow "the word of the kingdom" (Matt 13:19) extravagantly since we do not know what God will prosper.[9]

CONCLUSION

I encourage pastors to preach one or more series of sermons on this amazingly practical book. The overall title can be "The Gospel of Ecclesiastes." This enigmatic book, which many people write off as too pessimistic, is actually boldly realistic. It is filled with inspired wisdom which through Jesus Christ can speak powerfully to people in our day and age.

ENDNOTES

[1]Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 49.

[2]All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

[3]A three-fold cord is literally a rope with three strands twisted together. It probably alludes "to a well-known ancient Near Eastern proverb concerning the benefits of friendship." Tremper Longman, III, *Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 143.

[4]This statement does not deny that allegorical interpretation is appropriate for allegories, e.g. Eccl 12:3-4.

[5]Although "the work of Christ" could include his teaching, it is usually understood as the work of Christ on the cross for our salvation.

[6]*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 10.

[7]For detailed descriptions of these ways and many examples, see my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 203-77.

[8]For detailed argumentation for the parameters of the following textual units as well as the formulations of themes and goals, see my *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

[9]This is, admittedly, a more focused application than the Teacher had in mind.

Redeeming the "Problem Child": Qoheleth's Message and Place in the Family of Scripture[1]

Brian Borgman

LOVING THE PROBLEM CHILD

My former Hebrew professor, Ron Allen, quipped, "Ecclesiastes is something of a problem child in the family of Scripture."[2] My encounters with this inspired book of wisdom repeatedly verify Dr. Allen's conclusion. Both intrigued and frustrated, I took undergraduate and graduate courses in Old Testament wisdom literature and inevitably focused on Ecclesiastes. Books, articles, introductions and surveys only deepened my intrigue and frustration. My academic pursuit was like trying to unlock one of those cast-iron brain- stimulator puzzles. After years of wrangling with the iron pieces they were still interlocked. For years I stayed away from preaching the enigmatic book of Qoheleth (the Hebrew name for the writer of the book), but then I fell in love. My real love for Qoheleth blossomed when my family and I were on vacation on the Oregon coast. My daughter was just about to start high school (she is now close to finishing college). I was watching her play with her brothers and I was soaking in the joy of being a father, and then it hit me: "It seemed like just a few days ago she was a baby crawling on the floor. Soon she will be married, having children of her own. O how quickly time flies by! Those sweet days of childhood have slipped by with lightning fast speed. How sad! They are almost over." It was a *Qoheleth moment*. In my melancholy I thought that Ecclesiastes might actually help me make sense of this feeling. So I studied the book with great vigor for the next six months. I devoted my spare time to reading Ecclesiastes repeatedly and reading everything I could get my hands on that dealt with this book. The mental puzzle pieces began to unlock. I finally saw that Ecclesiastes is a positive book of divine wisdom that helps us see God and live life. I couldn't wait to preach it.

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DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM CHILD

For many interpreters, the best option for dealing with the problem child of Ecclesiastes is to put him in an orphanage or, at best, a boarding school. Frankly, some of the interpretations of Ecclesiastes sully its claim to inspiration and nullify its value

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and place in the family of Scripture. The *Scofield Reference Bible*, for instance, presents Ecclesiastes simply as worldly wisdom with a non-revelatory worldview. "This is the book of man 'under the sun,' reasoning about life; it is *the best man can do*, with the knowledge that there is a holy God, and that He will bring everything into judgment ... *Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man's.*"[3]

Fee and Stuart present an even less flattering view. They claim,

> Its consistent message [Ecclesiastes] (until the very last verses) is that the reality and finality of death mean that life has no ultimate value ... But this advice has not eternal value ... Why, then, you ask, is it in the Bible at all? The answer is that is it there as a foil, i.e., as a contrast to what the rest of the Bible teaches ... it is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical (not theoretical) atheism produces.[4]

Tremper Longman sees Qoheleth as "clashing with other books of the Bible."[5] He sees the book as representative of skepticism, with a theology that is basically unorthodox. Longman attempts to redeem the book by the supposed orthodox frame narrator, who salvages the book's canonicity by adding 1:1-11 and 12:8-15.[6] Unfortunately, Longman puts this view into a popular format in his book, *Breaking the Idols of Your Heart*.[7] Other interpreters have seen Qoheleth in a more extensive debate with either himself or a secularist.[8] The validity of the debate model seems doubtful, but if it is valid, then it is certainly well-hidden, unlike Paul's debate with his invisible antagonist in parts of Romans. Michael V. Fox comments, "If the author considered it important that we recognize that another person is speaking this or that sentence, he could have let us know. But he does not."[9]

This is by no means an exhaustive survey, but it is sufficient to make the case. It seems that Scofield, Longman, and Fee and Stuart, along with others holding to similar views, do an incredible disservice to the word of God. It even seems fair to say that Scofield ruined this book for a few generations of Christians and preachers. If he was right, what is there to learn? What is there to preach? Certainly Walter Kaiser is correct when he said, "No book of the Bible has been so maligned and yet so misunderstood as the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes."[10]

Not all interpreters opt for the orphanage, but boarding school is a viable alternative. These more "respectful" views focus on some kind of antithesis or dialectic in Qoheleth, which also diminishes the power of the book.[11] These views attempt to get around the enigmatic and troublesome statements. Although I certainly recognize that every interpreter must make sense of the "problem statements," if we simply pigeonhole all of the abrasive, gritty, "unorthodox" sounding statements into the category of some "secularist," then we run the risk of missing the life-changing significance of this book. Ardel Caneday makes this point:

> The suggestion that Qoheleth's book is indicative of a man who wavers between secular and religious perspectives, oscillating to and fro, filled with doubts and perplexities, yet finally arising above them, has no true correspondence to the nature of Qoheleth ... The paradoxical expressions and antithetical observations of God's disparate providence do not find their explanation from some internal struggle in Qoheleth between faith and reason. Nor are they resolved by postulating that they are the result of a dichotomy between sacred and secular perspectives.[12]

I hold that Qoheleth deserves a far more optimistic reading than it commonly receives. This reading does not idealistically nullify or minimize the difficulties of Qoheleth. Rather, this optimism emerges from viewing the book holistically and recognizing the inspired wisdom God offers for wrestling with life as we actually observe and experience it.

REDEEMING THE PROBLEM CHILD

Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature, but not of the classic sort; rather it is of the earthier, grittier sort. It belongs on the side of Psalm 73 and Job, but it has more sauce, more bite, more tang. When we arrive in Ecclesiastes, we cannot jump to the conclusion that the so-called negative perspectives in Qoheleth reflect that of an unbeliever or even a "life without God" perspective. We must see Qoheleth as a wisdom shock jock who despises the easy answers and will not let platitudes cover up the tough things in life. Qoheleth knows full well that life is not predictable. He knows full well the monotony and surprises of reality. He understands that a man has got to know his limitations. But the angst caused by such limitations is consuming and vexing.

Qoheleth's observations are harsh and seemingly depressing, even despairing. His methods raise eyebrows. His wrestling resonates with the deepest recesses of our own minds, where we have thought about these things, but never dared to speak them. But there is a method to his madness, and his instruction is sound and God-centered, although unconventional.[13]

The first thing we can say about Qoheleth's worldview is that he held tenaciously to a realistic view of life. Ecclesiastes is a real book about life: it is earthy, it is painful, and it is honest. "The nauseating newsreel of history develops as a replay of previous troubled times, the persistence of this present evil age, sin in wise and fool, good and bad; the acts and wisdom of God, inscrutably perplexing, an indiscriminating falling of favor and disfavor on bad and good, fool and wise alike."[14]

Life is said to be "Vanity!" "Vanity of vanities!" Life is meaninglessness, futile, a vapor, empty, transient, mysterious, an irony, even absurd. The Hebrew word *hebel* is used 38 times in Qoheleth. It is not used exactly the same way every time it appears. Kaiser identifies the common problem: "Everything gets off on the wrong interpretive foot when *hebel* (of Eccl 1:2, 37) is rendered 'vanity,' 'meaninglessness,' or the like."[15] Here are some general observations on the way Qoheleth used the word:

First, "the verdict of *hebel* is consistently maintained, whether God's involvement with the world is in view at a particular point or not. Belief in God does not relieve the observed and experienced fact of *hebel*."[16] *Hebel* is a constant in life. Faith does not make it disappear. Qoheleth is not going to show us how to escape *hebel*, but how to live with it.

Second, "*hebel* is not simply some brute fact, something which happens to be there without cause of explanation. It is a judgment, a condition imposed on the world, and on human beings in particular, by God."[17] In other words, *hebel* is part of the curse (see Rom 8:20-22). Thus, God is the One who is in ultimate control of *hebel*.

This is where we have to be careful. Many interpreters take the *hebel* sayings and the "under the sun" sayings and immediately equate them to life without God. Caneday is right when he says, "Qoheleth's world and life view was not fashioned according to a natural theology restricted to the affairs of men 'under the sun.'"[18] Certainly the unbelieving worldview is meaningless, but Qoheleth's point is not necessarily to always equate an unbelieving worldview, or life without God, with "under the sun" or *hebel*. The believing worldview obviously has ultimate meaning,[19] but that does not negate the *hebel* that we all observe, experience and grapple with.

In spite of the pervasive presence of *hebel*, God is there. He is there in the midst of the *hebel*. So also does he rule over it. *Hebel* is painful and confusing, and Qoheleth is never anything less than honest about it. Even with his raw honesty, Qoheleth never abandons the beginning of wisdom. In the midst of all of life's pain, uncertainty, ignorance and brevity, there is an unchanging reality that will not, cannot, and should not go away: fear of the Lord. Married to the fear of the Lord is of course faith in the Lord. He is to be feared and trusted. After all, he is sovereign over the *hebel* (Eccl 3:1-9). "It is God who has prescribed the frustrations we find in life."[20]

When Qoheleth *observes* life, he sees the constancy and frustration of *hebel*. When he *instructs* us about life, he points us to God. Fearing and trusting God does not make diminish at all the force of *hebel*, but it gives us a rock to stand on and a viewpoint from which we can actually enjoy this transient life. He shows us that life, with all its mysteries, is a gift to be received and enjoyed.

Qoheleth's worldview and theology stand as a great antidote to nihilism, utopianism, hedonism, and skepticism. The antidote is by no means sourced in an unrealistically optimistic view of life and suffering. He will have none of that. It is rooted in a sovereign God, who remains in control, even when we don't see how. His antidote succeeds where the antidotes of the culture utterly fail.

LEARNING FROM THE PROBLEM CHILD

An outline of the book helps to see the content and method of Qoheleth's instruction.

The *Hebel* of Monotony (1:1-11)
The *Hebel* of Analysis (1:12-18)
The *Hebel* of the Good Life (2:1-11)
The *Hebel* of Death (2:12-17)
The Gift of Life and Labor (2:18-26)
Time, Sovereignty and *Hebel* (3:1-15)
The *Hebel* of Injustice (3:16-22)
The *Hebel* of Oppression (4:1-3)
The *Hebel* of Envy (4:4-6)
The *Hebel* of Loneliness (4:7-12)
The *Hebel* of Politics (4:13-16)
The *Hebel* of Trifling with God (5:1-7)
The *Hebel* of Bureaucracy (5:8-9)
The *Hebel* of Wealth (5:10-20)
The *Hebel* of Prosperity (6:1-12)
Qoheleth's Proverbs I (7:1-14)
Do Not Be Excessively Righteous (7:15-18)
The Limitations of Wisdom and Righteousness (7:19-29)
Honor the King, Fear God and Enjoy Life (8:1-17)
How to *Really* Live Before You Die (9:1-10)
Living With the Frustrations of Life (9:11-18)
Qoheleth's Proverbs II (10:1-20)
Qoheleth on Money Matters (11:1-6)
The Sweetness and *Hebel* of Youth (11:7-10)
The *Hebel* of Old Age (12:1-8)
When All is Said and Done (12:9-14)

Qoheleth is the teacher. He knows that education is not a mechanical process. Good teachers use a variety of methods. The wisest of all teachers, God himself, uses trials and affliction. He employs unfair bosses and difficult family members to teach us about him, ourselves, and life. In the family of Scripture, he uses the problem child of Ecclesiastes, taking a less conventional approach, to teach us to trust him even when life does not make sense and to enjoy this brief, transient life. Qoheleth takes us through some rough terrain to demonstrate that life is a gift to be enjoyed, not an achievement to be hoarded.

Barry Webb sums this up:

> Qoheleth's performance is to be learned from rather than imitated. Ecclesiastes is a garment to wear when we have finished with performance and are ready for work – not with an inflated idea of what we can achieve, but with contentment and confidence, knowing that our times are in God's hands. A pair of overalls, perhaps. A garment for those who are through, once for all, with triumphalism and cant, and are willing to face life as it really is.[21]

Let's take a quick look at one of Qoheleth's crucial lessons, which illustrates this perspective.

> 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 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. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his 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 has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (Eccl 2:18-26).

Here is a vital truth that Qoheleth demands we see before he gives us any hope. If you look at life and think you will find significance and meaning in your labor, you will eventually hate life. If you look at life and think that there are rewards to be earned that will bring happiness and substance, you will eventually hate life. These avenues will be dead ends, inflicting much pain and much insomnia in the process. Qoheleth pulls back the veil a little and gives us insight that can change our lives.

Qoheleth is not bringing in a new view of life, with the "under the sun" limitation being left aside. Qoheleth has not just recently discovered God. He has labored to show us the *hebel* of trying to figure out *hebel*. He sets before us the intuitive view that life is about attainment and profit, and then draws us into his conclusion, "And so I hated life." Right when he hears us mutter, "Amen," he then shows us how he came to have some measure of peace with reality and with the *hebel* of life and labor. Notice his points: (1) There is nothing better (not in an absolute sense) than for a man to enjoy the basics of life, such as eating and drinking; (2) there is nothing better than to look at your labors and be satisfied, as he was in 2:10, seeing that they are good; (3) the reason you can do this is that life and labor are gifts from God. This is counterintuitive. Eating and drinking are gifts, not rewards. Labor is a gift, not a reward. "What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give."[22]

Barry Webb makes the critical observation:

> The possibility of enjoyment returns, significantly, only when the quest for profit is given up altogether (2:22-23), and replaced by the notion of gift. Opportunities to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in one's work, when they come, are not human achievements but divine gifts, and are to be enjoyed as such. They are only palliatives, to be sure, for they too are *hebel,* and will slip from our grip like everything else—but that is no reason to reject them.[23]

We need to understand clearly Qoheleth's thought process up to this point. There is a *hebel* to all of life. It begins with monotony and climaxes with death (1:2-11). So he sets out to try to clear up the *hebel* and find meaning in life. He did this first by wise analysis of the situation. All he got was pain (1:12-18). Then he decided to see if he could find meaning to life in pleasure and personal achievement. Personal achievement and many accomplishments brought him some satisfaction, but they bit him in the end (2:1-11). He looked at life and labor, and their profits and rewards, and as he looked at the quest for meaning in all of that, he hated life because it was still empty (2:12-21). It was as if he filled the bath up with the water of reward and then death pulled the plug. He was looking at life and labor and wanted more out of them than they could give. He then looked at the water in the tub again, not in terms of reward for labor, but as a gift from God. It put the plug back in and allowed him to enjoy it. He knows and we know that death will pull the plug someday, but if our life and labor are gifts then we ought to enjoy them while we can.

Qoheleth then says "For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without him?" (2:25). "The

gift of God does not make this meaninglessness go away; the gift of God makes this vanity enjoyable.... Joy is a crowning gift of God in this meaningless world."[24] Here is the beauty of Qoheleth's discovery. He didn't come up with the cure to *hebel*; he didn't figure out the meaning of life; he simply discovered that you can enjoy the basics of life and even labor when you see that they are gifts from God to be enjoyed. When God is at the center and is acknowledged—not assumed—then there can be true joy in this life. That is true spirituality.

Hebel is for everybody. Saint and sinner alike both are faced with it. God is sovereign over both of them. He is sovereign over the *hebel*. As sovereign, God has given something to believers that he has not given to unbelievers.

> [T]he message here is twofold. God is the One who gives things, and God is the One who gives the power to enjoy things. These are distinct gifts ... just as a can of peaches and a can-opener are distinct gifts. Only the first is given to the unbeliever. The believer is given both, which is simply another way of saying that he is given the capacity for enjoyment.[25]

I take the addition of "This too is vanity and striving after the wind" at the end of 2:26 to mean that even under the sovereign direction of God, life still retains its *hebel* qualities. In other words, even when we come to see life and labor as a gift from God, and even when we come to see that God is sovereign in giving us the capacity to enjoy it, it does not make *hebel* any less *hebel*. The amazing thing is that we have the can of peaches and the can-opener! This is a sweet gift from God in the midst of a short life full of enigmas.

THE PROBLEM CHILD'S PLACE IN THE FAMILY

One of the reasons so many interpreters interpret Qoheleth negatively is because they try to read the New Testament back into Qoheleth and struggle with the fit. Assumptions about Qoheleth's worldview and assumptions about where the dots should be connected between Old Testament and New Testament leave many interpreters believing that we should be ever so thankful for the New Testament, which rescues us from Qoheleth's pessimism. I see it rather differently. I think there is marvelous continuity between Qoheleth and the New Testament. Certainly the New Testament is the deeper, fuller, complete revelation of God in Christ, but the dots connect.

Two Sages: Qoheleth and Christ

It is obvious that Qoheleth is a sage, a wise man. Although the sage did not constitute a messianic office, like prophet, priest, or king, we might be able to talk about the "office" of the sage.[26] He served a function in Israel, dispensing the wisdom that filled in the cracks between the Law and the Prophets. He taught truth, but unlike Torah, his teaching wasn't always black and white. He taught truth, but unlike the Prophets, was not a covenant prosecutor. As a sage, Qoheleth made truth and life intersect, showing on a practical level what it is to be a godly person who fears the Lord in light of the mysteries of life.

When Jesus enters into history, he enters as the long-awaited messiah, which means that he fulfills the offices of prophet, priest, and king. He is the prophet not merely because he is the mouthpiece of Yahweh, but because he is the Word incarnate (John 1:1-14). He is the priest not merely because he intercedes and offers a sacrifice for his people, but because he is the incarnation of the sacrifice. He is both the offerer and offering (Heb 10:10-14). He is the king. He belongs to the royal line of David and of Solomon. What Solomon says of himself in Ecclesiastes 1:1, Jesus could say of himself as well. But just as King Solomon was also the sage Solomon, so King Jesus is also the sage Jesus.

Certainly Jesus is wisdom incarnate (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Jesus grew in wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52). Just as Wisdom cried out and invited people to come to her (Prov 1:20-33), so Jesus invited people to come to Him (Matt 11:28-30). Just as Wisdom

set a banquet and offers her choicest stores to those who would eat (Prov 9:1-6), so Jesus identifies himself as true bread and living water (John 6:35; 4:14) and offers himself to the hungry and thirsty. Just as Wisdom was at the creation the world (Prov 8:12-36), so Jesus is the creator (John 1:3; Col 1:16). Jesus is our wisdom from God. He is more than wisdom personified, He is wisdom incarnate. Wisdom himself taught wisdom.

Jesus taught wisdom in ways that are similar to Qoheleth. "What best recalls his manner of teaching is that of the masters of wisdom in the OT."[27] Jesus however, is no ordinary sage or wisdom teacher, he is the quintessential sage, surpassing even the greatest Old Testament sage, Solomon. It is no incidental reference Jesus makes when he said, "The Queen of the South will rise with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt 12:42). Jesus is like Solomon, but greater than Solomon. He is the greater Son of David and the greater sage.

Because we are so accustomed to the Gospels and not nearly as familiar with Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth's statements still shock us. We have learned to live with and domesticate Jesus' shocking statements, but Qoheleth still catches us off guard. In both method and content, there are some amazing parallels between Qoheleth and Christ.

Qoheleth uses typical wisdom literary devices such as proverbs and metaphors. Jesus uses these same literary devices. His parables, proverbs, and metaphors are strongly reminiscent of wisdom literature in general. But the parallel goes deeper than that. Qoheleth often stated things in abrupt, shocking ways. Jesus does the same. Jesus' language is often filled with jolting imagery, enigma, and hyperbole. Consider the following small selection (I have loosely paraphrased some of them so that they don't sound as familiar and thus so easily dismissed):[28]

- If you do not cut off your hand and pluck out your eye, that is, control your lust, then you will go to Hell (Matt 5:29-30).
- Be crafty and innocent (Matt 10:16).
- Don't wait to bury your father. Let your dead family members bury the dead (Matt 8:22).
- Don't be afraid of people who can kill you; be afraid of God who can kill you and throw you into Hell (Matt 10:28).
- You will go to heaven only if you love me more than your parents (Matt 10:37-38).
- You will not go to heaven if you do not pick up your cross and follow Me (something like saying "electric chair" today) (Matt 10:38).
- Self-interest will kill you (Matt 10:39).
- You are worse than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 11:21-24).
- If you are not on my side you are on the devil's side (Matt 12:30).
- Oppressors of the innocent will be violently drowned (Mark 9:42).
- The master praised the guy who had just ripped him off (Luke 16:8).

Throughout Jesus' teaching there is a steady emphasis on the *hebel* of this life and the futility of living as if this is all that there is (Matt 6:33-34; Luke 12:13-21). Jesus' teaching on wealth parallels Qoheleth's. Jesus' teaching on God parallels Qoheleth's, although Jesus obviously deepens the revelation since he is the revelation of the Father (John 14:9). Jesus' teaching on the final judgment is consistent with Qoheleth's, while again deepening that theme by revealing that he will be the judge. Jesus was not simply repeating Qoheleth, but there are many parallels and no contradictions. What Qoheleth presents to us in bud form, Jesus—the sage of sages—brings to full blossom. Qoheleth covered things not covered by our Lord. Obviously Jesus covered many things not covered by Qoheleth. Nevertheless, there is continuity between the two. This should not surprise us since "the words of the wise are given by one Shepherd" (Eccl 12:14).

Qoheleth and the New Testament

Some people point to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "knowing your toil (labor) is not in vain in the Lord" as conflicting with Qoheleth's message. However, there is no conflict here for the simple reason that (1) the labor or toil that is in view is not the same; (2) the vanity of labor for Qoheleth is always qualified (by motives, goals, or inequities). Qoheleth views labor as the gift of God, although not free from *hebel*. Paul sees laboring in the Lord as something that is not done in vain. Even Paul must have wondered at times at the apparent *hebel* of his labors (Gal 4:19-20; 1 Thess 3:5).

The larger question has to do with the consistency of Qoheleth with the New Testament, especially Paul's teaching. I submit that there are striking similarities between Qoheleth and the New Testament and no inconsistencies. Such things as wealth, *hebel*, the sinfulness of man, the sovereignty of God, and the final judgment all find a New Testament counterpart.

Qoheleth addressed wealth numerous times. Wealth does not solve or mitigate *hebel*. It can be easily lost. It cannot give satisfaction. It can bring misery, although it has temporary advantages and should be used as a gift from God. The apostle has echoes of Qoheleth in his admonition:

> Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplied us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim 6:17-19).

The sinfulness of man is also addressed clearly by Qoheleth (Eccl 7:20, 29). What Qoheleth says resonates with other Old Testament texts and is repeated in the New Testament (Rom 3:10-12, 23). The curse not only affects life as we know it, but it also radically affects our hearts and minds. We are part of the problem, not the solution. Both Testaments establish the same verdict.

Mystery and the sovereignty of God and are also vital themes. In fact, they form immovable planks in Qoheleth's worldview. The sovereignty of God is woven throughout the whole book. At times it is implicit. At other times it is explicit (Eccl 3:1-11; 7:13-14; 9:1). Qoheleth is always careful to remind us that sovereignty and mystery are companions in the knowledge of God. The sovereignty of God is also marbled beautifully throughout the whole Bible. This is obvious since the Bible is primarily a book about God who is sovereign. And yet there are some marvelous passages in the New Testament that speak not only of the absolute sovereignty of God, but also the mystery of his ways (Rom 11:33-36).

Final judgment also plays a major role in Qoheleth's theology (Eccl 3:17; 8:11-13; 11:9; 12:13-14). It is the certain reality of that judgment that keeps *hebel* from driving us insane. Again, it is worth repeating: the whole Bible speaks to the judgment of God, but it is in the New Testament where the Day of the Lord and the final judgment come to their fullest revelation (Rom 2:6-11; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:11-15).

Qoheleth's repeated refrain about life as a gift from God that must be enjoyed is also a New Testament theme. The apostle reiterates this by telling us "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude" (1 Tim 4:4). Furthermore, in a text already quoted, Paul says God "richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17). Moreover, Luke speaks to the way that God "did not leave himself without witness, in that he did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17; cf.1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:23-24).

It is actually the subject of *hebel* that I believe illustrates the organic connection between Qoheleth and New Testament. In Romans 8:19-25, Paul brings *hebel* into an "already and not yet" perspective. The creation itself suffers under the curse of

hebel (Rom 8:20). When God subjected this world to *hebel* ("futility"), he did so in hope. That hope is the gospel itself, first proclaimed in Genesis 3:15—in the midst of the curse itself. What Qoheleth looked forward to, namely that the just God of the universe will right all wrong, now has occurred in the coming and word of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel has arrived. For Qoheleth that light was blurry, but now in the glorious light of Christ, it has come and it shines clearly and brightly (2 Tim 1:10). No doubt, the *hebel*, in the light of the New Testament, still continues as a part of the curse and fallen world; but the fog is lifting and the hope is clear (Rom 8:23-25). Barry Webb states, "The New Testament does not annul the teaching of Ecclesiastes, but (and here is the good news) it does not leave exactly as it is either."[29] This hope is not qualitatively different from Qoheleth's hope. Qoheleth's hope was the black and white outline pictures of a coloring book. The NT brings out the beauty and color and definition of the artfully filled in pages. The artistic fullness is seen through Jesus Christ.

Graeme Goldsworthy states:

> From the New Testament perspective it is true to say that we can know with certainty that confusion and futility are banished by Christ. But until He comes again and all things are renewed, faith in the grace of God must sustain us through many incomprehensible tensions in our experience. The peculiar tension for the Christian is that we know our final goal with its resolution of all ills, but we do not know what tomorrow brings.[30]

CONCLUSION: THANKFUL FOR THE PROBLEM CHILD

Let us revisit a Qoheleth moment. There I stood looking at my kids who are growing up so fast. Life is so short. Soon they will be grown and gone. Qoheleth says to me, "True enough! And if you want to ruin fatherhood and life, then look at them as rewards earned and achievements gained and try to hang on as long and hard as you can.

But if you want to enjoy them, then revel in the fact that they are God's gifts to you and in him you can enjoy them in the fleeting moments that you have with them." God, through his enigmatic sage, requires that we enjoy this life. I find that so liberating. It makes food taste better. It makes a date with your wife sweeter. It makes playing catch with your kids more exciting. It even makes work more satisfying. Life goes better with a Qoheleth worldview.

The problem child of Scripture fits right in his God-appointed place in the family of Scripture. The family of Scripture is diverse. There is no need to Photoshop the problem child to make him look like other family members. His character and features may on the surface make him look like he was adopted, but on closer examination, the family resemblance and DNA are all there.

ENDNOTES

[1]I want to thank my friends Karen Tzaczyk and Jason Ching for their impressive editing skills and excellent suggestions.

[2]Ronald B. Allen, "Seize the Moment: Meaning in Qohelet," (paper presented to the Northwest Section Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, April 1988), 1.

[3]Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 696. (emphasis mine).

[4]Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: 1993), 213-214. We could probably add H. C. Leupold and E. W. Hengstenberg, in their respective commentaries, as holding generally similar views. Leupold basically argues that Qoheleth is viewing life solely apart from revelation. Hengstenberg asserts a post-exilic setting and a Natural Theology. The common thread is a "dichotomy between faith and reason." See H. Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Lifeview" in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 69-70.

[5]Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, (New International Commentary on the Old Testament;

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 30.

[6]Ibid., 32-39.

[7]Tremper Longman and Dan Allender, *Breaking the Idols Your Heart: How to Navigate the Temptations of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007). For a critique, see my review of this book in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 12, no. 1 (2008): 116-18.

[8]Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 91-94.

[9]Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 20.

[10]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 11.

[11]By "antithesis" I mean that Solomon is seen as setting up opposites or contrasts, between faith and reason, or secularism and faith. By "dialectic" I simply mean the method of employing opposing arguments—antitheses—to arrive at certain conclusions. These views of Qoheleth would relegate all difficult sayings to unbelieving, secular, or antagonist viewpoints. Kidner, Eaton, Bridges, and Ferguson represent this view to one degree or another.

[12]Ardel B. Caneday, "Quoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 111.

[13]"Commentators who remove the roadblocks never explain why the author put them there in the first place." Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 14.

[14]M. M. Kline, "Is Qoheleth Unorthodox? A Review Article," *Kerux* 13, no. 3 (1998): 20.

[15]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Promise Plan of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 138.

[16]Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 95-96.

[17]Ibid., 104.

[18]Caneday, "Quoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?,"107.

[19]From a God-centered perspective that sees God as sovereign and wise, this is an obvious conclusion.

[20]Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, 15.

[21]Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 109.

[22]Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, 35.

[23]Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 93-94.

[24]Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2003), 36-37.

[25]Wilson, *Jot at the End of the Tether*, 17.

[26]For an example of one who has made an argument for the "office" of sage, see Graeme Goldsworthy, "Lecture 3: Biblical Theology in the Local Church and Home, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 4 (2008): 40-41.

[27]C. Hassell Bullock, "The Wisdom of God" in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour; New York: Seabury, 1973), 659-60.

[28]I am not claiming that the paraphrase necessarily reflects accurate exegesis. Rather I am trying to capture the impact of the language.

[29]Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 107.

[30](Exeter: Paternoster, 2001), 457.

Sermon: Living All of Life Unto God (Ecclessiastes 1-2)[1]

Lee Tankersley

Does your life have any real purpose and meaning? Can you find any real satisfaction in life? These are the questions that everyone in every part of the world asks at some point. No doubt these questions have haunted our minds as well. Yet they are questions that, as believers, we may be afraid to ask. Maybe we are fearful of asking such questions because we "know" we should not think of them. The man who works 40-50 hours a week at a seemingly inconsequential job wonders if there is purpose. The wife who—over and over each day—changes diapers, does dishes, and keeps her house clean is tempted to ask these questions. Yet we may never ask them out loud because we feel they should not be asked. Then our silence leads us to wonder if we are the only ones thinking about these things.

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There is good news. The Bible asks these questions. Specifically, Ecclesiastes asks and answers the question, "Is there any meaning and purpose in our lives in the midst of a world that (1) will go on without us once we are gone and (2) is filled with so much injustice?" Therefore, if you've been afraid to ask this question, then fear no more; God has asked it for you through the pen of Solomon.

The thought Ecclesiastes asks the question we all ask may make us excited about studying such a book. However excited we may be, once we begin to look at it ourselves, we soon find that it is a very difficult book to understand. We might wonder if Ecclesiastes is anything more than a tirade by the most pessimistic and cynical man who has ever walked on this earth. On top of that, its structure is difficult to discern. The author gives us few clues at how to outline his book. Ecclesiastes is a great blessing to study; it is also a great challenge.

In August of 1527 the plague was wreaking havoc in much of Germany. Out of fear of the plague a great number of students and professors left the university at Wittenberg. Martin Luther, however, continued lecturing to a small group of students who stayed behind. He decided to lecture on Ecclesiastes. By October, Luther wrote, "Solomon the preacher is giving me a hard time, as though he begrudged anyone lecturing on him."[2] I've felt that way at times lately. Ecclesiastes is simply a difficult book to outline and to understand. However, as we dedicate ourselves to this task our labor in studying will be well rewarded.

SBJT 15.3 (2011): 72-77.

Here is what I believe is going on in Ecclesiastes. It appears that Solomon has decided to attempt to understand the purpose and meaning of life from the perspective of the unbeliever. That is to say, he sets out on a mission to understand what can be gained from life, but he limits himself simply to that which is "under the sun." And by "under the sun" he means that which has no reference to God or eternity.[3] Again, he is considering this from the perspective of one who denies the faith, one who is an unbeliever. As he works his way through this journey, however, he pauses three times before his final conclusion to gives us a glimpse of what his final answer is going to look like. And these glimpses along the way show us that apart from God life is simply meaningless and without purpose. We find these glimpses in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; 5:18-20; 8:15; and his final conclusion in 12:13-14.[4] Therefore, in this sermon, we begin the first leg of this four-part journey in attempting to understand if and where there is value and meaning in life.

I believe we will find it helpful as believers because it will drive home the meaninglessness of many things in the world that are tempting to us. I believe we will find this book to be a weapon in our fight against sin. And for the unbeliever, it will answer your questions and doubts about the Christian faith.

So, maybe you're here today and you're not a believer. You no doubt think this is nonsense. Why would we give our lives in devotion to a God we have never seen in hopes of a life after this one that none of us has visited? You no doubt think its a waste even to gather here on Sunday mornings. After all, we are giving up part of a day in which you don't have to work. At least five days of our week are already taken up with work, and now we commit one of our free days to gathering, singing, praying, and hearing someone lecture for the better part of an hour.

So, let us then consider life on your terms. Let us see if your criticism for wasting life holds up when *your* life and practices are the ones scrutinized. What rich meaning and purpose is in life outside of considering God and eternity? What significance is found in life if we only evaluate what we can see with our eyes, what is under the sun? Solomon gives us his answer in this book.

WE CANNOT FIND MEANING IN THIS BASED ONLY ON WHAT WE SEE (1:1-11)

The author begins by identifying himself and then pointing out his thesis: if you look simply under the sun, then life is meaningless. He writes, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (1:1-3).[5]

Then he goes on to point out in verses 4-8 that the earth and its cycles continue even after we die. The world keeps going on without us. Additionally, he notes that there is no true satisfaction for us in the time we are here. He writes:

> A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north; around and around goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing (1:4-8).

There is simply the endless running cycle of things in this earth, and never any real satisfaction and significance. On top of it all off, we forget what has come before us. Therefore, if we think anything is new it is simply evidence of the fact that we forget those who have come before us and what they have achieved. Again, Solomon writes, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and

there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us. There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after us" (1:9-11).

The first reality that we should see if we try to find meaning, purpose, or value of our lives apart from God and eternity is that our lives will soon be forgotten among the coming generations. If you hope to find meaning for life under the sun, then the devastating reality is that you will one day be forgotten.

This past winter my wife and I were home visiting my parents when my dad talked me into cleaning out a storage shed with him. It was cold and dirty, and the job consisted of throwing broken chairs and other similar items into a landfill. It was not necessarily memorable work, but I don't think I will ever forget it. The reason I'll remember that day is because of the conversation my dad and I had while we were hurling these items into the ground. After we started loading the stuff up to haul off, my dad told me that he had paid to keep this storage shed and the stuff in it for something like twelve years. He had paid quite a bit of money to do that, and now we were throwing it away. He had paid a large sum of cash to store for years what we were now calling trash. I asked the obvious question, "Why?"

My dad's first answer was that it took him that long to convince someone to come help him throw it away. But his more serious answer was that these items belonged to his family from generations back. Some of the chairs we were throwing away had been handmade by his grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather. He pointed to items that he remembered sitting in his house when he was growing up. He remembered vaguely a few stories that his mother would tell about how they were made. Then my dad said, "I've held on to these things for a long time because of stories I cannot even remember and because of connections with people my children don't even know. And some day somebody will be throwing away my junk that was held onto by someone else, and they won't even know who I am."

And you know what? He's right. Yet when I heard my dad say that, I almost wanted to convince him that we should stop loading this stuff up, put it back in the storage bin, and start making payments again. But he and I both knew that there would be no purpose to that.

This is exactly the point that Solomon is making. If all you bank on for hope and meaning in this life is that which is under the sun, then you need to realize that life will move on just fine when you are gone, and eventually you will be forgotten. My failure to recall even the names of those relatives my dad mentioned that day is evidence of the fact. Even the deaths of the most famous people of a given generation, though making headline news for days or weeks thereafter, are forgotten in time.

So, if you think that you can find meaning, purpose, and value in this life alone, then, Solomon tells us, you need to take off your rose-colored glasses. But if you think Solomon is drawing a conclusion that he does not have the authority to declare, then he points out his qualifications for making this statement in the next section of text.

SEEKING EVERYTHING THE WORLD VALUES WILL ONLY BRING EMPTINESS (1:12-2:23)

In 1:12-2:11 Solomon gives us his qualifications for being able to say this. First of all, he is someone who was among the wealthiest and most powerful persons in the world and as such had the ability and resources to undertake this quest to find out what life means. He writes,

> I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

> What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow (1:12-18).

He was king, and he applied himself to this question of the meaning, purpose, and value of life. He used his means to observe life. He gained more wisdom and knowledge than all who had come before him, and he realized that the lack of the world being able to provide purpose and meaning is a reality that cannot be changed. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted (1:15). The more wisdom and knowledge he gained, the more his troubles and sorrows increased.

No doubt you have experienced this as well. Simply growing older brings realizations of greater problems and greater needs. Your troubles increase. Thus, Solomon points out that he is qualified to make this statement, and his statement still stands. Seeking everything this world has to offer is vanity; it only brings emptiness.

And in case we think he simply did not experience the greatest joys in this world or the highest degree of luxury available, Solomon shows us that his wealth and privilege makes even present-day millionaire socialites pale in comparison.

Solomon describes his experience at length:

> I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the children of man. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (2:1-11).

Solomon had all the riches one could desire. He sought out the greatest pleasure he could imagine. He withheld nothing from himself that his eyes desired. He built homes, cultivated lush gardens, and accumulated every object one could desire. The things you might be tempted to covet, he had he had in abundance. And then he declares that he considered all that he had done in seeking out these things, and he found that it was vanity. It brought only emptiness. It was like chasing after the wind. There was nothing lasting to be gained in it.

But we might say, if he sought things with more reward than simply riches, or music, or possessions, then he might find real meaning, purpose, and value in life. So, Solomon says that he considered wisdom and folly. After all, is there anything higher in life than wisdom? And Solomon acknowledges that indeed: "There is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in

his head, but the fool walks in darkness" (2:13-14). However, if you are just considering this life and what is under the sun, then Solomon points out that the same thing happens to the wise person and the foolish person. They both die. There is no enduring remembrance of the wise person over the foolish person. Eventually, both are forgotten. So, Solomon says, "I hated life, because of what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and striving after the wind" (2:17).

But what about leaving a legacy behind for those following you? That is a way to guarantee lasting purpose, meaning, and value to your life, it would seem. But Solomon points out that though you may leave all you have to one after you, you have no idea whether that person will be a fool or wise. You have no control, and eventually your possessions may be put to foolish use. Or they may simply be thrown in a landfill.

So, if we are honest, we must admit that Solomon is right. Yes, it's a pessimistic view, but is that not because it is realistic? We all will die eventually. The world will go on without us. Our possessions will pass on to another. And all of our labor in this life will have no lasting value if this life is all there is. Solomon then is right—life is vanity.

Is there, then, any hope, purpose, meaning, and value to life? Yes. Lest we become too discouraged, Solomon directs us "above the sun" for a moment to hint at his conclusion.

LIVING UNTO GOD BRINGS MEANING AND PURPOSE (2:24-26)

Solomon gives us his first conclusion in his journey, writing,

> There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, this too 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 has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (2:24-26).

Solomon says that what you should do in this life is to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in your labor. "But how" we might ask, "if all is ultimately meaningless?" Solomon answers, by telling us this is a gift we can have only from God's hand . That is to say, we should live and find joy in what we do, but we will only have joy when we consider all things in relation to God, for The only way to find real meaning, purpose, and joy in life is to realize that everything we have comes from God, and that God is working all things for his eternal purposes.

If we seek meaning through gaining all that our heart desires in this life, we will find it vanity. However, if we see all of life as a gift from God, realize everything we do is being used by him to fulfill his ultimate purposes and plans, and see everything we do as something done to God's glory, then we will find meaning in life, and then spend eternity with one beyond the sun.

Therefore, may we see Solomon's first conclusion as an exhortation for the unbeliever to stop looking for meaning in this life alone and look instead to the God who made this world and sent his Son to die and be raised from the dead that we may have eternal life. Submit to God and infuse meaning into everything you do, even the mundane things, realizing that they can be done to the glory of God.

As for believers, let us: (1) recognize everything we have as a gift from God and everything we do as a means for God to fulfill his ultimate plans; (2) use this message as a weapon to fight against the temptation to focus our hopes and joys in things that are passing; and (3) take this good news that there is hope beyond what our eyes see to a world that needs desperately to bow the knee to Christ.

That day when my dad and I were cleaning out the storage unit, I found a cane that belonged to my grandpa. I kept it. I kept it not because I need a cane or value that piece of wood. I kept it so that one day I can tell my children that this cane

belonged to their great grandpa. But I will not follow that by telling them that he was a man who had great earthly riches—for he had very little. I will not tell them that he was a man of great education—for he did not even finish high school. But I will tell them that his life had eternal value because he believed the gospel, labored to serve God, taught his children the Scripture, and lived his life unto the glory of the Lord. Because of that, it was natural for him to teach his son the gospel. And it was because of his son, my dad, that my children now have a dad who believes the gospel and teaches them to believe as well. I will one day show my children that cane and tell them about a man who knew that there was more to life than what he could see under the sun and therefore placed his faith in the one who reigns above the sun.

ENDNOTES

[1]This sermon was originally preached at Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, Tennessee, on June 25, 2006. Slight modifications have been made for this present manuscript.

[2]Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521-1530* (trans. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 564-65.

[3]Tremper Longman writes, "In brief, Qohelet's frequent use of the phrase *under the* sun highlights the restricted scope of his inquiry. His worldview does not allow him to take a transcendent yet immanent God into consideration in his quest for meaning." Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 66. Similarly, see Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 288.

[4]Thus, the outline of the book of Ecclesiastes as I understand it is: 1-2; 3-5; 6:1-8:15; and 8:16-12:14. Similarly, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 21; Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms,* 285-384 (although Estes separates the prologue and epilogue in his outline).

[5]All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Book Reviews

A Sword between the Sexes? C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates. By Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010, 264 pp., $22.00 paper.

The September 8, 1947, issue of *TIME* magazine ran a cover story on C. S. Lewis—one he judged to be "ghastly," mainly because it said he disliked women. He retorted that he never disliked any group of people *per se*, commenting, "I wouldn't hang a dog on a journalist's evidence myself."

Journalists aside, feminist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen is prepared to hang the early Lewis as a misogynist on the evidence of his writings—particularly *That Hideous Strength*, where the Christ figure urges a woman to choose motherhood over an academic career, and *Mere Christianity*, where the husband is declared the better party to execute the family's "foreign policy":

> [H]e always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to outsiders. A woman is primarily fighting for her own children against the rest of the world.... She is the special trustee of their interests. The function of the husband is to see that this natural preference is not given its head. He has the last word in order to protect other people from the intense family patriotism of the wife (29).

These and other passages drive Van Leeuwen to join Dorothy Sayers in the judgment that Lewis has written "'shocking nonsense' about women" (127). His sin, by Van Leeuwen's account, is that he was an essentialist and a hierarchicalist; he said that men and women had significantly different natures and that the difference better suited the men to lead.

But Van Leeuwen is pleased to contend that Lewis "repudiated" this stance in later years, and that, throughout his professional life, in his dealing with female students, colleagues, and visitors to his home, he was "a better man than his theories." Even when he opposed the ordination of Anglican women on grounds of dissonance with God's masculinity ("Priestesses in the Church?"), he granted that women were "no less capable than men of piety, zeal, learning, and whatever seem[ed] necessary for the pastoral office," for a woman was not "necessarily or even probably less holy or less charitable or stupider than a man" (48).

But the smoking gun that showed he'd done in his old "misogynist" self appeared in *A Grief Observed*, after the loss of his spouse to cancer:

> A good wife contains so many persons in herself.... What was [Joy] not to me? She was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign, and always,

> holding all these in solution, my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow soldier. My mistress, but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have had good ones) has ever been to me. Solomon calls his bride Sister. Could a woman be a complete wife unless, for a moment, in one particular mood, a man felt almost inclined to call her Brother? (10)

This poetic reflection accords nicely with an observation he offered in *The Discarded Image*: "There is, hidden or flaunted, a sword between the sexes [cf. the reviewed book's title] till an entire marriage reconciles them" (56). Thus we see Lewis freed from his "previous tendencies toward misogyny as a crude cover for the scars of an early-wounded, and in some ways insecure, man" (56), or so concludes Van Leeuwen, whose "formal training is in academic psychology" (13).

How did such a remarkable man as C. S. Lewis become so broken and confused in the first place? Van Leeuwen advances a variety of factors—the loss of his mother when he was nine, which, according to friend Ruth Pitter, "must have seemed like a black betrayal" (103); his youth in Edwardian times, an age which groomed girls for adornment and domesticity, rather than economic self-sufficiency" (91); the contentiousness of Janie Moore, for whom he became a "lifelong fictive son" after the death of her real son in WWI (99, 102).

It was not surprising then that he got gender concepts wrong, especially since he was a bachelor into his 50s, working within the predominately male world of elite academic leisure. (You can hear the echo of those who claim the Pope has no business "pontificating" on contraception or the unmarried Bill Gothard on child-raising.) But his heart and language became more tender through the years as his understanding of and appreciation for women grew.

Van Leeuwen would have been wise to leave it at something like that, happy to get on base with a walk or a single. But she insists on swinging for the fences—and fails.

For one thing, she's determined to show that the findings of empirical psychology can trump traditional readings of the Bible, and she uses Lewis as a foil. The poor man was leery of the social sciences, regarding much of what they offered as "either intellectually vacuous or potentially dehumanizing" (164). Though he shows traces of Freud and Jung in his thinking (30), his bondage to Cartesian dualism kept him from appreciating the sort of "bell curve" and "standard deviation from the mean" work that Van Leeuwen favors. He just couldn't let go of the conviction that soul and body were radically different entities and that it was absurd to attach equally the label "science" both to the study of thoughts and synapses.

To help matters, Van Leeuwen devotes a chapter ("Men Are from Earth, Women Are from Earth") to show how her science works effectively to embarrass the gender essentialists. She cites studies, traces refinements of those studies, and offers critiques of various studies to block whatever strategies the traditionalists might use to differentiate the sexes psychologically—whether through talk of averages, optimality, or thresholds. But the complexities she rehearses are dismaying, and the contradictory tides of thought she tracks can strengthen the impression that the social sciences are a very messy affair, in a different league from those disciplines served by Bernoulli and Mendel, Watson and Crick.

Granted, the table she supplies ("Some Effect Sizes … from Various Meta-Analyses of Studies of Sex Difference") is mathematically crisp, with men at a 2.18 standard deviation over women on "throwing velocity" and at .87 on "desires many sex partners." I suppose those are simple enough to measure: Just watch men and women hurl baseballs and ask them about the promiscuity of their hearts (though even here, they might be prone to tweak their answers to sound good). But when the study comes to "moral reasoning," where women score somewhat higher on "'care' orientation" and men on "'justice' orientation," I have to ask, what

counts as "care" and "justice"? (Even the chart puts these words in scare quotes.) Is "tough love" care? Does justice require that you turn your own child in to the police if you catch him shoplifting? Ethicists strive mightily over these notions, and I'm not confident that Van Leeuwen and her psychology colleagues are equipped to analyze successfully shades of moral reasoning down to the ".28s" and the ".19s" (181).

Then there is the problem of assigning "negligibility" to difference-scores lower than .20. When Van Leeuwen seeks in the next chapter to demonstrate that Lewis was right regarding the evils of divorce, she draws on an even smaller, more negligible, difference between the well being of children from broken and unbroken homes (at least according to one study). But here, we must take the "negligible" difference seriously, for we need to distinguish "statistical significance" from "practical significance" (209-10). Accordingly, she says that we should ignore "negligible" gender differences because they can be used for discrimination but should respond to the "negligible" child-impact differences because they can be used, like medical data (say, concerning the effects of second-hand smoke in the home), to protect kids from harm.

But what if the shoe were on the other foot? What if we found that grade-school teachers favored girls over boys because of "negligible" differences in their behavior patterns, the boys being slightly more inclined to squirm in the classroom or engage in "rough and tumble" on the playground? Would our anti-discrimination spirit drive us to count respect for that difference "practically significant"? And would our sense of justice reel at the sight of a judge who handled divorcees roughly despite psychologists's testimony that the impact on their kids was "statistically negligible"? In other words, judgments of "negligibility" and "significance" can be more ideological than clinical, and Van Leeuwen's priorities are clear.

Of course, the standard retort is *tu quoque*—"You, too." After all, the biblical complementarian has her own priorities, which can color her assessment of the data. But this is not a matter of moral equivalence. For what one makes of the Bible is decisive, and, on this matter, Van Leeuwen falls behind.

She does speak of "biblical wisdom" and notes that, at Pentecost, Peter quotes Joel on women prophesying. But this book sits very lightly on the Bible when at all. And she seems squeamish over biblical inerrancy, which she stereotypes and marginalizes—in mocking the "biblical positivist" who said that "novels are all lies" (26); in assuring us that "the Bible is not primarily a 'flat book' of doctrines and rules but a cumulative, God-directed narrative whose successive acts … comprise a continuing, cosmic drama in which all persons are players" (27); in disparaging a "docetic view of the Bible … that ignores the human side of its composition and treats its inspiration almost as a matter of divine dictation by God" (257).

When Van Leeuwen does get to textual specifics, the results can be odd, as when she declares, "Lewis made no appeal to the Gospels to defend his theory of gender archetypes and gender hierarchy, for the simple reason that there is nothing clearly there to draw on." One would think she would at least take the trouble to comment on Jesus' stipulation that God be called "Father" in the Lord's Prayer, as well as on Jesus' repeated use of the title, "Father" in his own prayer and teaching. But she is impatient with anything that smacks of a "patriarchal reading" (168), so attention to the Gospels's ubiquitous "Father" talk may be irrelevant in her system.

In that connection, I wish she had also spent time on clearing up the gender "confusions" generated by such passages as 1 Corinthians 11:14-15 (on the matter of unisex hair styles), 1 Peter 3:7 (concerning the "weaker vessel"), and Proverbs 31 (which describes the ideal wife, not the ideal generic spouse). Of course, feminists have crafted their rejoinders, but it would have been natural and useful to see Van Leeuwen's treatment of them in a book one endorser calls "magisterial."

I think it might sharpen our view of her project to use biblical archaeology as an analogue. Biblical inerrantists appreciate the work of archaeologists, many of whom are themselves inerrantists. We celebrate discoveries that help bring the text to life—inscriptions, implements, ash-laden strata, etc. But when the professor returns from his dig to announce that David was a fiction or that nothing horrendous happened at Ai, the believer simply says, "Keep looking, you missed something." We know the Bible is true, and if a journal article contradicts it, the journal article is wrong. Archaeology is good, but not so good as to put Scripture in doubt.

Similarly, the Christian has no use for psychological, sociological, or anthropological attempts to supplant or to qualify into triviality the biblical teaching on human nature and conduct. When Margaret Mead announced in *Coming of Age in Samoa* that adultery was innocuous and happily accommodated by these gentle islanders, the church didn't have to rethink its ethic, apologizing for its puritanical hang-ups. The people of God just knew that she was confused and/or devious in her work, both of which proved to be the case with Mead.

On the other hand, when such social scientists as Paul Amato, Bruce Keith, Elizabeth Marquardt, and Andrew Cherlin, all of whom she cites, trace the baleful effects of divorce on children, the Christian community can nod and say, "Surely they're on to something." This isn't inconsistency; it's deference to Scripture.

But Van Leeuwen risks the reverse. She thinks she knows what is "statistically significant," and if the traditional reading of a passage contradicts her social science, then she tells the biblical exegete, "Keep looking, you missed something." Alternatively, if she finds interpreters who serve her psychological conclusions (such as that gender differences are ephemeral), she will encourage them right along.

For Van Leeuwen, terms like "manliness" and "womanliness" are fingernails on the blackboard, and certainly, as Lewis once observed, talk of a "man's man" and a "woman's woman" can be off-putting (164). (After reading this section of the book in the Seoul airport, I saw a newsstand issue of *Esquire* bearing the cover question, "What is a man?" along with an article title, "How to be a Man." I was frustrated to discover the inside text was in Korean, though I did recognize a photo of Clint Eastwood.) But to suggest that the psychological and expectational distinction between men and women is nothing more than a cultural construct is to cross a bridge too far.

Nevertheless, she storms on across, urging us to use "gender" more as a verb than as a noun; "[G]endering is something we are responsibly and flexibly called to do more than to be" (70). Furthermore, "God is not 'for' androgyny or 'for' gender complementarity. God is for just and loving relationships between men and women—and because of this, we may be called to 'do gender' differently at different times and in different places" (188).

Van Leeuwen goes on to say this will work itself out variously in different cultures, whether to serve "nomadic herding," "nineteenth century family farming," or life in the "twenty-first-century post-industrial city" (188-89).

At this point, she acknowledges that some would find her approach "too loose and relativistic" or susceptible to the "polymorphously perverse," but she assures us that "experience does not allow us to make too many wrong turnings" (189).

Oh?

Then, she U-turns abruptly to announce, "Empirical social science and biblical wisdom have also begun to converge on other aspects of gender relations" (189)—which prove, in the next chapter, to be divorce and parenting. She made a similar move earlier in the book when she jumped from the awkward topic of Christ-male headship in Ephesians 5 to disputing the Father's eternal headship over Christ, a matter she found more congenial.

Back to Van Leeuwen's flirtation with the "polymorphously perverse." I think she has set herself up to accommodate homosexuality. Elsewhere,

she carefully hedges her language on the topic, as when she writes, "egalitarians hope to defend themselves against accusations of moving toward what is perceived as an unbiblical acceptance of homosexuality" (170). So is this alleged moving simply a matter of perception? Or is there a properly "biblical acceptance of homosexuality"? What is she saying? And it is fair to ask whether she is really prepared to rebuke those who are "gendering" their way into same-sex relationships.

There is really no way to tell where one will end up when rejecting essentialism. Sartre pictured the possibilities when he cast existentialism against ancient notions of a given human nature, using the now-famous paper-cutter illustration. The tool's "essence precedes its existence." That is to say, its design is set before it appears on the office supply store shelf. But, in contrast, man comes into existence before his essence is established. It is his job to shape his nature, and in doing this, he is not answerable to any external guidelines or authorities, neither can he find comfort in them. This makes him responsible, but for what?

This is not a happy philosophical path to take on gender issues. For one thing, it forsakes the clear teaching of Romans 1:26-27, which speaks of *natural*, gender-specific sexuality. For another, it makes Jesus' apocalyptic title "King of Kings" in Revelation 19:16 seem arbitrary, pointlessly offensive, and/or a toss-up. It could have just as easily been "Queen of Queens," since masculinity and femininity are just what we make of them, with nothing essential to it.

It is interesting to read Van Leeuwen's epistemological caveats, and then follow her performance. She cautions, "research in neither the biological nor the social sciences can resolve the nature/nurture controversy regarding gender-related psychological traits and behaviors in humans" (171). So "any conclusions about male and female 'essences'—biological or metaphysical—are purely speculative" (174). Nevertheless, she goes right ahead and rejects essentialism, much as methodological naturalists in the sciences become metaphysical naturalists in their philosophy.

She cautions against the "The Drunk under the Lamp Post" syndrome (he dropped his keys outside the tavern up the block, but he is looking for them under the lamp post "because that's where the light is") (191), and argues that Lewis was something of a drunk in searching for the truth on gender in the light cast by classical, medieval, and Renaissance literature. But it is fair to say Van Leeuwen undertakes her own search in light of the feminist agenda and hermeneutic.

In its favor, the book is packed full of information, often in generous footnotes, including one in which Van Leeuwen expresses disappointment at N. T. Wright's statement that Lewis's assignment of the family's "foreign policy" to the husband is "worth pondering deeply" (182). Along the way, the reader picks up such interesting tidbits as that Hannah Moore of the Clapham sect refused to encourage literacy among her poor Sunday School pupils (87); that Dorothy Sayers had a child out of wedlock (96); that Lewis never learned to drive (127), that he shared some of Chesterton's and Belloc's fondness of "distributivism"—"a kind of 'third way' between capitalism and socialism" (147), and that he was unknowingly indebted to Oxford colleague Helen Gardner for stepping aside when he reconsidered the offer of a chair at Cambridge (128).

The quotes can be arresting, too, as when Lewis observed, "The Greeks [sinned] in owning slaves and [in] their contempt for labor"; when, regarding apologetics, Lewis said, "[W]e expose ourselves to the recoil from our own shots; for if I may trust my personal experience, no doctrine is, for the moment, dimmer to the eye of faith than that which a man has just successfully defended" (122); when Lewis Smedes explained, "It is simple to make an idol. Just slice one piece of reality off from the whole and expect miracles from it" (28); when Dorothy Sayers wrote (not very inspiringly, in my estimation), "I do not know what women *as* women want, but as human beings they want, my good men, exactly what you

want yourselves: interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet" (106).

Van Leeuwen also provides some useful short takes on the philosophical writings of Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and G. E. M. Anscombe, as well as a look at competing schools of thought in the social sciences (the functionalists vs. the Marxists in sociology; the psychoanalysts vs. the behaviorists vs. the humanists in psychology). Her report on the Anscombe/Lewis Socratic Club debate is instructive.

The book supplies a useful collection of Lewis's complementarian writings, and Van Leeuwen may unwittingly broaden the Lewis fan base in this connection, encouraging fresh or first-time reading of *The Four Loves*, *That Hideous Strength*, *The Great Divorce*, *Surprised by Joy*, and *Perelandra*, as well as *Mere Christianity*, which she finds particularly galling since it seems to place complementarianism among the Christian basics.

Throughout the book, Van Leeuwen would have done better to shy away from such rhetorical infelicities as false dichotomy (e.g., the consistent complementarian vs. the gentleman); argument from silence (e.g., "Lewis never suggested to her that [continuing to teach after becoming a mother] is an inappropriate choice" (118); and excessive hedging (e.g., "Lewis effectively retracted …" [29]; "there is evidence to suggest" [77]; "with a distinct nod toward" [61]).

After all is said and done, it is still not clear that Lewis "repudiated" his earlier complementarian, essentialist, hierarchical views. (John Steinbeck did not become a vegetarian when he wrote on the nutritional wonders of beans in *Tortilla Flat*; and no, I am not comparing women to beans.)

Of course, the big question is not whether Lewis moderated and even rejected his earlier views on women, but whether, if he did so, he did the right thing. We are all familiar with pastors who became more liberal on one subject or another the older they got, and in some cases the change was disappointing; where they used to stand firm in the truth, they went wobbly. Perhaps a biblical teaching hit too close to home. Perhaps they just tired of conflict. All this is understandable, but it does not impact the truth of things. Neither does Van Leeuwen's biographical and psychological sketch work.

Early on, Van Leeuwen speaks of a colleague who lamented "the 3:16 bait-and-switch." Here, the preacher evangelizes the woman with John 3:16, only to drop Genesis 3:16 on her ("your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you") once she is in the fold, victimizing her by his "crude proof texting" (32-33).

From what I read in *A Sword between the Sexes?*, the feminist offense may well extend to 2 Timothy *3:16* ("All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness"); to 2 Peter *3:16* (which recognizes scriptural authority in Paul's writings); and perhaps to James *3:16* (which warns against envy and selfish ambition).

Hard words? Yes. But Van Leeuwen could use a taste of her own medicine.

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The Human Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When It Gets God Wrong (and Why Inerrancy Tries to Hide It). By Thom Stark. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011, xx + 248 pp., $29.00 paper.

It is no secret that some of the most fervid theological liberals tend to be former evangelicals. Evangelical-turned-agnostic Bart Ehrman has vindicated that truism with books like *Misquoting Jesus* and *Jesus Interrupted*, both of which seek to discredit biblical inerrancy by popularizing critical studies of Scripture. Thom Stark describes himself as a former fundamentalist, and his book *The Human Faces of God* belongs to the Ehrman-genre, though with at least one significant differ-

ence. Despite the Bible's many deficiencies, Stark wants to retain the Bible's privileged place as Christian Scripture. Even though Stark views the Bible as shot through with error and contradiction, he nevertheless thinks that it is an important book. "This Holy Bible is also my book because I continue to choose it. For everything I loathe about it, there is at least one thing I love about it: it has the power to show me who I am. When we look into the looking glass we see the aspirations, desires, insecurities, and utter obliviousness of humanity" (242). For Stark, the errors and foibles of the Bible are a reflection of the fallen human condition, and that rings true with him.

Stark makes no claim to be breaking new ground in *The Human Faces of God*. He does not aim "to advance knowledge within academic circles"; rather, he intends to reach a "wide audience" through the popularization of well-worn arguments (xvii). From the start, Stark has *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (CSBI) from 1978 in his crosshairs: "This book is an argument against that doctrine, particularly as articulated by the Chicago Statement, and it is an argument in favor of a different, more ancient way of reading the books that comprise the Bible" (xvi). Stark hopes his book will speak to Christians who struggle with biblical inerrancy and who have not found answers to their questions about the Bible. Stark wants them to know an "alternative way of being Christian"—a way that vehemently rejects the Bible as inerrant (xviii).

Through ten chapters, Stark makes his case. Chapter one contends that the Bible is "an argument against itself" and is hopelessly self-contradictory (1). Chapter two asserts that "inerrantists do not exist" in reality because of their inconsistent use of an historical-grammatical hermeneutic (which is required by the *Chicago Statement*). Chapter three adduces examples of biblical texts that would undermine "basic tenets of fundamentalist theology" if those texts were interpreted properly. Chapter four argues that the "theological unity" of Scripture founders on the observation that many Old Testament authors were polytheists (85). Chapter five attempts to demonstrate the moral inferiority of the Bible by showing that the authors believed in the "nobility and efficacy of human sacrifice" (99). Chapter six highlights "Yahweh's Genocides" in the Old Testament and concludes that God never commanded such things as the conquest of Canaan. Chapter seven argues that the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 is a fictitious "hero-worshiping legend" that appears in Scripture as a kind of "government propaganda" aimed at buttressing the Davidic dynasty (159). Chapter eight takes aim at Jesus himself and says that if the Gospels are right then Jesus was "ignorant" and "wrong" about the timing of the final judgment (160). Chapter nine dismisses three hermeneutical approaches that have the effect of glossing over Scripture's theological and moral deficiencies: allegorical readings, canonical readings, and subversive readings. Finally, chapter ten consists of Stark's constructive proposal for reading the Bible in a way that allows Christians to retain the Bible as their Scripture.

It is in this final chapter that the futility of Stark's quest comes into full view. After nine chapters of attacking the historical, theological, and moral authority of the Bible, he thinks he can offer a way of reading the Bible that will preserve it as Christian Scripture for the church. Since the biblical text taken on its own terms has an "evil," "devilish nature" that reveals God to be a "genocidal dictator" (218, 219), Stark argues that the only way to read the Bible faithfully is to read it as "condemned texts." It will be useful to read Stark's prescribed hermeneutic in his own words: "*[The Bible] must be read as scripture, precisely as condemned texts. Their status as condemned is exactly their scriptural value. That they are condemned is what they reveal to us about God.* The texts themselves depict God as a genocidal dictator, as a craver of blood. But we must condemn them in our engagement with them" (218). Stark anticipates an objection: If the texts deserve censure, then why pay attention to them at all, much

less give them some kind of authoritative, canonical status? He answers:

> To do so is to hide from ourselves a potent reminder of the worst part of ourselves. Scripture is a mirror. It mirrors humanity, because it is as much the product of human beings as it is the product of the divine.... It mirrors our best and worst possible selves. It shows us who we can be, both good and evil, and everything in between. *To cut the condemned texts out of the canon would be to shatter that mirror.* It would be to hide from ourselves our very own capacity to become what we most loathe. It would be to lie to ourselves about what we are capable of. It would be to doom ourselves to repeat history (218-19).

So Stark says that the church must appropriate Scripture's regulative authority in two ways: one, it must face head-on the Bible's moral and theological deficiencies, and two, reject for its own life the negative examples in the Bible. In other words, the church should learn to shun the evil ways of the God of Scripture.

Stark gives several illustrations of how his hermeneutic works out in practice. Since Scripture reveals that both polytheism and monotheism underwrite ideologies of slavery, war, genocide, and racism, the church must reject both polytheism and monotheism. Instead, Christians should embrace a new "conception of the divine nature"—one that recognizes its non-trinitarian "plurality" (221). Since Scripture affirms the nobility of human sacrifice, Christians should recognize their own evil propensity for human sacrifice. Once again in Stark's own words,

> Yet we continue to offer our own children on the altar of homeland security, sending them off to die in ambiguous wars, based on the irrational belief that by being violent we can protect ourselves from violence. We refer to our children's deaths as "sacrifices" which are necessary for the preservation of democracy and free trade. The market is our temple and must be protected at all costs. Thus, like King Mesha, we make "sacrifices" in order to ensure the victory of capitalism over socialism, the victory of consumerism over terrorism (222).

Stark goes on from here to apply his hermeneutic to biblical texts about genocide, Jesus' failed prophecies, etc.

This is a learned book that is well acquainted with critical biblical scholarship. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, *The Human Faces of God* does not deliver on what it promises. Stark attempts to offer both a convincing case against inerrancy *and* a viable, alternative way of reading the Bible as Christian Scripture. He fails at both aims.

None of the arguments that he offers against inerrancy are new (as he himself acknowledges on page xvii), yet he treats his interpretation of the material as if it were the settled scholarly consensus. He promises to pay inerrantists the "deep respect of extensively engaging their arguments" (xvii) and then neglects to interact with leading scholars who have defended inerrancy over the last thirty to forty years. For example, Stark lodges extensive complaints against New Testament authors' use of the Old Testament (19-20, 29), yet he has not one word of interaction with the work of Greg Beale or other inerrantists who have done extensive work in typology. Stark dismisses out of hand the notion that inerrancy is the established position of the church (17, 32), yet he has not one scintilla of interaction with John Woodbridge's work (nor does he cite the Rogers and McKim proposal). I daresay that there is not a single objection to inerrancy that he raises that has not already been ably answered in the relevant literature. Yet Stark goes right on as if his case is the only one to be made.

I could multiply examples in which Stark trots out old objections that have already been answered, but I will limit myself to just one. In an attempt to show that inerrantists do not really accept the Bible's literal sense, he appeals to 1 Tim-

othy 2:12-14 and the fact that many inerrantists allegedly reject Paul's teaching that women are "inherently more susceptible to deception" (16-17). Stark says that "the most common strategy to explain away this blatant misogyny" is to impose a distinction between the cultural and the universal (41). For Stark, this is prima facie evidence that inerrantists cannot accept what the Bible really teaches and that they do not practice the hermeneutic that the *Chicago Statement* preaches. Yet anyone familiar with the literature knows that this is not the "most common strategy" used by inerrantists in dealing with this text. Stark appears oblivious to the work of Doug Moo, Tom Schreiner, and many others who argue on exegetical grounds that the prohibition on female teachers has to do with the order of creation, not with the relative gullibility of women.

Not only does Stark fail to produce a convincing argument against inerrancy, he also fails to offer a viable alternative. His proposal to read the Bible as a "condemned" text is clever but transparently bogus. It is a little bit like asking an abused wife to admire her abusive husband because of the "mirror" he provides into her own corruption. It is patently absurd, and I doubt that very many actual churchgoers will be compelled to respect the Bible as "scripture" based on the mountain of deficiencies that Stark alleges. If anything, Stark has given readers more reasons to give up on the Bible altogether.

In the end—even though he does not say so in so many words—Stark himself has given up on the Bible. He confesses that he rejects monotheism and the substitutionary atonement of Christ and that he is not in any sense an orthodox Christian (242). We have to conclude that Stark's approach is less a reading of Scripture than it is a raging against it. Stark loathes the God of the Bible and filters out any depiction of God in Scripture that does not fit into the Stark moral universe. Stark stands over Scripture as its judge. Indeed, his hermeneutic requires it. And he wants readers to join him in his cynical scrutiny of the Bible. The shortcomings of *The Human Faces of God*, however, are extensive and serious, and there are more than enough reasons for readers not to follow Stark down the dead-end trail that he is walking.

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Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith. Edited by Roger Allen and Shawkat M. Toorawa. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011, xviii + 177 pp., $20.00 paper.

In *Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith*, Roger Allen, of the University of Pennsylvania, and Shawkat M. Toorawa, of Cornell University, succeed in producing a helpful introduction to Islam. Allen and Toorawa bring together an authoritative collection of fifteen essays written by experts in their fields covering what they "deemed to be the most important aspects of Islam for a contemporary North American reader" (xiii). The essays range from foundational topics like the Qur'an, Muhammad, and Shari'a Law to topics of interest especially for a North American readership like "Women and Islam" and "Islam in America." The essays are short in length, yet are packed with the most salient information on the topic at hand, similar to articles in specialized encyclopedias or dictionaries of Islam.

The essays for the most part present an accurate and balanced portrayal of Muslim belief and practice. However, the reader should note that there are occasional apologetic comments, either in defense of Islam in general or of a progressive form of Islam. For example, Homayra Ziad criticizes the traditional role of women in Muslim societies and blames what she deems as misogynist beliefs and practices on culture, inauthentic *hadith* (110), and even biblical influence (109). Readers should be aware that the form of Islam advocated in a few of the essays stands in contrast to what is generally found in the Muslim world. However, this

perceived intent to defend Islam against critics or against traditional forms of Islam does not detract from the overall balance, accuracy, and trustworthiness of the collection of essays.

In spite of the overall usefulness of the book, the collection of essays has one glaring weakness. In their preface, Allen and Toorawa state that they chose the essays based on what they saw as the most important aspects of Islam for a North American audience. In light of world events in the last decade, the one issue that a "contemporary North American reader" wants to know about is Islamic extremism and terrorism. Is Islam a religion of peace or violence? Are Muslim terrorists being faithful to Islam or are they perverting Islam? It seems that these are the types of questions most North Americans reading an introduction to Islam would like answered. Though Allen and Toorawa recognize in their preface that there are other areas they could have covered (xiii), their omission of such an important topic is a major weakness of the book.

To conclude, Allen and Toorawa's, *Islam: A Short Guide to the Faith* would be a useful text to those researching specific topics addressed in the book. However, because only a limited number of topics are addressed, this introduction needs to be supplemented with other introductions to Islam that provide a broader and more cohesive picture of the faith. Readers could turn to John L. Esposito's, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford) or Daniel Brown's, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Wiley-Blackwell). For an introduction to Islam from an evangelical perspective, readers could turn to Colin Chapman's, *Cross and Crescent* (IVP), which also addresses theological and missiological concerns.

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The Apologetics Study Bible for Students (HCSB). Edited by Sean McDowell. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2009, xxx + 1,408 pp., $29.99.

Declining church attendance among high school graduates coupled with a rapidly growing secularism in the academy could leave a church leader with a sense of hopelessness. These challenges, however, should be faced with neither pseudo-intellectualism nor second-rate science, but with the gospel itself—for, according to Romans 1:16-17, the gospel alone provides the power of God unto salvation. In the face of, for example, the bravado of the new atheist regime, high school students may be tempted to doubt the salvific and explanatory power of the gospel. But the gospel alone is able to convert the sinner and convince the skeptic.

This is what distinguishes *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students (HCSB)* from a standalone book on apologetic issues. Instead of a separate work responding to Christianity's objectors, Holman Bible Publishers has provided a quality study Bible that integrates apologetics and study notes for the reader's convenience, personal growth, and witness. In combining a readable translation with substantive articles on apologetics, this study Bible allows students to see a more holistic picture of a biblical witness.

The nearly fifty contributing authors respond to the most perennial questions related to the truthfulness of the Bible and the authenticity of the Christian faith. Students access these resources through—in addition to the articles and study notes mentioned above—quotes, personal stories, and bullet-point lists found throughout the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

That said, the advanced student of apologetics may find some of the articles to be a bit facile. Similarly, due to the space allotted for apologetics resources, some readers may desire more in-depth textual commentary. While a key strength of this work is its diverse contributors, readers will recog-

nize related limitations such as a lack of a cohesive theological framework or a consistent approach to apologetics (evidential or presuppositional).

The image of the thinking man carved of stone is used throughout this study Bible's pages, which provides perhaps a helpful analogy. Contemporarily known as the "The Thinker," this icon was originally part of a larger work commissioned for an art museum in France. The artist Auguste Rodin created the piece to resemble Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The Thinker represents Dante at the gates of hell, contemplating the destiny of men and women beneath him.

May pondering the reality of an eternal hell—a horrifying thought—serve as apologetic impetus for those reading *The Apologetics Study Bible for Students (HCSB)*, a Bible I recommend as an invaluable resource for students who are passionate about standing strong in the faith, making an impact in the broader culture, and reaching their fellow classmates.

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The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach. By Michael R. Licona. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010, 718 pp., $40.00 paper.

The affirmation of biblical inerrancy is nothing more, and nothing less, than the affirmation of the Bible's total truthfulness and trustworthiness. The assertion of the Bible's inerrancy—that the Bible is "free from all falsehood or mistake"—is an essential safeguard for the Bible's authority as the very Word of God in written form. The reason for this should be clear: to affirm anything short of inerrancy is to allow that the Bible does contain falsehoods or mistakes.

Lamentably, the issue of biblical inerrancy has been and remains an issue of some controversy within evangelicalism. Addressing this crisis, a group of leading evangelicals met in Chicago in 1978 under the auspices of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy to adopt what became known as *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.

The opening words of that statement set the issue clearly:

> *The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.*

Those who affirm biblical inerrancy understand this affirmation to be essential, not just to the question of the Bible's perfection as the Word of God, but also to the question of evangelical consistency. Thus, the Evangelical Theological Society requires an affirmation of inerrancy for membership, and it has adopted the *Chicago Statement* as the guiding definition of that requirement.

The question of biblical inerrancy has recently arisen in connection with a book written by Michael R. Licona and published by InterVarsity Press last year. Licona is a well-known evangelical apologist who has served as Research Professor of New Testament at Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, and, until recently, on the staff of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is based in Atlanta.

Licona's book in question, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, is both massive and important. Furthermore, it is virtually unprecedented in terms of evangelical scholarship. The 700-page volume is nothing less than a masterful defense of the historicity of the bodily

resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Licona is a gifted scholar who has done what other evangelical scholars have not yet done—he has gone right into the arena of modern historiographical research to do comprehensive battle with those who reject the historical nature of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

And Licona does so with remarkable skill and great erudition. He also writes with a commendable and quite transparent intellectual honesty. This is a very serious scholar making a very serious case for the fact that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead—and that this event is historically documented and accessible to the modern historian.

When Licona affirms the resurrection as a historical fact, he uses the definition of Richard Evans, who has argued that a historical fact is "something that happened and that historians attempt to 'discover' through verification procedures." Licona denies that the resurrection is inaccessible to the modern historian, and he asserts with confidence the fact that historians who deny the historical nature of the resurrection are simply operating out of their own ideological preconception that such things simply do not happen.

In making his case, Licona demonstrates his knowledge of modern historiography, the philosophy of history, and the work of modern historians. He confronts head-on the arguments against the historicity of the resurrection put forth by scholars ranging from Bart Ehrman and Gerd Ludemann to John Dominic Crossan.

In taking on Crossan, Licona documents Crossan's straightforward denial that the resurrection can be a historical event. Crossan operates out of a naturalistic worldview that precludes belief in anything supernatural, such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Crossan, a veteran of the infamous "Jesus Seminar" that sought to remove all supernatural elements from the New Testament, asserts that the body of Jesus remained in the tomb, where it decomposed and was eventually consumed by scavengers.

Licona offers a powerful rebuttal to Crossan, demonstrating, first of all, that Crossan operates out of a worldview that simply denies that a resurrection can happen. Licona takes Crossan's arguments and, one by one, he answers them convincingly. Along the way, he documents Crossan's own anti-supernatural ideological commitments and his use of psychohistory to explain the experience of the disciples.

But, even as Licona dissects arguments against the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact, he then makes a shocking and disastrous argument of his own. Writing about Matthew 27:51-54, Licona suggests that he finds material that is not to be understood as historical fact.

The text reads:

> And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:51-54, *English Standard Version*)

The issue of greatest concern with regard to Licona's own argument is how he deals with Matthew's report that "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."

Earlier in his book, Licona had suggested that some of the biblical material might be "poetic language or legend at certain points," specifically mentioning Matthew 27:51-54 as an example.

That statement is deeply troubling, but when he turns his full attention to Matthew 27:51-54, his argument takes a turn for the worse. He refers to "that strange little text in Matthew 27:52-53, where upon Jesus' death the dead saints are raised

and walk into the city of Jerusalem."

Licona then refers to various classical parallels in ancient literature and to the Bible's use of apocalyptic language and, after his historical survey, states: "it seems to me that an understanding of the language in Matthew 27:52-53 as 'special effects' with eschatological Jewish texts and thought in mind is most plausible."

Special effects? Licona then writes: "There is further support for this interpretation. If the tombs opened and the saints being raised upon Jesus' death was not strange enough, Matthew adds that they did not come out of their tombs until *after* Jesus' resurrection. What were they doing between Friday afternoon and early Sunday morning? Were they standing in the now open doorways of their tombs and waiting?"

This is a very troubling argument. First of all, if we ever accept the fact that we are to explain what anyone in the Bible was doing when the Bible does not tell us, we enter into a trap of interpretive catastrophe. We are accountable for what the Bible tells us, not what it does not.

Licona eventually writes, "It seems best to regard this difficult text in Matthew as a poetic device added to communicate that the Son of God had died and that impending judgment awaited Israel."

He even seems to catch himself at this point, conceding that if the raising of these saints, along with Matthew's other reported phenomena, is a poetic device, "we may rightly ask whether Jesus' resurrection is not more of the same."

This is exactly the right question, and Licona's proposed answers to his own question are disappointing in the extreme. In his treatment of this passage, Licona has handed the enemies of the resurrection of Jesus Christ a powerful weapon—the concession that some of the material reported by Matthew in the very chapter in which he reports the resurrection of Christ simply did not happen and should be understood as merely "poetic device" and "special effects."

This past summer, evangelical philosopher Norman Geisler addressed two open letters to Michael Licona, charging him with violating the inerrancy of Scripture in making his argument about Matthew 27:52-53. Licona, Geisler argued, had "dehistoricized" the biblical text. As Geisler made clear, this was a direct violation of biblical inerrancy. Licona's approach to this text, Geisler argued, "would undermine orthodoxy by dehistoricizing many crucial passages of the Bible."

Geisler called upon Michael Licona to change his position on this text and to affirm it as historical fact without reservation. But Geisler, a member of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) for many years, made another very important point. He reminded Licona that such arguments had been encountered before within the ETS, and it had led to the expulsion of a member.

Amazingly enough, the issue in that controversy was also centered in the Gospel of Matthew. New Testament scholar Robert Gundry had written *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, published in 1982. In that volume, Gundry had argued that Matthew was using the literary form of midrash and that he had thus combined both historical and non-historical material in his Gospel in order to make his own theological points. Gundry had written that readers of Matthew should not operate under the assumption "that narrative style in the Bible always implies the writing of history." Gundry proposed that Matthew freely changed and added details in his infancy narrative to suit his theological purpose.

Scholars including D. A. Carson and Darrell Bock argued, in response, that Matthew was not writing midrash and that his first readers would never have assumed him to have done so. Scholars also noted that Gundry's approach was doctrinally disastrous. Gundry had argued that Matthew "edited the story of Jesus' baptism so as to emphasize the Trinity." Thus, Matthew was not reporting truthfully what had happened in terms of historical fact, but what he wanted to report in order to serve his theological purpose. Gundry had suggested that Matthew changed Luke's infancy narrative by changing shepherds into Magi and the manger into

a house. As one evangelical scholar retorted: "For Gundry, then, the nonexistent house was where the nonpersons called Magi found Jesus on the occasion of their nonvisit to Bethlehem."

In 1983, the Evangelical Theological Society voted to request that Robert Gundry resign from its membership. The arguments for his expulsion from the ETS are exactly those that are now directly relevant to the argument that Michael Licona makes about Matthew 27:51-54. The suggestions that these events reported by Matthew are "special effects" and a "poetic device" are exactly the kind of dehistoricizing that led to Gundry's removal from the ETS. Gundry's argument concerning Matthew's use of midrash is virtually parallel to Licona's argument from classical references and Jewish apocalyptic sources.

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy explicitly declares that these approaches are incompatible with the affirmation that the Bible is inerrant. There is every reason within the text to believe that Matthew intends to report historical facts. Matthew 27:51-54 is in the very heart of Matthew's report of the resurrection of Christ as historical fact. Dehistoricizing this text is calamitous and inconsistent with the affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

Article XVIII of the *Chicago Statement* makes this point with precision: "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship." Furthermore, the *Chicago Statement* requires that "history must be treated as history."

In a response to Norman Geisler, Michael Licona stated his affirmation of inerrancy but did not retract his arguments concerning Matthew 27:51-54. In fact, he made no reference to "special effects" but said that his position had been that the text should be interpreted as "apocalyptic imagery." He also stated: "When writing my book, I always regarded the entirety of Matthew 27 as historical narrative containing apocalyptic allusions."

But what can this really mean? In his book, he clearly argues that the raising of the saints was not to be taken as historical fact, leaving no other option but to understand that Licona understands at least some of the "apocalyptic allusions" he sees in Matthew 27 to be something other than historical in nature. Thus, "the entirety" of Matthew 27 is not to be taken as consistent historical narrative at all.

Licona also wrote: "Further research over the last year in the Greco-Roman literature has led me to reexamine the position I took in my book. Although additional research certainly remains, at present I am just as inclined to understand the narrative of the raised saints in Matthew 27 as a report of a factual (i.e., literal) event as I am to view it as an apocalyptic symbol. It may also be a report of a real event described partially in apocalyptic terms. I will be pleased to revise the relevant section in a future edition of my book."

This hardly resolves the issue. As a matter of fact, Licona's only real concession here is to allow that Matthew's report of the raised saints may be as likely as his earlier published argument. That is not a retraction. Further, he says that his slight change of view on the issue came after research in the Greco-Roman literature. As the *Chicago Statement* would advise us to ask: What could one possibly find in the Greco-Roman literature that would either validate or invalidate the status of this report as historical fact?

There is one crucial difference between the cases of Robert Gundry and Michael Licona. Gundry had written a major commentary on Matthew that demonstrated throughout his approach to Matthew as midrash and his argument that Matthew was changing historical facts to suit his theological agenda. Michael Licona has written a massive defense of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. His treatment of Matthew 27:51-54 is glaringly inconsistent with his masterful defense of the resurrection as his-

tory and of Matthew as a faithful reporter of this central historical fact.

We can only hope that Michael Licona will resolve this inconsistency by affirming without reservation the status as historical fact of all that Matthew reports in chapter 27 and all that the New Testament presents as historical narrative. He needs to rethink the question he asked himself in his book—"If some or all of the phenomena reported at Jesus' death are poetic devices, we may rightly ask whether Jesus' resurrection is not more of the same."

In his book, he asked precisely the right question, but then he gave the wrong answer. We must all hope that he will ask himself that question again and answer in a way that affirms without reservation that all of Matthew's report is historical. If not, Licona has not only violated the inerrancy of Scripture, but he has blown a massive hole into his own masterful defense of the resurrection.

It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in principle. The devil, as they say, is in the details. That is what makes *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* so indispensable and this controversy over Licona's book so urgent. It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in general terms. The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense.

Michael Licona is a gifted and courageous defender of the Christian faith and a bold apologist of Christian truth. Our shared hope must be that he will offer a full correction on this crucial question of the Bible's full truthfulness and trustworthiness. I will be praying for him with the full knowledge that I have been one who has been gifted and assisted by needed correction. Leaving his argument where it now stands will not only diminish the influence of Michael Licona—it will present those who affirm the inerrancy of the Bible with yet another test of resolve.

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James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom. By Aaron Douglas Weaver. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2011, 196 pp., $18.00 paper.

"Everybody wants a theocracy," James Dunn famously said. "And everybody wants to be 'Theo.'"

I probably quote that at least once a semester in Christian ethics class here at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, not only because it is pithy but because it is so true. Dunn, longtime head of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, was nothing if not quotable. The other famous (or infamous) quote from him that comes to mind is his one sentence defense of "soul freedom": "Ain't nobody but Jesus going to tell me what to believe."

Love him or hate him, Dunn was a powerful force in Baptist life in the twentieth century, and a new book seeks to set him in historical and theological context. Aaron Douglas Weaver's *James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom*, just published by Smyth and Helwys, is that book, and it is well worth reading.

Weaver, easily the most gifted young historian of the moderate Baptist movement, crafts a winsome and engaging narrative and, unlike many historians, refuses to ignore theological analysis of his subject. I think Weaver will be a major force in Baptist historical scholarship in the next generation, precisely because of his analytical ability and his gift for prose.

Weaver is, of course, sympathetic; at times, I think, overly so. He, for example, treats Dunn's anti-Catholicism quite gently, and argues unconvincingly that Dunn's argument that abortion should be between a woman and her doctor is remaining neutral on the pro-life/pro-choice debate. That aside, the book should be read not only by Dunn's sympathizers but by those of us who are theologically conservative as well. Here there are a number of lessons to be learned.

First of all, enough time has passed for conservatives to appreciate some genuinely commend-

able facets of Dunn's work. He was right to argue that separation of church and state is a Baptist distinctive worth preserving, even when he stretched the definition beyond what most of us would agree with. He was right to assert that the Supreme Court decision *(Smith v. Oregon)* that removed the "compelling interest" test with regard to religious liberty is dangerous.

He was right to oppose the government underwriting religion in such ways as state-written "non-denominational" prayers and funding for religious initiatives (which, as we have seen, ultimately cut the evangelistic and Christocentric heart out of those initiatives). And, perhaps above all, Dunn was right to warn of what a Christless civil religion does to the witness of the church, which is to freeze it into something useless if not satanic.

Here, though, is where the warning for us all comes in. Dunn was not exempt from the pull toward a civil religion and a politicized faith. It is fair enough to say that some of Dunn's critics opposed him with an uncritical Reaganism rather than with a gospel-centered theology. But Dunn consistently showed an unwillingness to break from his own partisan commitments too.

On the issue of abortion, for instance, Dunn refused to call for the protection of unborn human life. Why not? His principle of "soul freedom" gave a theological basis for the right of a woman to choose to abort her child. But what about the question of the personhood of the fetus, what of his or her "soul freedom"? After all, "soul freedom" would not mean the freedom of a white supremacist to lynch, would it? Of course not. Can a corporate executive claim the "soul freedom" to pollute a water stream? No. Can a magistrate claim the "soul freedom" to whip a dissenter for refusing to baptize his baby or to preach without a license? Leland and Backus would say, "no." So would, come to think of it, Smyth and Helwys.

If there is only one person involved, soul freedom is an easy rallying cry (as was, and is, "states' rights"). If there are two (which even most abortion-rights advocates would admit now, while still defending the priority of the woman's choice), then soul freedom does not answer the question. Dunn saw the limits of "soul freedom," and courageously so, when it came to issues of segregation, economic predation (including the state lottery system), and so on. It is a tragedy he could not see it here.

This book demonstrates why Dunn succeeded where he did, with some genuine pluck and courage. It also shows why he failed to lead Southern Baptists where he wanted to go. Some of that is due to the cultural and social and theological factors in the Convention at the time. Some of that is because of Dunn's acerbic disposition and his all-too-often refusal to transcend partisanship. Matching reflexive Reaganism with reflexive anti-Reaganism tends to dilute a prophetic witness.

Resurgent conservatives should see in this book where both Dunn, and we, have succeeded and failed. Our witness is often compromised by politicians who seek to use us (just as, arguably, Bill Clinton used Dunn and his allies). Our leaders want to adopt whole-cloth the agendas of those with whom we might agree on some transcendent issues. Politicians seek to co-opt our religious figures for "prayer rallies." Our religious figures prognosticate on partisan elections, with thinly-veiled endorsements of candidates, often in shockingly carnal terms. And we do not even notice that our neighbors see what we are really after: power. We also do not notice that our neighbors are wondering: if we are this easily duped by political maneuvering, how can we be trusted to talk about the question of the resurrection from the dead?

I do not agree with James Dunn's anti-creedalism. Neither does he. "Ain't nobody but Jesus" is a creed. Jesus, after all, refers to someone, and there is some theological content there. I do not agree with Dunn's theological liberalism, and I think he was all too willing to mute his "prophetic" witness when it came to his political allies.

But I agree with him on the big picture, if not always in the details, that the church is too important to be tied up with the state. The temptation for

all of us is to want to be "Theo." There is no arguing with that.

—Russell D. Moore
Dean, School of Theology
Senior Vice President for Academic Administration
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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

BibleWorks 9. Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks LLC, 2011, $359.00.

Every time *BibleWorks* comes out with a new version, I am amazed at their ability to maintain a simple, intuitive user-interface while adding seemingly endless additional excellent resources. The recently released version, *BibleWorks 9*, is no exception. I just demonstrated the program to my intermediate Greek class today. There are a number of reasons why I think *BibleWorks 9* is the best Bible software available.

The first reason is its intuitive interface. Do not let anyone fool you. Every Bible software program (or website, for that matter) has a learning curve. It takes at least a brief investment of time to learn how to use a new program, app, or webpage. But, once one has made that initial investment of time, how easy is it to continue using the program and poking around to learn new stuff? *BibleWorks* receives an "A+" for ease in use. I find that there are usually four or five ways of accomplishing the same task in the program (drop down menus, button bars, context-sensitive right click options, etc.). So, if I have momentarily forgotten how to do some task, I can usually figure it out with little help.

The second reason is its speed. On the front row of my class today sat a student with a super-powerful laptop computer onto which was loaded a major Bible software program that is a competitor to *BibleWorks*. The student was almost drooling as he saw the speed of *BibleWorks* searches and the ease of moving among the interlinked resources—all on my ancient (three year-old) laptop. After class, the student told me that he plans to buy *BibleWorks*.

The third reason is its excellent, abundant, and free training videos. *BibleWorks* comes standard with clear, helpful, and logically organized help videos. Granted, *BibleWorks* did not pay big bucks for a radio announcer to record these, but no owners of *BibleWorks* can complain that they have not been given abundant, free, and well-designed training videos.

The fourth reason is that it has the right resources, rightly linked. *BibleWorks* comes standard with virtually any major original language text (morphologically tagged) or resource you will need: NA27 Greek New Testament, Leningrad Hebrew Old Testament, Apostolic Fathers in Greek, Josephus in Greek, Philo in Greek, the Latin Vulgate, the entire Greek New Testament diagrammed, multiple Greek and Hebrew lexicons, etc. Of course, scholars will want to pay extra to get BDAG and HALOT, but those resources never come standard on any program.

The fifth reason is its ancient manuscripts. One of the new features of *BibleWorks 9* is the inclusion of transcriptions and complete image sets of seven significant Greek New Testament manuscripts (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Bezae, Washingtonianus, Boernerianus, and GA 1141). Like everything else in *BibleWorks*, this new feature is seamlessly integrated into the existing program. Without referring to any of the help features, I was able to show my class examples of textual variants on the PowerPoint screen today.

It is difficult for me to think of enough superlatives to describe this excellent Bible software program. The only two drawbacks I can think of are: the program does not currently have a mobile device app, and if one runs it on an Apple computer, one must use the PC emulator function.

—Robert L. Plummer
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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission. By Alan G. Padgett. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011, xviii + 151 pp., $19.99 paper.

Alan Padgett, a professor of systematics at Luther Seminary, defends mutual submission in this work, emphasizing particularly that Christ submits to the church, just as the church submits to Christ. Padgett has written on the topic of male-female roles (or the lack thereof!) for many years, and much that is in this book has appeared in journals elsewhere in a more technical form. The book is written in an engaging style, which makes for a quick read, especially since it is brief and to the point.

How does Padgett argue for or advance his case? He distinguishes between two different kinds of submission, maintaining that one type of submission is militaristic and political. This first kind of submission is generally involuntary and is also not mutual. The second kind of submission is different, for it is rooted in personal relationships, and is voluntary and mutual. According to Padgett, the submission called for in Ephesians 5 is of the second variety, i.e., personal, voluntary, and mutual. On the other hand, the submission required in 1 Peter and the Pastoral Epistles fits with the first type, so that it is externally imposed and is not mutual. The apologetic and missionary situation of 1 Peter and the Pastorals explains why a different kind of submission is demanded.

How can Padgett say that Jesus submits to the church when Scripture never says this explicitly? He argues for a canonical Jesus-centered hermeneutic, a hermeneutic of love. The Bible cannot be understood merely by unearthing the meaning of the author but must be read in light of the heart of the gospel and the person of Jesus. A sophisticated and subtle and profound reading of Scripture recognizes that servant leadership is another way of talking about submission. Hence, Jesus' giving himself up for the church, which Paul unpacks in Ephesians 5:22-33, demonstrates that Jesus submits to the church, for submission and servant leadership belong in the same conceptual category. Similarly, the great text on Jesus' living for the sake of others and humbling himself for our salvation (Phil 2:6-11) supports the notion that Jesus submits to the church.

The issues addressed in this book are scarcely new and have been rehearsed repeatedly, though Padgett definitely has some new twists here and there. I asked a friend before reading the book what he thought Padgett would say. He accurately predicted the substance of the author's argument without even reading the book, confirming that the heart and soul of the argument are not substantially new. Padgett does rightly point to 1 Corinthians 7:3-4, which indicates that complementarians must beware of a rigid and militaristic kind of hierarchicalism. Complementarians must not fall prey to a fortress and defensive mentality in which we reject everything our critics say. We must listen to all of Scripture so that our marriages conform to the balance found in the Scriptures. Otherwise, conservative Christian homes could become quite strange and even bizarre, so that the wife is virtually treated like a slave.

It must be said, however, that the main thesis of the book fails. Padgett rightly warns of the danger of using authority selfishly, reminding us that those who are in authority must serve those under them. Such observations, however, do not cancel out the distinction between Christ and the church taught in Scripture. Padgett's attempt to drive a wedge between the two types of submission does not work lexically in the texts he cites. The submission that Christians are called upon to give is always voluntary in all the marriage texts in the New Testament. Nor, despite Padgett's protestations, are husbands ever called upon to submit to wives. That remains a stubborn fact that cannot be washed out of the text. First Peter 3:1-6 can be adduced as an example of the weakness of Padgett's thesis. It is scarcely evident that Peter believes that the submission is different in character than what we found in Ephesians 5:22-33. The situation differs to some extent because

some of the wives have unbelieving husbands, but Peter commends submission out of fear to God, not to satisfy external authority. And Padgett does not read the text carefully enough. Peter does not limit his call to submission to wives with unbelieving husbands. He says "some" (1 Pet 3:1) husbands disobey the word, not all. It is simply not the case that all the husbands in 1 Peter were unbelievers. Hence, the evidence Padgett adduces for a different kind of submission collapses upon closer analysis. Similar criticisms could be raised about his analysis of the word "submit" relative to the Pastoral Epistles or relating to slaves and the government, but space precludes a detailed treatment.

The weakness of Padgett's case is also illustrated by his discussion of the word "head" (*kephalē*), which he argues means "source" in Ephesians 5 and other texts. But Padgett does not investigate the immediate context to decipher the meaning of the word, for wives are called upon to "submit" because husbands are the "head," just as the church is called upon to "submit" because Christ is the "head" (Eph 5:22-24). It makes much more sense in context to submit to one who is an authority. Furthermore, what does it mean to say that I as a husband am the "source" of my wife? I am certainly not the source of her spiritual or physical life. In addition, Padgett's whole discussion of "head" is unpersuasive. He says it means "source" in Colossians 2:10, but that text is talking about Christ's authority over demonic powers, and hence the text functions as a parallel to Christ's enthronement and authoritative headship over all in Ephesians 1:19-23.

Padgett claims that those who dismiss his case on the basis of the definition of "submit" are prone to superficiality. He raises a good caution here, but he actually falls into a trap on the other side. We need to be careful of restricting unduly the semantic domain of a word, but we must also beware of lumping words together that need to be distinguished. Padgett's case fails, for he does not establish convincingly that the two types of submission he posits actually inform the texts on husbands and wives.

In some ways Padgett sets up the case so he cannot lose. If one objects about the meaning of words and the author's meaning, he can appeal to a canonical Jesus-centered hermeneutic that promotes love. A canonical hermeneutic is important, and I agree with Padgett that we need to look at the whole Bible canonically to determine its meaning. There is a divine author. But again we must beware of over-reacting to the mistakes of others. We can appeal to "love" to justify just about any behavior today, but the ethical norms and commands in the Scriptures flesh out the nature of love (Rom. 13:8-10). A canonical reading accords with and does not contradict the clear words of Scripture, which are accessible to ordinary readers.

Padgett's words on a canonical reading seemed ironic upon reading his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, for his interpretations are of a standard historical-critical variety, though with different conclusions. Hence, he argues that 1 Corinthians 11:3-7a represents the Corinthians's view, not the standpoint of the Apostle Paul. And he proposes a midrashic reading of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 which is, if nothing else, remarkably creative. Most evangelical feminists do not subscribe to the interpretations proposed here, and Padgett suggested these readings in scholarly journals some years ago. It is far-fetched to argue that Christ submits to the church as well, for Christ acting as a servant must not be equated with submission. Jesus Christ is a servant leader, but he is our leader and our Lord. We are called upon to submit to him and to obey him. Never the reverse.

—Thomas R. Schreiner
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Brevard Childs, Biblical Theologian: For the Church's One Bible. By Daniel R. Driver. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010, 328 pp., $91.73 paper.

In this revised version of his doctoral thesis completed at the University of St. Andrews, Daniel R. Driver seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of Childs's oeuvre and to uncover the inner workings of his brand of biblical theology.

After surveying Childs's life and the history of the canon debate, Driver divides his analysis into three main parts. In part one, Driver gives a sort of reception history of Childs's work both in English and German contexts. In part two, he exposits Childs's canonical approach itself and examines its internal coherence. According to Driver, Childs makes two major shifts or turns in his career. The first is Childs's movement from a focus on "form" to a focus on "final form." In part three, Driver examines the second major shift in Childs's career, which relates to his reflection on the relationship between the Testaments. Childs's concern in this area is to affirm that Christ is the subject (the *res*) that both the Old and New Testaments witness to in their own discrete voices. After providing a test case for the issues raised throughout his discussion (on the scope of Psalm 102), Driver concludes with an epilogue that surveys recent work on the canon and suggests its relevance to Childs's approach.

One of the consistent criticisms of Childs is that he is inconsistent and that his approach is in need of reconstructive surgery. This perception was encouraged by James Barr's biting criticism of Childs throughout his career. According to Driver, this critique in particular has helped generate a "bipolar Childs" in much secondary literature (36-50). On the one hand, Childs champions a focus on the final form of the text, but on the other he engages in various forms of historical criticism in his treatment of biblical material. Many critical biblical scholars would decry a privileging of a final form, which they view as arbitrary, and many evangelical biblical scholars would balk at the use of critical methodology, which they view as dangerous.

For Driver, what is missing in the contemporary discussion is the historical Childs, or better, the canonical Childs. Though one might surely still take issue with elements of Childs's work, Driver maintains the importance of recognizing that for Childs, there is an internal logic to his version of the canonical approach. Driver points out that the "missing link" many critics neglect is the notion of canon-consciousness (71, 144ff) and that Childs sees an integral connection between the "precanonical" forms of texts and traditions and the shape they take in the canon as part of the church's Scripture. Driver's articulation of Childs's "career thesis" is that "the historically shaped canon of scripture, in its two discrete witnesses, is a Christological rule of faith that in the church, by the action of the Holy Spirit, accrues textual authority" (4). Driver's overall contention is that Childs's approach is complex but ultimately coherent.

Evangelical and historical-critical scholars alike who are wary of all things "canonical" would do well to situate Childs in his academic context. Driver demonstrates that throughout his career, Childs reflected on the relationship between historical-critical and biblical-theological methods and assumptions. And there are important differences between his application of these critical tools and "business as usual" in the scholarly guilds. In a sense, the burden of Driver's volume is to answer thoroughly the question, "What happens if Childs's work proves to have a logic of its own, even if it is a logic one finally chooses not to enter?" (59). It is this suggestive yet balanced approach that makes Driver's volume an instructive hermeneutical guide for reading Childs.

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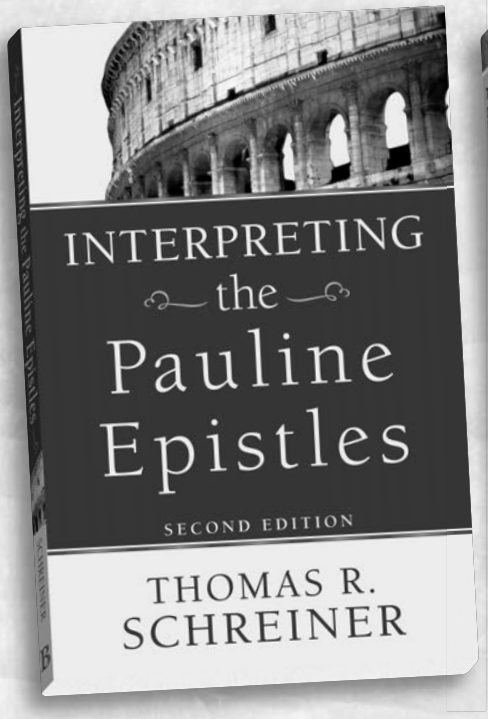

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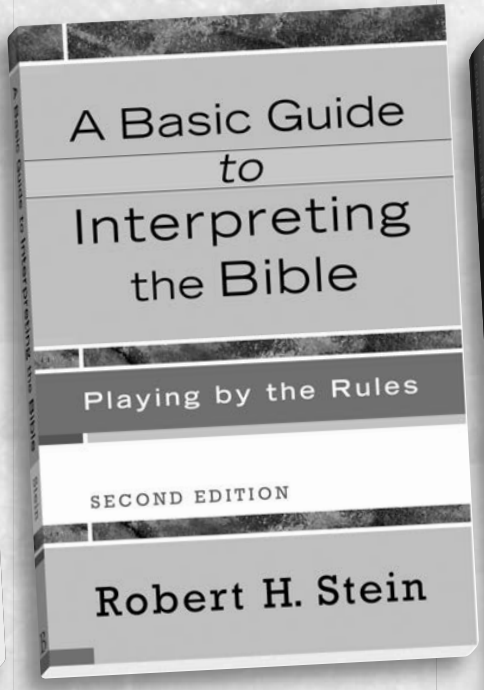

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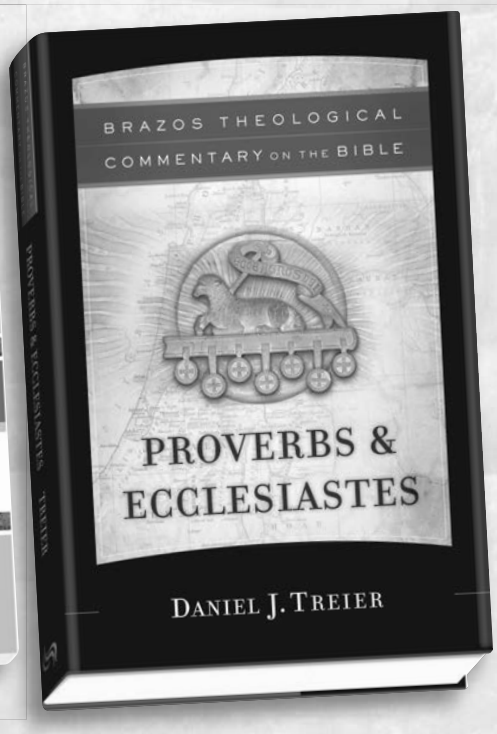

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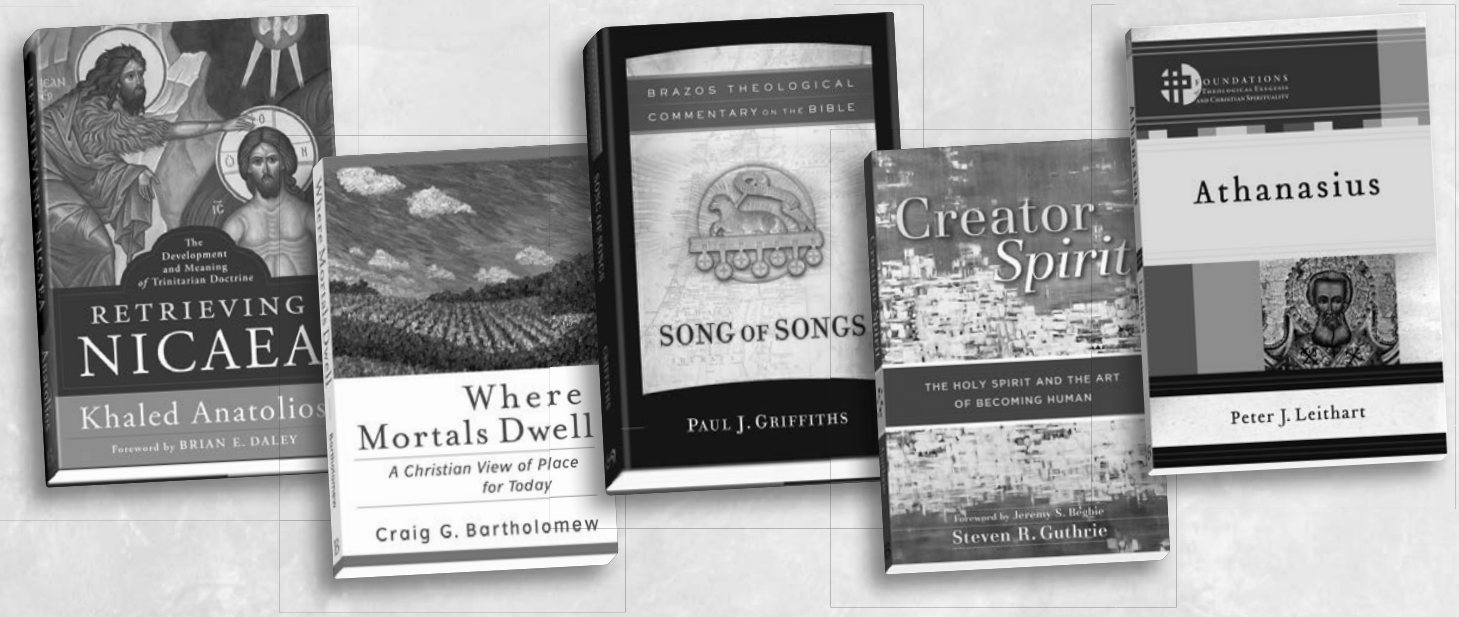

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