

Faith Pulpit

The Viewpoint of Ecclesiastes: Cynicism or Realism?

The book of Ecclesiastes is a conundrum to many people. Does it express a cynical view of life, or does it describe how a believer is to enjoy life? Our understanding of how to interpret this book makes a significant difference in how we apply it to our lives. In this issue of the Faith Pulpit Tim Little, professor of Old Testament at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, explores the differing views of how to interpret Ecclesiastes and gives his studied conclusions. In the accompanying article he explains several passages from Ecclesiastes in view of his interpretive framework.

Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes,¹ looked at the various areas of life and concluded that everything was vanity.² He started (1:2) and ended (12:8) his writing by stating, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Is vanity, however, the theological message of Ecclesiastes? Or should it be understood in a more positive light? Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, co-authors of *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, take differing views: “[one of us] understands Ecclesiastes to be an expression of cynical wisdom, which serves as a kind of ‘foil’ regarding an outlook on life that should be avoided; [the other one of us] understands the book more positively, as an expression of how one should enjoy life under God in a world in which all die in the end.”³ So is Ecclesiastes a warning to us of the vanity of life outside of a relationship with God or a message of how one can enjoy life despite its vanity?

Qoheleth, the Foil

Those who understand Ecclesiastes to be a foil (i.e., a contrast to the rest of the Bible’s teachings) interpret the majority of the book as “a brilliant, artful argument for the way one would look at life—if God did not play a direct, intervening role in life and if there were no life after death.”⁴ Ecclesiastes 12:13 and 14 is then understood as “a corrective, orthodox warning.”⁴ “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is

evil.”

Thus Ecclesiastes is viewed as the musings of a negative, pessimistic wise man who, at the end of life’s journey, found no meaning in life. He “is not satisfied merely to state that everything is meaningless; he specifies a number of areas and shows why they have no value.”⁵ He looked at toil in 2:17–23 and 4:4–6 and concluded that it was vanity. Oppression ruled on the earth (4:1–3; 5:8, 9). There was no satisfaction with political power (4:13–16), riches (2:1–11; 5:10–17; 6:1, 2), large families (6:3), or long life (6:6). “In each of these areas he encountered ‘meaninglessness’ and expressed his frustration that life is the way it is.”⁶ From this perspective even time (3:2–8) is vain. In his poem on time in 3:2–8, he concluded that the responsibility of the wise man is to do the right thing at the right time.⁷ Qoheleth realized, however, that he could not always do the right thing at the right time. “No one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (3:11b). Longman explains, “As a human being, he [Qoheleth] could never be certain that a given moment was the ‘right time,’ and this lack of knowledge, this lack of certainty, frustrated him to the point that he thought that life ‘under the sun’ was meaningless.”⁸ Thus to Longman, time is also vanity.

So breath of breaths! Everything is a breath! We live, we die, and we are forgotten. This is the best a life apart from God can offer. In this view Qoheleth serves as our example of how not to live.

Qoheleth, the Preacher of Truth

Was Qoheleth really a pessimistic man with a negative outlook on life because he did not have a relationship with God? Or was he a wise man and a believer in the one true God who saw and experienced life with all its vanities and concluded that we should take delight in the blessings that God has given us? Four considerations point to the latter conclusion.

Theological consideration

Qoheleth authored Scripture. How does the Spirit of God speak through a man to produce a divinely inspired work of God without that individual being a believer in God? Is an entire Biblical book, with the exception of a few controversial verses at the

beginning and the end, written by an unbeliever who, presumably, does not believe in the afterlife (3:18–21)? From my perspective this is not possible.

Longman, however, differs with this conclusion. He looks at the story of Job to reconcile the difficulty of having such pessimistic, nonorthodox teachings. He states, “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.”⁹

Longman's argument is that Job contains nonorthodox ideas, so Qoheleth could have done the same. Longman's view, however, cannot be substantiated because the two settings are different. In the book of Job God goes to great lengths to tear down the three friends' arguments and present correct teachings. In the end God is exalted, and man is put in his proper place. No doubt exists in the book of Job as to the orthodox teaching (Job 38—42). In Ecclesiastes, however, we are presumably given only two cryptic verses (12:13, 14) of corrective instruction, and, unlike Job, the primary author is the one who gives supposedly unorthodox advice.

Practical consideration

If Qoheleth indeed wrote from a cynical view of life, why would he write a book with which he disagreed completely and leave only a handful of verses at the end as his rebuttal?¹⁰ Therefore, the author could not have been presenting the cynical view of life. It seems better to understand these final two verses as the capstone of a message that has been proclaimed throughout the book. "This conclusion does not contradict what comes before, however, but brings the message to its proper conclusion—the one that Qoheleth has had in view from the beginning."¹¹

Structural consideration

Authors like Longman and Stuart downplay the positive passages of Ecclesiastes (e.g., 2:24; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18–20) and paint an incorrect picture of Qoheleth by overemphasizing select texts (e.g., 1:14, 15, 18; 2:17–23). The literary structure of Ecclesiastes,¹² however, points to the enjoyment texts as being Qoheleth's response to his "vanity" conclusions. Qoheleth decried the vanity of life in 2:1–23 but then gave his positive response in 2:24–26. Likewise, 5:18–20 gives a positive response to 5:8—6:9 and 8:15 to 6:10—8:17. Therefore, the enjoyment texts advise the reader how to live in spite of all the vanity around him. Everything is vanity! So how should you live in light of all the vanity? You should enjoy the blessings that God gives you.

Exegetical consideration

In Ecclesiastes 2:24–26 Qoheleth explained that people can enjoy life but only through a relationship with God. Is life meaningless outside of a relationship with God? Qoheleth would answer, "Yes." Although Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 could be understood as being negative and pessimistic, Qoheleth is seeking to answer the question, "What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). What is life all about? All people die and are forgotten (1:11), life cannot be figured out or mastered (1:15), there is no profit to pleasure/possessions (2:1–11), there is no longstanding profit to wisdom (2:12–17), nor is there profit to labor (2:18–23). Is there a lot of vanity leading up to 2:24? Yes, but Qoheleth explained how to live in spite of the vanity in 2:24–26.

What is life all about? It's about enjoying the blessings God has given you. Qoheleth did not speak of great riches in 2:24–26; he spoke of food, drink, and labor. How can someone enjoy these plain, ordinary blessings? Qoheleth answered, “By having a relationship with God!” “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God” (2:24). Notice that the enjoyment originates with God. Who takes delight in the things of this world? Those whom God allows! Ecclesiastes 2:25 takes this truth a step further, “For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, apart from Him?”¹³

So who can enjoy life apart from God? Qoheleth's answer is “nobody.” In chapter 2 Qoheleth looked at many “things” in which people, even today, seek to find pleasure. Qoheleth wrote that pleasure can be found in the simplest things if one has a relationship with God.

Conclusion

Qoheleth was not a pessimistic cynic but a wise man who learned how to live a godly life in a world filled with vanity. His message is consistent and sprinkled throughout the book: enjoy the blessings God has given you.

Works Cited

1. The authorship of Ecclesiastes is a hotly debated issue. For the purposes of this article we will use the ambiguous Qoheleth (from ?????? in Eccles. 1:1; sometimes translated Preacher or Teacher) to refer to the author of Ecclesiastes.
2. The word ??? (hebel) is a key word in Ecclesiastes occurring in more than 30 passages. It has been variously translated as vanity, meaningless, or futility to name a few. The literal meaning of hebel is “breath” as used in Isa. 57:13. Thus Ecclesiastes 1:2 would read, “Breath of breaths, all is a breath.” The metaphorical meaning of this word is debatable. The translation “vanity” does not do justice to the semantic range of hebel, but for the purposes of this article we will use the traditional “vanity” when referring to this word.
3. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 243.
4. *Ibid.*, 244.
5. Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 32.
6. *Ibid.*, 33.
7. “The book of Proverbs does not give a list of truths that are always, everywhere appropriate, but a series of principles that are to be applied at the right time” (Longman, 33).
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 38.
10. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 40; Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 20; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 19, 20.
11. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 20.
12. The structure of Ecclesiastes has been variously debated with some giving up entirely and claiming that it has no structure. However, certain parts of the book do have a clearly discernible structure. The phrase, “nothing is better,” occurs four times in Ecclesiastes and each time it is in the context of enjoying life (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15). In each of these texts, Qoheleth is giving advice on how to live in spite of all the vanity.
13. The NKJV reads, “who can have enjoyment, more than I?” There is a textual variant here and most scholars, including Longman, understand the suffix here to be the 3ms instead of the 1cs (“him” instead of “me”). For additional information see Jan de Waard, “The Translator and Textual Criticism (with Particular Reference to Eccl 2:25),” *Biblica* 60, no. 4 (1979): 509–529.

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