

Ecclesiastes according to the Gospel: Christian Thoughts on Qohelet's Theology*

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Abstract

The Book of Ecclesiastes is hermeneutically difficult and largely mis-handled by Christian interpreters who tend to sugar-coat Qohelet's harsh observations of life. Taking Qohelet's words at face value and coming to terms with Qohelet's theology and view of God are how the church can learn from Ecclesiastes. What Qohelet starkly says – “everything really is truly absurd” – is at odds with Israelite thought, and yet he is nevertheless a wise man according to the epilogue, which is critical to the proper understanding of Qohelet and the message of Ecclesiastes. The narrator's final advice – “fear God and keep his commandments” – must be understood in the light of Qohelet's unsettling look at life. The narrator then encourages the reader not to linger with Qohelet but to move beyond. A Christian evaluation of Ecclesiastes considers both the starkness of suffering and doubt and the call to press on in the light of the gospel: “follow Jesus anyway, no matter what.”

I. Introduction

Ecclesiastes poses one of the more interesting hermeneutical challenges in the Old Testament, for two reasons. First, the message of the book seems to be at odds with theological trajectories evident elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. Second, at least on the surface, Ecclesiastes is dotted with noticeable internal inconsistencies.

Discussions reaching back at least to rabbinic times still continue, not only as to the meaning of verses here and there, but the basic message of the book as a whole. An overview of standard commentaries and introductions will quickly demonstrate that Ecclesiastes is amenable to conflicting interpretations. Is the author coherent or incoherent, insight-

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ful or confused? Is he a stark realist or merely faithless? Is he orthodox or heterodox? Is he an optimist or pessimist? Is the final message of the book “be like Qohelet, the wise man” or “Qohelet is wrong, make sure you don’t fall into his trap”?

Discovering the meaning and purpose of Ecclesiastes will likely continue as a back-and-forth journey between overarching concepts and smaller exegetical details, balancing the forest and the trees. But attempting to achieve such a balance seems to involve us in a vicious hermeneutical circle. How one sees the overall purpose of Ecclesiastes will affect how one handles the perplexing details of the book itself, yet that overall purpose cannot be determined apart from those same details. Of course, on one level, this is the case with any biblical book, but the problems are augmented in the case of Ecclesiastes, for it is precisely the details of the book that continue to challenge virtually any statement as to its basic purpose. As one reads the book, one begins to draw conclusions as to the author’s train of thought, only to find a verse or two later the author says something that reduces one’s conclusions to ashes. This scenario is played out so often in Ecclesiastes that Michael Fox has argued that the contradictions in Ecclesiastes are actually the key to discerning the meaning of the book, and so we should not try to impose an internal consistency in the book.

For example, for nearly any OT book, you can ask any ten reasonably informed people about its contents, its basic story line. To use Genesis as an example, you might get different people emphasizing different aspects of the book, but somewhere they would likely all mention creation, Adam and Eve, the Flood, Tower of Babel, and various episodes of the Patriarchs. Likewise, for Exodus, the main themes to arise might be slavery, Moses, deliverance, Red Sea, Mt. Sinai, with variations on those main themes. No one, I would think, would say of Genesis, “It is about the destruction of the world, how Adam and Eve passed the test, that wonderful tower project, and how God rejected the Patriarchs in favor of Egyptians.” And no one would say that Exodus speaks of God enslaving the Israelites and Pharaoh’s efforts to liberate them. The basic content and meaning of these books are not in serious question by informed readers. There may be differences of emphasis or disagreement on some minor points, but it is hard indeed to “counter-understand” Genesis and Exodus.

Yet, with Ecclesiastes (Song of Songs being another example), the main issue at hand is not matters of emphasis or degrees of difference. Rather, the issue has been and remains “What is the very basic message of the book?” To put it somewhat bluntly, is Qohelet right or wrong? It does not take much time in reading the book before Qohelet sets you back on your heels. He makes numerous observations and complaints

that are a bit stark, to say the least, and he arrives at some conclusions that may make some of us want to cover our ears and eyes.

Although by no means universal, there are two common ways of handling “the problem of Qohelet”: (1) allow Qohelet to vent for eleven chapters, say “duly noted,” and then cancel out his words by a particular reading of the epilogue (12:8-14); (2) try to make Qohelet look more “orthodox” than he really is by dulling the impact of his words. In my opinion (and again, I want to stress that these two options represent somewhat of extremes), the answer lies somewhere in the middle, and it is the epilogue that holds the key for understanding the message of the whole (see below). To summarize briefly my conclusion,

Qohelet is indeed making stark, harsh, unsettling observations about the nature of reality, observations that put his words in tension with much of Israelite thought. The epilogue, however, considers Qohelet, nevertheless, to be a wise man, but still encourages readers not to linger with Qohelet but to move beyond.

What follows is, first, a summary of Qohelet’s theology, focusing on the opening chapter of the book where Qohelet’s thought is conveniently introduced. Second, I will briefly address Qohelet’s view of God, or at least one important aspect of it, with respect to the so-called *carpe diem* (seize the day) passages. Third, we will look at the epilogue to see how Qohelet’s words are evaluated by the narrator of the book.¹ These three issues will help us form a working knowledge of the theology of Qohelet. I will then conclude by bringing this theology into brief conversation with the Christian reality of being united with the crucified and risen Christ. In my view the theology of Qohelet, however unsettling it might be, should not be discounted by the church but the church should learn from it.

II. A Summary of Qohelet’s Theology according to Chapter One

There are a number of ways one can summarize Qohelet’s theology, but allow me to boil it down to a brief statement and then illustrate by following the argument presented in chapter 1 of Ecclesiastes.

Everything, and I mean everything, is absurd. No matter what you do, you have ultimately nothing to show for it. You live and then you die.

¹ To be precise, the actual words of Qohelet begin at 1:12 and end at 12:7. Qohelet’s words are framed by a narrator who introduces us to Qohelet’s words in 1:1-11 and then evaluates them in 12:8-14.

The only thing you have is the portion God gives you. And this is how God has set things up.

This doesn't seem to preach well, I admit, but that does not mean the summary is inaccurate. In fact, these themes recur throughout Ecclesiastes. There are three keywords in Ecclesiastes 1 that help bring some order to the message. "Absurd" is a translation of the word *hevel*, which is more often translated in English as "meaningless" or, as in the KJV, "vanity." "Absurd," however, better reflects Qohelet's exasperation at the human condition, as Michael Fox puts it.² Another common and important term in Ecclesiastes is *yitron*, which is typically translated "profit," as in a surplus, a return on your investment. Qohelet claims that there is no *yitron* in anything you do, you ultimately have nothing to show for your work. Why is that? Because we all die (2:14; 3:20). All we really have, and it is not much, is the day-to-day work God has *given* us to do, our "portion" or "lot" (*kheleq*). This is what life is like and it is God who is to blame for making it so.

Perhaps the best way of easing into Qohelet's rather dismal outlook is to look at chapter 1. The narrator introduces the book in vv. 1-11, and then Qohelet himself introduces his thoughts in vv. 12-18.

As I said at the outset, the overall meaning (and value) of Ecclesiastes is debated, but it seems to me that there can be little doubt as to the point Qohelet is trying to get across. The narrator has even been kind enough to summarize Qohelet's words for us, first generally in vv. 2-4 and then in more detail in vv. 5-11. Verses 2-4 may be translated as follows:

Utterly absurd...utterly absurd, everything is absurd. What profit is there in anyone's labor under the sun?³ A generation goes [dies] and another one comes; the world remains unchanged.

The narrator leaves little doubt about what will occupy both Qohelet and the readers' attention for the next twelve chapters. Moreover, the fact that 12:8, the first verse of the epilogue, is a virtual verbatim repetition of 1:2 makes it clear that this thought frames the words of Qohelet

² M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down, A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 30-42.

³ The term "under the sun" is often misunderstood to mean something like "on earth, as opposed to in heaven." The point would be that, if only Qohelet would take his gaze off of earthly things, he would see that a heavenly perspective holds the answers. This is not at all what he means. Rather, the phrase is meant to refer to the exhaustive nature of Qohelet's search. He has left no stone unturned; nothing has been left uninvestigated, as the subsequent chapters make clear.

throughout. The narrator is handing us Qohelet's message on a silver platter.

Verses 5-7 are an extended illustration where the narrator appeals to creation in support of his summary. Unlike the Psalter, which praises God for his creation, Qohelet sees creation as confirming the futility of existence. The sun rises and sets, everyday the same thing (v. 5). The image drawn here is of the sun rising, setting, and then "panting" to get back in place in order to do it all again the next day. But what is in it for the sun? What profit does the sun have? Its existence is absurd, just like ours. It is as if Qohelet is saying, "You don't believe all of life is absurd? Just look out the window." The same goes for the wind (v. 6). From north to south, round and round it goes on its rounds, a never-ending cycle. Then, in v. 7, we see how the rivers flow into the ocean, but for all their hard work, the oceans are never full: there is no profit.

Beginning in v. 8, Qohelet moves from analogues taken from the natural world to human activities, namely speaking, seeing, and hearing, and the result is the same: they amount to nothing. All words just make one weary; they just don't get you anywhere. So, too, with seeing and hearing: the eye never has enough and the ear is never "full."

Verses 9 and 10 make the same point but in more direct language, without recourse to natural or physical imagery. In fact, we may say that vv. 9-10 summarize in plain language the points made thus far: "Whatever *has* happened [or "is happening"] is what *will* happen. Whatever *has* been done is what *will* be done. There is nothing at all new under the sun" (see also 3:15). This summary notion is very strong: "There is nothing at all new anywhere on earth ("under the sun," see v. 3 above), neither in the past, present, or future." This "circle of life" is for Qohelet not a source of stability or comfort, but the very expression of the absurdity of life, since "the cycle" insures that nothing that happens or nothing we do will make any difference. "Oh sure," Qohelet continues in v. 10, "someone might look at something and say, 'look, this is new,' but it really isn't. It's just the same old thing. It has been here 'forever.'"

Verse 11 concludes the introduction to the book and brings us to another summary statement of sorts, one that will become a dominant theme throughout Ecclesiastes: death. Not only is there *nothing* new under the sun—no permanent deed or human activity—but this holds for us as well. In fact, the very existence of previous generations is forgotten. Likewise, those who are yet to be born will eventually, after their own death, be forgotten by generations who will come after them. This is no casual comment. It should echo with anyone familiar with the Old Testament, for it is precisely a blessed memory that is the hope and comfort for God's people (patriarchal narratives). To live in such a way as to live on in the memories of one's descendents is a mark of a life

lived in communion with God and God's covenant faithfulness to his people (e.g., Prov 10:7; Ps 112:6). In 1:11, Qohelet does not leave room for the memory of the righteous: non-remembrance is the ultimate lot of *all* the living. The point is made more clearly in Eccl 2:16: "There is no memory for the wise man, like the fool, forever; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!"

With this thought we come to the end of the narrator's introduction and begin the words of Qohelet. Whatever winding path Qohelet will choose to take in subsequent chapters to arrive at his points of destination, we must keep before us the fact that the narrator has already pointed us in the ultimate direction in which Qohelet is headed. Let me summarize in my own words:

The cycle of life, as illustrated even in nature itself, assures that there is no pay off for any of our activities and efforts. All that we do in any corner of our existence collapses to absurdity. Moreover, the ultimate indication of absurdity is the fact that we will all die, and even the hope of being remembered by our descendents is an empty one.

To the narrator's summary is added Qohelet's own in 1:12-18. After announcing himself in v. 12, he declares how he has "given his heart" to the wisdom task of investigating everything done under the sun. One might think a wise search of the things of the world would be a worthwhile task, but not for Qohelet. No sooner do we read this than he follows with the dismal observation at the end of v. 13, "It [meaning the search just announced] is a grievous task that God has given to humanity by which to occupy them." After raising a spark of hope in the reader's eye in v. 12, he immediately undermines that quest with what is one of the more significant verses not only in the introduction, but also in the book as a whole. To paraphrase the last portion of v. 13: "God sure has made it difficult for us." As we will see in a bit more detail in a moment, Qohelet's complaint is not about what *happens*, but, somewhat like lament psalms, his complaint is about God who *lets* things happen, or, for Qohelet, even more starkly, God who *makes* things happen this way. He follows up on this notion in vv. 14-15. He claims to have seen⁴ everything done under the sun and he declares it all absurd and a "chasing of the wind." Moreover, this state of affairs is what it is; there is nothing anyone can do about it. As he says in v. 15: "What is made crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted." In other words, this state of affairs that Qohelet has observed, this grievous task, this crooked situation, cannot be undone. The implication,

⁴ This should not be understood in the literal sense, but figuratively, i.e., in his mind's eye. Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes the word also means "to experience."

particularly in view of the latter portion of v. 13, is that it is *God* who is responsible.

Clearly Qohelet has a bone to pick, and he is not starting off his monologue in a manner that will win him many speaking invitations. That his problem is with God is something we will return to in a moment, but let us first bring chapter 1 to a close. In what seems like another immediate reversal, Qohelet again announces his attainment of wisdom. In fact, he has more wisdom than any other who has ever ruled over Jerusalem (v. 16). He gave himself over to the task of knowing wisdom and knowledge as well as madness and folly (v. 17): he covers the entire spectrum and leaves no stone unturned. One would think Qohelet has put himself back on the right track, but he, once again, brings any such optimism to an abrupt halt: “I know that this, too, is a chasing of the wind.” As the book continues, one will see Qohelet weaving in and out of this realization, but already here, at the outset of his words, he makes the announcement that puts him in tension with the heart of Israel’s faith: *wisdom does not really work*. In fact, as he concludes in v. 18, much wisdom brings much anger; adding knowledge adds pain. One would be hard-pressed to find a statement like this in Proverbs, where wisdom is “more precious than rubies” (see Prov 3:13-20).

This opening chapter is extremely important for setting the stage for what is to come. We have, from both the narrator and Qohelet himself, a clear indication of where he will end up, when all is said and done. He will have spasms of optimism and submit to traditional notions now and then, but, in one form or another, he returns to the broader realization that everything is absurd, there is nothing that can be done, and God is responsible—which leads us to the next point.

III. God is the Problem

We have already seen in 1:12 and 15 how Qohelet seems to have a thinly veiled gripe with how God is running things. This is a theme that surfaces with more force in subsequent chapters, particularly in the context of the *carpe diem* passages. I would like to look briefly at two of them here, 3:1-15 and 5:17-19 [Eng. 18-20].

First, let us take a bird’s eye view of 3:1-15. The first eight verses are well known to many, being the topic of a famous American folk song from the 1960’s (The Byrds), “Turn, Turn, Turn.” There is a time for everything, a time for being born, a time for dying, etc. One might be tempted to think of this litany of “times” as a positive statement on Qohelet’s part: “Look at the rhythms of live. Aren’t they wonderful? There is a time for everything, so don’t fret.” Actually, this is far from Qohelet’s mind. Think back on 1:5-7 and the rhythm of the cre-

ated world. This rhythm is what demonstrates the *absurdity* of life. The same holds here. One need only continue reading to v. 9 here Qohelet interprets vv. 1-8: “What *profit* is there for the one who does something in which he toils?” In other words, things are the way they are. There are “times” for everything, and so all our toiling to make a difference amounts to nothing. Then, in v. 10, he repeats essentially the sentiment expressed earlier in 1:10, “I have seen the task God has given to humanity by which to occupy him,” and Qohelet is none too happy about it.

None of what Qohelet is describing here is good. The remaining verses in this passage are key. “He [God] does everything fitting⁵ in its time.” “Time” is the same word found throughout vv. 1-8, which Qohelet has already evaluated as something without profit. In other words, God does what he does when he does it, and he has “put [not eternity, but] ‘time-consciousness’ into our hearts.” (“Time-consciousness” is an attempt to translate the root *ʿlm* we saw before often mistranslated as “eternity.”) This first portion of v. 11 is often misunderstood as a word of praise to a good God who, despite the ups and downs of the “times,” has nevertheless given humanity a yearning for heaven, or something like that. This is completely contrary to Qohelet’s thinking. He is actually saying that God acts when he pleases, and he has given humanity *the ability to comprehend this*, to conceive of time immemorial and on and on into the future *to frustrate them further*. The point is made clear in v. 12: “Humanity cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end.”

What follows in vv. 13-15 is the actual *carpe diem* passage, which, like the earlier verses, is often given a positive spin that Qohelet did not intend. In view of all that he has been saying thus far, in the book as well as in this passage, Qohelet’s words here can hardly be taken as encouraging. To paraphrase vv. 12-15:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be joyful and do worthwhile things in their lives. In fact, this is what sums up our human existence⁶: eat, drink, and experience some good in one’s labor. This is

⁵ The Hebrew word here, *yph*, can also mean “beautiful,” but “fitting” is better given the context. Qohelet is not remarking on how God’s actions here are beautiful, but how they fit in their proper (i.e., God-determined) time.

⁶ The Hebrew here is *kol-ha’adam*, literally “all the man.” The phrase appears in the next *carpe diem* (5:18), concerning death (7:2), and then once more in the epilogue (12:13). This is an important phrase, and we will return to it below. For a more detailed interaction with how this phrase helps us understand the theology of Ecclesiastes, see “כל-האדם” and the Evaluation of Qohelet’s Wisdom in Qoh 12:13, or The ‘A is so, and What’s More, B’ Theology of Ecclesiastes,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. H. Najman and J. H. Newman; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), 125-37.

what God gives us to do. I know that whatever God does lasts [*l'olam*]: you can't do anything to change it. God does these things so that humanity might fear him. What is already was; what is to be already was.⁷

For Qohelet in this passage, life has a rhythm (“times”) that are in God’s hands, not ours, and so what we do has no profit. To make matters worse, God endows us with a real understanding of the grand expanse of time, which frustrates us all the more. In light of this state of affairs for which *God* is responsible, Qohelet *resigns* himself (i.e., “there is nothing better than”) to finding some alternate meaning in life, one of taking it as it comes and finding some enjoyment in what one does. This is what sums up the human condition. What God does cannot be changed (note the echoes of 1:15 in 3:14), and so we fear him, not in a Proverbs “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7) kind of way, but fear as one would have for a capricious ruler. Qohelet is not happy.

A similar sentiment is found in a second *carpe diem* passage, 5:17-19 [Eng. vv. 18-20], and so we can treat it much more briefly. Eating, drinking, experiencing good things as the fruit of one’s labor is our *lot* in life, i.e., our *portion* [*kheleq*]. In fact, he adds here, rather dismally, “the number of days of our lives.” This allusion to the inevitability of death, and how it cancels out any hope of any sort of *profit*, raises its ugly head again. And everyone to whom *God* gives wealth, possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, well, that is God’s “gift.” Note here, too, that the ability to enjoy the fruit of one’s labor is *God’s doing*. In fact, as v. 19 concludes, humans don’t remember much of their lives because God keeps them so busy with the “pleasure of their hearts,” i.e., the fruit of their labor. None of it lasts. None of it is profitable. It is merely our *portion*, that which this God deigns to give us.

Qohelet’s frustration with, even anger towards, God is not limited to these two passages,⁸ but they give enough of a sense of where Qohelet is coming from. In summary, the words of Qohelet hit on a lot of issues, and he is anything but consistent in his train of thought. But what unites his thinking is the fundamental commitment to the absurdity of life. If I may paraphrase him again:

At the end of the day we have nothing to show for our lives, we die and are forgotten, and this is how God set it up. The best we have is to try

⁷ I have left untranslated the very last clause in v. 15. It is a bit enigmatic and does not affect the general picture given here.

⁸ E.g., 5:1; 6:10; 7:13.

to enjoy the fruit of our daily labor, even though that, too, will come to naught. Yes, absolutely everything under the sun in absurd.

Qohelet's despondency is palpable on every page.

IV. The Epilogue's Evaluation of Qohelet's Theology

Surely, one would think, such a theology has no place in the OT, yet there it is. It is also no wonder why some interpreters have tried to minimize the force of Qohelet's observations either by toning down his rhetoric or by claiming that the epilogue (12:8-14) corrects Qohelet's errant teaching. In my view, Qohelet's words are too many and too clear to tame. And, as a review of the epilogue will show, the frame narrator hardly corrects or condemns Qohelet's error, but affirms Qohelet in a very sincere way.

After summarizing Qohelet's words in 12:8 (see 1:2), the narrator says in v. 9 that Qohelet was (1) a wise man, (2) he taught people knowledge, (3) he heard, investigated, and put in order many proverbs. In fact, he sought (exerted effort) to find "pleasing words," meaning, the right words to get his point across, and whose written words were honest (v. 10). Now, this may not be what readers expect to hear at this point. Was Qohelet really a wise man, with all his dismal words and despondent rhetoric? It seems that, according to the narrator, he was. He must have anticipated the discomfort this would give to his readers, as we read in v. 11, "The words of the wise are like goads, like firmly embedded nails are the 'masters of collection' [either those who collect wise sayings or the collection itself] given by a shepherd." The imagery is of sheep herding. The goad, with its nail at the tip, is meant to keep the sheep in line. And, yes, sometimes that hurts, just like Qohelet's words.

The narrator continues with a warning to his son in v. 12: "There is no end to the making of books [or better, writings], and much study wears the body." Although this is a favorite verse of Bible students during final exams, it has nothing to do with one's studies. Rather, the narrator is shifting now from what was praise of Qohelet in vv. 9-11 to a cautionary note *to his son*. He is saying that one can go on and on as Qohelet has done, multiplying example after example, going round and round on this issue (write more books like this); that is wearisome. Rather, as he says in v. 13, "The end of the matter, *all* has been said" (i.e., no more needs to be said). And then the narrator reveals the lesson he wants his son to take away from his reading of Qohelet's words:

Fear God and keep his commandments. Indeed, THIS⁹ is what sums up the human situation.

Qohelet is wise, to be sure, and his words hurt. What do you expect from wise sayings? But remember, my son, in the midst of any sort of similar stresses and doubts you yourself might experience, no matter how unnerving and “unorthodox” a question may come from your lips, no matter how much you are frustrated and even angry with God himself, remember this: fear God and keep his commandments.

This is not cheap advice, but gets at the heart of much of Israel’s traditional faith. The narrator is not saying “just shut up and do your Bible lesson.” He is saying that, however wise Qohelet’s observations truly are, that does not let one off the hook of continuing to fear and follow God *no matter what*. This is what your duty is. Verse 13 is the fourth use in the book of the Hebrew phrase *kol-ha’adam* (“the whole duty of man”). The previous uses pertained to the matter of seeking temporary satisfaction in one’s work (3:13 and 5:18), and the inevitability of death (7:2). But here, the narrator is saying something very different. Yes, the best we have in this life is the temporary satisfaction of our work; yes, death awaits us all. But, what trumps all is the duty to fear and follow God even as you work through the ups and downs of life. At the end of the day, God will judge justly, even though you don’t see it now (v. 14). To put it succinctly, the narrator is saying “Yes, Qohelet is wise. Pay attention to what he says, as painful as it might be. But, in the midst of all this, the higher good is to fear and follow God, who will eventually set all things right.” This is the theological message of the epilogue and it intersects quite well with the message of Gospel.

V. Ecclesiastes according to the Gospel

As we have seen, the narrator does not discount Qohelet’s anguish, doubt, and anger, but affirms them and even lauds Qohelet as wise. The proper perspective is not to minimize Qohelet’s suffering (as Job’s friends did to him), but neither is it to wallow there in endless speculation and despair. Neither option is left open for his readers. Rather, they are to fear and follow God, i.e., remain an Israelite, in covenant with God regardless of what may come.

The significance of Ecclesiastes for Christians involves us in a complex question of the nexus between “what it meant” and “what it means,” or, if you will, the overused word “application.” How one gets from then to now has in my experience proved to be a complex interpenetration

⁹ The Hebrew is quite emphatic, *wegam zeh*.

of factors both obvious and subtle.¹⁰ But to speak of the Christian significance of any OT book is to say that the setting of the interpreter (whether individual or community, however defined) presents itself as an influential factor in interpretation. To put it another way, the Bible does not have contemporary “significance” for anyone apart from a conceptual framework within which one makes sense of anything.¹¹ This certainly entails one’s individual time and place in world history. But for Christians, that conceptual framework is centered first and foremost not on our particular or personal life-settings, but on the gospel, which is to say on what God has done for his people and the world in and through the person and work of Christ.

For the gospel to form our grid for understanding Ecclesiastes is not a call to “see Christ” in every verse, or even every passage of the book, nor is it to discount Qohelet because we “know better.” Rather, the gospel forms our basic “hermeneutical posture,” i.e., that point of view from which we read and to which the meaning of Ecclesiastes will be applied. It is to acknowledge that the very questions we raise, the very way in which we interact with an ancient, Hebrew book like Ecclesiastes is profoundly shaped by our having been raised and united with the crucified and risen Christ. It is, in my view, precisely a failure to recognize this vital hermeneutical posture that has fostered the notion that a faithful, Christian reading of Ecclesiastes is demonstrated by deriving some immediate moral lesson from the book—an approach that will, in my opinion, drive one to ignore, overlook, brush aside, or actually mishandle portions of the book. Our outlook must rather be shaped by the knowledge that, on the one hand, Ecclesiastes has something to say on its own terms, and on the other hand, how we hear it and use it will be shaped in a most fundamental way by our living in the privileged setting of the post-resurrection cosmos.

All this is to say that any Christian interpreter of any Old Testament book, including Ecclesiastes, must purposefully endeavor to allow the two horizons of then and now to be in conversation with each other. And they must be in conversation. To repeat, I do not think that the cross and resurrection mean that the challenging peaks and valleys of Eccle-

¹⁰ I explore some of these issues, albeit briefly, in “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond the Modernist Impasse,” *WTJ* 65 (2003): 263-87, esp. 279-87.

¹¹ See for example the comment by D. McCartney: “When a person within a certain social context, who shares with the culture a certain way of thinking about reality, comes to a text, he or she understands that text in categories drawn from an already-extant understanding of everything” (“The New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament,” *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* [ed. H. M. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988] 104).

siastes can now be ignored. But it is still a conversation that embraces the powerful and liberating realization that we are living in the age of the inaugurated eschaton. It is this final, climactic stage in the drama of redemption that we now look back and say, “Now that we know where Israel’s story ends up, what difference does that knowledge make in how we understand previous stages in the story?” In other words, the “now” with which the “then” must be in conversation is not *exclusively* the “private now” of my personal experiences (although the personal dimension is certainly in play), but with the “eschatological now” of the new age (2 Cor 6:2) that dawned when Christ, the climax of God’s covenant with Israel, was crucified and raised from the dead. Only after this eschatological posture is allowed to exert its proper force do we as Christians bring Ecclesiastes to bear on the particular circumstances of our individual and corporate lives.

A Christian reading of Ecclesiastes must allow its own prominent peaks and valleys to define our hermeneutical landscape, while at the same time bearing in mind that there is another, grander landscape beyond the immediate horizon, against which Ecclesiastes can be seen in a different light. Interestingly, an analogy with the book of Ecclesiastes itself may illustrate the point. Just as reading the epilogue brings us to say to Qohelet, “yes you’re right, but there is something more,” so, too, does our post-resurrection vantage point bring us to look at Ecclesiastes as a whole and say “yes, you’re right, but there is something more.” The difference, of course, is that the “something more” of the epilogue is a reiteration of Israel’s traditional categories of fear and obedience. For us, the “something more” is the complex realization that, however bound we are to this same formulation, it is now reconfigured in the crucified and risen Christ, who paradoxically embodies *and* transforms Israel’s story.

Such an approach to understanding Ecclesiastes should ring true with those familiar with the role of suffering, doubt, despair, even anger towards God, in the Christian life. It is in this sense that Ecclesiastes can be seized by the church as the Word of God, not the ramblings of a tired, pessimistic, heretic in need of a little faith. After all, it is only people of faith who speak as Qohelet does. Rather, Qohelet forces us to see our own struggles and sufferings for what they are, never for a moment thinking that they should be sanitized or sugar-coated in any way, while also driving us to see how we, too, are to move through and ultimately beyond the suffering.

In this respect we see two ways in which the NT is very much in harmony with the reading of Ecclesiastes I have presented above. The NT is replete with passages where suffering and doubt are not minimized, but encountered. No one who has been a Christian for any length of time is

a stranger to suffering of some sort, and the NT is not at all shy about telling us that this is to be expected. When I as a Christian read Ecclesiastes, even in his darker moments, at times I think to myself, “Yup, I hear you. I have felt that way too.” Even though Qohelet may put things in a somewhat provocative way, few Christians I know would argue that his thoughts are unknown to them—even when it comes to crippling doubt and accusing God of some wrong doing.

The difference between Ecclesiastes and the NT, however, is that the intensity of the suffering of the Christian is, by the power of the Spirit, only matched by the joy and privilege of knowing that, precisely *in our suffering*, we are following in Jesus’ footsteps, even to the extent that we are filling up what is “lacking” in Christ’s suffering (Col 1:24). The narrator says to his son, “Keep moving: fear God, keep the commandments.” Jesus says to us,

Suffering will come. When you suffer you are becoming more like me. Do not allow your deepest, darkest thoughts to overcome you, even though I, more than anyone, understand what those thoughts feel like. I affirm your pain. I have known it. Follow me anyway. Keep moving. Even when NONE of it makes sense, and the easiest thing to do is cry out, “this is all absurd, I am getting nowhere.” I am not asking you to understand. I am asking you to follow—to pick up your cross and follow. I have uttered that very cry myself, when the Father was nowhere to be found. Follow me anyway, as I followed the Father.

The Book of Ecclesiastes presents a particular kind of cry, one of despair, doubt, frustration, and anger where God himself is called to account. A Christian who cries out as Qohelet did should not minimize or dismiss the sage’s observations, but press on in the Spirit, knowing that what sums up all of our existence is, to paraphrase 12:13-14, “follow Jesus anyway, no matter what.”