

Redeeming the “Problem Child”: Qoheleth’s Message and Place in the Family of Scripture¹

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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.

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 it is 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 Qohe-

leth’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

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

²Ronald B. Allen, “Seize the Moment: Meaning in Qoheleth,” (paper presented to the Northwest Section Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, April 1988), 1.

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

⁴Gordon 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.

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

- Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 30.
- ⁶Ibid., 32-39.
- ⁷Tremper 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.
- ⁸Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 91-94.
- ⁹Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 20.
- ¹⁰Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 11.
- ¹¹By “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.
- ¹²Ardel B. Caneday, “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), 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.
- ¹⁴M. M. Kline, “Is Qoheleth Unorthodox? A Review Article,” *Kerux* 13, no. 3 (1998): 20.
- ¹⁵Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Promise Plan of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 138.
- ¹⁶Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 95-96.
- ¹⁷Ibid., 104.
- ¹⁸Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?,” 107.
- ¹⁹From a God-centered perspective that sees God as sovereign and wise, this is an obvious conclusion.
- ²⁰Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, 15.
- ²¹Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 109.
- ²²Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, 35.
- ²³Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 93-94.
- ²⁴Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2003), 36-37.
- ²⁵Wilson, *Jot at the End of the Tether*, 17.
- ²⁶For 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.
- ²⁷C. Hassell Bullock, “The Wisdom of God” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour; New York: Seabury, 1973), 659-60.
- ²⁸I am not claiming that the paraphrase necessarily reflects accurate exegesis. Rather I am trying to capture the impact of the language.
- ²⁹Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 107.
- ³⁰(Exeter: Paternoster, 2001), 457.