

Enjoying the Righteousness of Faith in Ecclesiastes

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The message of the book of Ecclesiastes is that life “under the sun” is הֶבֶל, *hebel*, that it is vaporous, ephemeral, and even absurd. This clear statement has caused considerable debate as to the book’s place within the canon. A sizeable number of scholars understand Qoheleth as either a heretical voice mocking the simplicity of books such as Proverbs, or a pessimist who sees no way out of the superficiality of life, or even an unbeliever whose shocking message must be brought into line by an orthodox epilogist. Not-so-unsympathetic scholars aver that, while part of the orthodox tradition, Qoheleth has pitched his tent at the extreme outskirts of acceptable teaching.¹ A closer look at the book, however, with an eye toward its relation to Genesis, especially chapters two through four, and its author’s understanding of righteousness (צִדִּיק) and approval (רִצְוָה), reveals that Qoheleth’s enjoyment imperatives are a believer’s proper, albeit paradoxical, response to a penultimate world that is, indeed, vaporous (הֶבֶל) “under the sun.” This essay will endeavor to demonstrate that a negative view of Qoheleth’s enjoyment imperatives is unnecessary; these statements should rather be understood as positive prescriptions. Just as importantly, merely viewing these imperatives as positive statements without clearly connecting them to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith impoverishes them and leads back logically to a negative view.

I. The Structure of Ecclesiastes

Discerning the structure or outline of Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult. Other than recognizing the epilogue as an integral unit, commentators offer so many varying solutions as to make consensus impossible. Nevertheless, one’s understanding of the structure of the book can impact one’s interpretation, and thereby how one views the author’s argument. Proposals by Norbert Lohfink, Choon-Leong Seow, and James Crenshaw illustrate recent approaches, each with strengths and

¹ Scholars engaged in this essay who present an essentially negative view of the teachings of Qoheleth include James Crenshaw and Martin A. Shields. Scholars that resonate with Qoheleth and see in his writing teaching that is integral to, or at least in concert with, Torah include Michael V. Fox, Eunny P. Lee, and Choon-Leong Seow.

weaknesses. After a brief survey of their contributions, another proposal will be offered which undergirds the thesis of this essay.

Norbert Lohfink offers an intriguing and complicated solution to the problem of the structure of Ecclesiastes. In his article "Das Koheletbuch: Strukturen und Struktur,"² and again in his English-language commentary of 2003,³ Lohfink posits two schema working at once, one of which appeals to the Hebrew mind and the other to the Greek. According to Lohfink, a linear structure can be discerned which divides the book into four major sections: 1:2-3:15; 3:16-6:9; 6:10-9:10; and 8:16-12:8. Lohfink then detects a chiasmic structure that runs concurrently through the book. The value of Lohfink's work is the way in which he shows the inherent balance within Ecclesiastes, especially in his chiasmic discovery. While by no means universally accepted, Lohfink's work opens windows into the text, windows that support the thesis that while all "under the sun" is הַבַּל, vaporous, there is still a hidden beauty to the work.

Choon-Leong Seow divides Ecclesiastes into two parts, each further divided into two sections, the first being a reflection upon life and the second concerned with related ethics. The first part is, according to Seow, the teaching that "Everything is Ephemeral and Unreliable." In light of this, the ethical response concerns how to cope with uncertainty. The second part is the reflection that "Everything is Elusive"; the ethic therefore concerns how to cope with risks and death.⁴ Seow's outline is simple and useful. Still, the emphasis on ethics seems off-focus from the nature of the questions that Qoheleth is asking. Twice, in 2:3 and 6:12, he asks, "What is good?" Certainly this can be understood as an ethical question. But is this question truly ethical, or is it deeply theological? If the question and its answers are simply ethical, then Qoheleth never raises his eyes from that which is under the sun. If the question is theological, then while the answer may still be ethical on one level, it will be given as a response of faith, which finds meaning "above 'under the sun.'" Furthermore, imposing this simple schema on the structure of the book appears to ignore other structural elements, as will be discussed below.

² Norbert Lohfink, "Das Koheletbuch: Strukturen und Struktur," in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie*, ed. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 39-121.

³ Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4.

⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 46-47.

James L. Crenshaw offers more of a list than an outline. He identifies twenty-five divisions—twenty-three if one excludes the superscription and the epilogues.⁵ Although Crenshaw's list should be seriously considered, perhaps the search for neat and tidy structures is a modern fascination. In support of this, Michael V. Fox's critique of proposed literary structures deserves a hearing.⁶ Fox notes that the drive to outline books has grown out of the Enlightenment. The scholarly preoccupation with outlines, he notes, often has less "effect on interpretation than a ghost in the attic."⁷ The debate rages on.

II. A New Proposal

There is a structural element in Ecclesiastes, however, that appears to be ignored by commentators. Qoheleth has significant sections which might be called either "poems" or "proverbs." Five such poetic-proverbial sections can be discerned: 1:2-11; 3:1-8; 7:1-13; 8:1; 10:1-11:4. Some commentators also consider 12:1-8 as a proverb-poem, but most translations do not follow suit, nor does this section break naturally from what precedes it.⁸ If the proposal is entertained that these five sections mark off natural breaks in Qoheleth's work, then the intervening words could be understood as his discussion and treatment of the proverb-poems. The theme of the first section, for example, is that "a generation goes and a generation comes." Qoheleth is asking what advantage (יִתְרוֹן) a man has in all his toil (עֲמָל). Qoheleth's point, as Seow has noted, is that life is ephemeral. What follows is the "Royal Narrative" of Qoheleth's great experiment. In the midst of this discussion is a major question of Qoheleth: "What is good for the sons of man to do under the heavens?"⁹ The opening poem seems to imply that there is no advantage to be gained. Nevertheless, Qoheleth asks what is good for man to be doing. He then continues explaining to his readers what he busied himself doing.

Section two begins with a poem about seasons and times (3:1-8). Qoheleth again asks what advantage (יִתְרוֹן) a worker gets from his toil. Qoheleth's discussion of this extends to the end of chapter six. In 6:12 he

⁵ James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 47-49.

⁶ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 147-152.

⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 149.

⁸ The new *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) treats more of Ecclesiastes as poetry than does BHS. This will undoubtedly affect future translations. See *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, vol. 18 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 25-53.

⁹ 2:3: אִי-זֶה טוֹב לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

asks the question of 2:3 again, but this time acknowledges human ignorance. Section three begins at 7:1 with a set of proverbs that are in the genre of "better than" sayings. Qoheleth makes some shocking judgments. The day of death is better than the day of birth; the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. Life is upside-down, and yet, "Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has bent?"¹⁰ His discussion continues with the theme that things are upside-down in this world. The righteous often perish; the wicked prosper.

Section four begins with a very short poem (8:1), in which Qoheleth asks, "Who is like the wise?" and "Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" He then takes up the issue of the benefit enjoyed by the one who fears God. Although he does not use the term "advantage" (יתרון), Qoheleth's statement has that term as its theme. Furthermore, his discussion takes the reader into what this essay claims to be the theological heart of Ecclesiastes: the topic of God's approval (רציה).

Section five begins with a set of concluding proverbs. While 10:1-4 contains many disjointed aphorisms, 11:5-6 appears to be Qoheleth's rebuttal to those who now, once again, assume that life will be predictable. Qoheleth then concludes with a very descriptive picture of the end, which, it will be argued, is at minimum a double-entendre. His conclusion is then summed up in the final two verses of the book, and is consistent with his entire argument. What is good for a man (2:3; 6:12)? "Fear God and keep his commandments." This conclusion is not inconsistent with the enjoyment imperatives, but is part and parcel with them, as this essay will endeavor to show.

As noted by Eunny P. Lee, the book of Ecclesiastes contains eight "enjoyment statements" (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7-10; and 11:7-12:1). While the "vaporous" (הבל) theme constantly sounds forth, the themes of fearing God and of enjoying life are also clearly present. Lee remarks, "Apart from the meaning of *hebel*, interpretive antinomies are evident in scholarly discussions of two of the most prominent motifs in the book: the enjoyment of life and fear of God. As in the case of *hebel*, these two themes are widely recognized to be critical to the book's teachings. . . . The more prominent of the two is the commendation of enjoyment."¹¹

Looking at the proposal that the structure of the book should take into account the poem-proverb sections finds each section of the book

¹⁰ 7:13: רָאָה אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יוּכַל לְחַסְּנוֹ אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה

¹¹ Eunny P. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qoheleth's Theological Rhetoric* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 2-3.

answering the question, "What is good?" with the answer: Enjoy! Life is ephemeral; therefore, "there is nothing better than to eat and to drink and to cause yourself to see good" (2:24). This comes from God's hand. Man has no control over the times and seasons, and cannot even discern them. Furthermore, life seems unjust. Three times Qoheleth insists on enjoyment (3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19). And in that last statement, he goes so far as to insist that enjoyment is good. It is God's gift (3:13; 5:19). Life is upside-down. Rejoice and consider; God has made them both (7:14). "Who is like the wise; who knows the interpretation of a thing?" (8:1). No one is and no one does; only God. Qoheleth commends joy (8:15) and urges his readers to eat and to rejoice (9:7); God has approved their works. Finally, Qoheleth takes up proverbs that appear to say that life is predictable, then urges his readers once again not to think in such a way. In 11:1-4 he says that those who wait for the perfect time end up never doing anything. Now is the time. Do it. And while doing all that you do, rejoice (11:9) and remember (12:1) that you will die, that judgment is coming. Everything under the sun is vaporous (הבל). But the proper response to this is not despair. The proper response of faith is to rejoice in the gifts of God, even the ones under the sun that will pass away.

No one outline of Ecclesiastes is completely satisfying. As Lee remarks, "this perennial problem, like so many issues in the study of Ecclesiastes, has polarized scholarly opinion."¹² Yet there is a progression of thought and a strange kind of balance that becomes more evident the longer one spends time with Qoheleth. Ecclesiastes is not a mess, but a masterwork that, perhaps in its very structure, sounds forth that all "under the sun" is vaporous (הבל), but there is more than just what is "under the sun."¹³

III. Begin at the End: The Eschatological Key

The structure of Qoheleth's argument is such that one cannot read his work piecemeal; it must be read through to the end. While the connection to the creation account of Genesis 2 and the account of the "fall into sin" in Genesis 3 is often recognized, given Qoheleth's statements about mankind's return to the dust, the eschatological notion of impending judgment is less often emphasized.

¹² Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 15.

¹³ Qoheleth "is dealing not with the works of God, which are good, true, and above the sun, but with the works that are under the sun, works that we carry on in this physical and earthly life." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), vol. 15: 15 [henceforth LW].

The concluding enjoyment imperative (11:9-10) is followed immediately by the admonition, "Remember your creator" (וּזְכֹר אֶת-בּוֹרְאֶיךָ). What follows is what Lee calls a "vivid depiction of the end."¹⁴ The question is: "What end is being described?" Fox notes three primary lenses through which 12:1-8 has been interpreted. These are the allegorical, the literal, and the eschatological.¹⁵ An allegorical reading understands the poem to describe the degeneration of the human body over time.¹⁶ Fox notes, however, that the problem with an allegorical interpretation is the arbitrariness of the supposed metaphors.¹⁷ The decoding of the metaphors is at the whim of the exegete. Seow also concurs that "an allegorical approach cannot be applied consistently throughout the text."¹⁸ A literal interpretation would take the words at face value. Fox notes a few possible ways in which the text can be read.¹⁹ One is to read the entire passage as a picture of human deterioration.²⁰ Another interpretation reads the text as referring to a funeral procession. Still, Fox admits, "some symbolism is recognized."²¹ A third lens through which to read this passage is to interpret it eschatologically. According to Fox:

This type of reading can be combined with either of the first two. The imagery that pictures the death and funeral of an individual is also suggestive of a day of vast calamity or even the destruction of the world. Koheleth is not describing the actual day of judgment or the world's end; he is depicting the death of an individual human with overtones of cosmic disaster. It is as if Koheleth is saying, when you die, a world is ending—*yours*.²²

Such an interpretation is much like the impression of Hebrews 9:27 that judgment follows immediately after death, and yet it links that judgment with Christ's return at the eschaton. Seow admits the probability that "an eschatological judgment is meant in 12:14, for the text suggests that everything hidden will be revealed, whether good or bad."²³ The picture of the end as presented by Qoheleth carries with it both the individual end of

¹⁴ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 79.

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes: the traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation* (The JPS Bible commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 76-77.

¹⁶ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 182.

¹⁷ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76.

¹⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 372.

¹⁹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76.

²⁰ But how this is not an allegorical interpretation of the meta-narrative Fox does not explain.

²¹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76.

²² Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76 (emphasis original).

²³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 395.

consider God's work. What God has bent, no man can straighten. Qoheleth then begins his commentary.

Qoheleth takes up the issue of the "under-the-sun" reality that often the man that is "righteous" suffers, while the man that does evil appears to get away with it and even to endure and to prosper. Surprisingly, Qoheleth does not use the word "vaporous" (הבלי) in this section, other than in 7:15, where he calls his life a "life of vapor" (בִּיַּיִ הַבֵּלִי). That some are righteous and others are evil is to him a given. But what is the nature of this righteousness? Rather than complaining over the reality that temporal blessings do not always follow the righteous, Qoheleth counsels against excess. What is the nature of this excess? Is he suggesting that one should sin some, or is he rather describing the reality of fallen human existence? Lee writes:

Wickedness and folly are known to destroy life (v. 17). But so, too, can zealous religiosity damage a person's vitality and well-being. Qoheleth therefore urges those who are prone to such over-righteousness to cease striving, and to allow mistakes in themselves and others as well (cf. vv. 21-22). Fear of God must be accompanied by an appropriate and realistic knowledge of the self if it is to be life-giving.²⁶

This statement implies that the righteousness that is appropriate is not based upon fastidious adherence to the law. Luther's comments are along the same line:

That is, forget about the highest law; measure yourself by your own foot and sing, "Know thyself." Then you will find in your own breast a lengthy catalog of vices, and you will say: "Look, I myself am still unrighteous, and yet I am tolerated by God and am not banished by people. Then why am I so carried away with fury that I harshly require of others what I do not achieve myself?" This is what it means to be overly righteous.²⁷

The point of this section is summed up in the words of 7:20: "There is not a righteous man in the land who does good and does not sin." This failure of all people to be truly righteous teaches that life "under the sun" will, as Lohfink states, not be lived under "an eternal and unchangeable moral law but rather according to an ethic qualified by concrete relationships,"²⁸ by a realization that one's fellows are broken by original sin.

Does Qoheleth, then, give up on living a good and "righteous" life? Is he counseling his readers to commit sin, or, rather, is he simply urging

²⁶ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 102.

²⁷ LW 15:122.

²⁸ Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary*, 98.

them to acknowledge that no one is perfectly righteous? "Do not be excessively righteous" sounds like an invitation to sin at least a little. Fox notes that this

sounds as if Koheleth would allow a moderate degree of wickedness. The commentators try to avoid this impression in various ways. Ibn Ezra claims the *rasha'* (wicked) here refers to worldly matters. . . . However, *rasha'* always refers to real wickedness. Koheleth is not advocating it but accepting its inevitability: all humans are inescapably flawed (7:20), but they can at least avoid being very wicked.²⁹

In this, Fox's comments agree substantially with Luther, whose position is that Qoheleth is not writing to instruct consciences before God, but rather about life in the world, even the political life.³⁰ Yet it must be remembered that for Luther, even the political life is life lived *coram deo*. Therefore, Luther can also say, "If this life were heavenly and angelic, nothing would happen unjustly; but our sinful nature cannot do anything but sin and be foolish."³¹ Qoheleth establishes that the righteousness that counts before God is not that of human moral perfection; all people commit sin, even the righteous (7:20).

The righteousness of the man in 7:14, who perishes in his righteousness, is the civic, or political, righteousness of the kingdom of the left. This is not the righteousness that counts before God, but the declaration of righteousness bestowed upon one by one's fellows. Qoheleth's counsel against excessive righteousness is a warning against considering oneself to be more righteous than others, and a warning not to consider this to be the righteousness that truly matters outside this vaporous (הבל) world. The temptation to focus on one's civic righteousness and constantly to measure oneself against others is pervasive, as illustrated by the Pharisees in the Gospels of the New Testament. It is also an admonition to be realistic in one's expectations of others. Qoheleth is a realist, who would warn his hearers that they too have fallen short in the same ways as others. Seow sums this up well: "The inevitability of wickedness is the very opposite of the hubris that believes in the possibility of being so righteous that one can avert death."³² The one who realizes his own failings will better be able to bear the shortcomings of others. Luther, whose teaching distinguishes between two kinds of

²⁹ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

³⁰ LW 15:133.

³¹ LW 15:123.

³² Choon-Leong Seow, "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control," *Interpretation* 55, no. 3 (2001): 246.

righteousness, one that avails before God and one that is for the neighbor's sake, states, "For just as it belongs to the righteousness of faith and spiritual righteousness to bear the weak in faith and to instruct them gently, so it belongs to political righteousness . . . to bear the defects of others, so that there is mutual toleration, by which we tolerate one another and wink at faults."³³

So far Qoheleth has taught what kind of righteousness does not count before God. It is not this civic, or political, righteousness. Has Qoheleth anything positive to say? While a more explicit explanation will follow below, herein Qoheleth still teaches a different kind of righteousness. This righteousness is the righteousness of faith. In 7:18 he states: "The one who fears God will go forth with both of these." The God-fearer is the one who does not pretend to be what he is not; he does not feign perfection. Seow remarks: "The fearer of God is one who knows the place of humanity, both human potential and human limitations. For Qoheleth in this passage the fear of God is the recognition of human limitations and the acceptance of divine will."³⁴ The one who fears God thus lives life *simul iustus et peccator*. The form of righteousness for Qoheleth is the same as for Paul the apostle; the form is faith. For Qoheleth, the fear of God "refers to mankind's living in knowledge of man's place in relation to deity."³⁵ Accepting one's place in relation to God is none other than accepting one's position, or rather suffering one's position, to be that of a creature and, therefore, as one that will rightly be subjected to the judgment of God. The person of faith acknowledges that he is not so righteous as to avoid the inevitable sentence of the unrighteous, namely, death. A creature is a receiver of life and of justification (or condemnation). The person of faith has received the judgment of imperfection (7:20) without argumentation. Rather than self-justification, "the fear of God, by contrast, embraces both the possibilities and the impossibilities of being human. It acknowledges that people are invariably *simul iustus et peccator*,"³⁶ as Lee has remarked. Thus Qoheleth's comment that "there is a [righteous man] perishing in his righteousness and there is an [evil man] enduring in his wickedness," while made in the midst of his vaporous (הבלי) life, is not itself followed up by the verdict of being vaporous (הבלי). It is God's eschatological sentence, and therefore is above all censure. "Both righteousness and wisdom are achieved through

³³ LW 15:127.

³⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 255.

³⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 57.

³⁶ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 103.

the fear of God,"³⁷ which means by faith. Qoheleth calls upon his hearers boldly to acknowledge their sinfulness, but to do so in utter trust in God.

V. The Meaning of "Fearing God" in Ecclesiastes

"The fear of the LORD," or as Qoheleth states it, "fearing God," is a recurring concept in the wisdom literature of the Bible. Qoheleth makes a strong statement about fearing God in 7:18. By fearing God, one will steer a proper course in life between hubris and wickedness. Seow remarks:

Such is the reality of a world where righteousness and wisdom are ultimately beyond grasp, and Qoheleth dares to state the case theologically—in terms of the all-important category: the fear of God. The view of human inability to grasp righteousness and wisdom would later be developed more fully by the apostle Paul. . . . Indeed, Paul takes the argument of Qoheleth to a christological conclusion, but the seeds of the gospel, as it were, have already been sown in "the Preacher's" proclamation of humanity's place before the sovereign and mysterious God whose world is ungraspable by mortals.³⁸

A world in which everything is הבל (gaseous, vapor, absurdity) might seem to be a prescription for despair. That God is in heaven and man is on earth and no one can find out what God has planned may appear to be a cause to lie down and die. Far from it! Rather, Qoheleth counsels joy, coupled with the fear of God. How is it that his observations do not end in desperation? Seow continues:

The unrelenting emphasis on the world's ungraspability may lead one to despair, except when one ponders also the equally persistent insistence of the author that everything is in the hand of a sovereign and mysterious God. This is the God of the Torah and, one might add, the God of all scripture. The *deus absconditus* (hidden God) of the book is none other than the *deus revelatus* (revealed God). The epilogue makes explicit what has been only implicit in the book, namely, that there is a theological-ethical implication in all this talk of *hebel*: one is to live life before this God who is both *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*.³⁹

The proper posture of mankind is to live in the fear of God. This fear is, in actuality, suffering oneself to be in a recipient relationship to God, both to God as creator and the giver of life, and to God as judge, the one who will judge everyone's works. This fear of God is thus nothing other than faith.

³⁷ Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23, no. 3 (1985): 257.

³⁸ Seow, "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control," 246.

³⁹ Seow, "Theology When Everything Is Out of Control," 248-49.

The one who is properly oriented toward God is the one who fears and trusts in him.

VI. The Doctrine of Justification in 8:2-9:10

We next investigate the second-to-last part of Ecclesiastes. The discussion of the text will be presented up to and including 9:10, even though, according to the structure proposed in this study, the section continues to 9:17, because the verses that follow do not impact the understanding of the key section of 9:7-10, but rather flow out from it. This second-to-last part of Ecclesiastes begins with the shortest of the poem-proverbs, in which Qoheleth appears to engage the questions, "Who is like the wise?" and "Who knows the meaning of anything?"⁴⁰ This is essentially the rendering of these words in NKJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV, and NIV. This is not, however, the only possible translation. Rendering דבר as "word" yields a different sense in the entire verse. The word דבר in this case is not a general statement. The דבר to which the question is directed is rather the following saying of the wise: *הַכִּמְתָּ אָדָם הַתָּאִיר פָּנָיו וְעוֹ פָּנָיו יִשָּׂא*. Although tricky to translate, the sentence can be rendered: "The wisdom of a man makes his face to shine and changes the hardness of his face." This would make the entire verse read: "Who is like the wise and who knows the meaning of the saying: 'The wisdom of a man makes his face to shine and changes the hardness of his face.'" This is essentially the translation put forward in the NJPS: "Who is like the wise man, and who knows the meaning of the adage: 'A man's wisdom lights up his face, / So that his deep discontent is dissembled'?"⁴¹

In all cases, the question appears to be rhetorical. As Fox states, "The implicit answer is 'no one'—no one is that wise!"⁴² There appears to be universal agreement among the commentators on this. The deeper question is whether or not this is Qoheleth's own final verdict. Does he agree that no one knows the meaning of this adage, or is he going to make his readers wrestle through to the end and help them limp toward an answer? If the more common translation is followed, then one must simply treat this as a stand-alone proverb, and the issue is moot. But if the saying (דבר) is this proverb, then, consistent with his methodology, Qoheleth wants to engage his readers and pull them deeply into this mystery. His discussion of this proverb follows. How is it that a man's face is lighted up,

⁴⁰ 8:1, *מִי כְּתוֹכֵם וּמִי יֹדֵעַ פֶּשֶׁר דְּבַר*, rendered, "Who [is] like the wise ones, and who knows the meaning (explanation, interpretation) of a thing (word, matter)?"

⁴¹ As found in Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 53.

⁴² Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

and, given all of Qoheleth's foregoing critique of wisdom, of what *genus* is this wisdom that does such a thing, that even changes the hardness of a man's face?⁴³

Throughout Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth has been arguing against the kind of theology that seeks to find God and to understand his way on the basis of what can be seen and discerned from life "under the sun." The theology of Qoheleth becomes crystal clear in 8:2-9:10. Human sinfulness is confessed in no uncertain terms. No man is so mighty that he can hang on to his spirit when his day of death comes (8:8). Death for Qoheleth is the proof that man is powerless. Qoheleth also takes up the result of God's forbearance. While he does not go so far as to say that God forbears so that man may be given an opportunity to repent, he does inform us what God's longsuffering actually works within the person. "Because a sentence is not carried out speedily against an evil deed, therefore the heart of the sons of man is fully set to do evil." Torah is replete with such stories, such as God's forbearance with Israel in the wilderness, that illustrate Qoheleth's point.

An equally important aspect of Qoheleth's theology concerns human ignorance. In 8:17 he writes that he has seen all the things that God has done. In other words, he has attempted to discover what can be known about God and his ways from the world around him. All he has been able to find out is that man cannot know anything about the will and purposes of the *deus absconditus*. "No matter how much man toils in attempting, he will not find it out" (8:17). Man cannot know from the temporal experiences of life whether God loves him or hates him (9:2). The ultimate proof of this is that everyone completes his life with the same end (מקרה), namely, death. It would thus appear, although Qoheleth does not say this, that the only logical conclusion that could be made from the common end of all people is that God hates all people. Qoheleth draws neither this conclusion nor its opposite, that is, that God loves everybody, but he does use this end (מקרה) as evidence that "the heart of the sons of man is full of evil and foolishness," which could also be translated as "madness (or insanity) is in their hearts" (9:3).

Therefore, it is in some ways surprising to read Qoheleth's words about it going well (טוב) with those that fear God. Qoheleth's argument as to why it goes well with those that fear God is absolutely consistent with his doctrine of human sin, inability, and ignorance. It does not go well with the God-fearer because such a person obeys the law, or seeks wisdom, or

⁴³ Or, as Seow translates this: "one changes one's impudent look." *Ecclesiastes*, 276.

makes sacrifices, or any such works. Rather it is well with the God-fearer simply because this one fears before God (8:12). Conversely, it is not well (טוב) with the one who does not fear God, not because of some laundry list of sins and offenses, but simply because he does not fear before God. Qoheleth has to make such an argument to be consistent. All have sinned. Everyone's heart is full of evil. Therefore, all human merit is excluded. Qoheleth preaches grace alone, even before he gets to 9:7.

In 9:7 Qoheleth arrives at the theological foundation for the enjoyment imperatives. He has counseled enjoyment six times previously, most recently in 8:15, where he commended enjoyment. There he stated that rejoicing and enjoyment of food and drink is the only thing that is good (טוב) for man "under the sun." A few words are in order here concerning this statement. It might appear that Qoheleth is counseling a hedonistic lifestyle. Such a reading of the text is unnecessary. In fact, a close reading precludes such a conclusion. Qoheleth is no hedonist. The eating and drinking that he urges is coupled with the commendation of rejoicing. The word שמח (rejoice, make merry) is used in the sense of rejoicing in God and his works (e.g., Deut 16:4, Judg 9:19, 1 Sam 2:1, Ps 31:8).⁴⁴ Given the current context—the preceding speaking of the one who fears before God, the following speaking of the days of one's life as days given to man—this is a rejoicing that is informed not by the horrors of a life of toil, but by the fear of God. Only such an eating and drinking coupled with rejoicing can sustain a person, accompanying him in his toil throughout the days of his life. Qoheleth is concerned not so much with the temporal (or eternal) fruit of toil as with the toil itself. He counsels his readers to find enjoyment in the very midst of toil, not in the results that it may or may not bring to the laborer. In this sense, Qoheleth is recovering for his readers a perspective on work (vocation) that regains what was lost in Eden. This can only be accomplished if the cause of the curse, mankind's refusal to live rightly related to God, that is, in a position of fear and faith, is undone.

"Go, eat your bread with rejoicing and drink your wine with a good heart, for God has already accepted with pleasure your doings" (9:7). This is the theological grounds for all the Enjoyment Imperatives. The word רצה ("accepted with pleasure") in the *Qal* means "take pleasure in," "be favorable to," "be well disposed toward," "to accept with pleasure," and even "to become friends with."⁴⁵ In the Septuagint the word was translated by the Greek word "εὐδόκησεν," which also means "he has approved" or

⁴⁴ See L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J.J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. M.E.J. Richardson (4 vols.; Leiden, 1994–1999), 1334.

⁴⁵ *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1281.

"he has delighted."⁴⁶ The word רצה occurs with "the accusative of a thing" in 9:7—with God as the subject of the sentence, the object being one's works.⁴⁷ The declaration of pleasure in the present context is thus directed specifically towards one's doings. The one to whom Qoheleth is speaking is the one who fears God. The one whose works are accepted with pleasure by God is the one who is righteous by grace through faith, living out his life of faith in the context of his vocation. Luther comments:

This exhortation applies to the godly, to those who fear God, as though he were saying, "You who are godly, do what you can, because you know that God approves what you do." This is the height of spiritual wisdom, to know that one has a gracious God, who approves our works and actions. Thus Rom. 8:16 says, "It is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." For unless our heart immerses itself in the will and good pleasure of God, it can never sweeten its bitterness of heart; it will always remain bitter unless the heart is filled with the good pleasure of God. This passage ought to refute those who conclude from the mistranslation of the earlier words (v. 1), *whether it is love or hate man does not know*, that men should be uncertain about the will of God toward us.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, and F.W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1979), 319.

⁴⁷ This same grammatical structure (רצה with the accusative of a thing) occurs in Deut 33:11, Prov 16:7, and 1 Chr 29:17. The first of these is the blessing of Moses upon the tribes of Israel, just prior to Moses' death and Israel's entry into Canaan. In Deut 33:11, it is the work of Levi's hands that Moses asks God to "accept." That work would be the sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests. The Proverbs reference says that when a man's ways are "pleasing to the Lord," God even makes his enemies to be at peace with him. The immediately prior verse speaks of atonement for iniquity. The context thus implies propitiation and acceptance (justification). The reference in 1 Chronicles is from David's prayer prior to his death. God tries the heart and "delights" in the upright. The verse also speaks of joy. When the word רצה is used with the accusative of a person, we find God accepting a man, that he may see God's face with joy (Job 33:26), God's acceptance of his people when they return to him (Ezek 20:40), and his acceptance of them after they offer sacrifices (Ezek 43:27). In the section in the book of Job, Elihu speaks of repentance, then states, "And he will pray to God, and he [God] will accept him (רצה) that he may see his face in joy and restore to man his righteousness." The context speaks of the restoration of righteousness, which is none other than justification by grace through faith. The passages in Ezekiel likewise speak of restoration, although the context is eschatological. God's רצה of his people's works, especially in this context in Ecclesiastes, does not imply God finding anything pleasing in his people, but rather taking pleasure in—delighting in—his people. God's רצה of his people and their works is an act of sheer grace.

⁴⁸ LW 15:148–149 (emphasis original).

Luther makes a very important point. The “height of spiritual wisdom” (recall the question of 8:1) is to know that one has a gracious God. How to know God’s will is part of the problem with which Qoheleth has been forcing his readers to wrestle. Man cannot know God’s will by probing into the *deus absconditus*, by reasoning out God’s will through a process of evaluating the apparent fate or end of individual people. The common end of all precludes this. Rather, God’s will, and God’s will toward one, can only be determined by hearing the expression of that will from the *deus revelatus*. This *deus revelatus* has spoken, and his words are inscripturated. Thus, by returning his readers to the creation account of Genesis, which undergirds the entire book, Qoheleth points to that which is most certain and true. God has given work to mankind. He did so before the Fall, and he has commanded man to toil since the Fall. Thus it is through living by faith (the fear of God) within one’s vocation that one knows the grace of God, the acceptance of one and one’s works. The one who lives life in the revealed will of the God of the Torah knows God’s grace and favor. Qoheleth is urging his readers to abandon a theology that seeks to understand God by probing the *deus absconditus* and to find God solely where he has willed to be found as *deus revelatus*. This understanding leads to the conclusion that the closing verses of Ecclesiastes are consistent with Qoheleth’s theology and purpose.

It must be made clear that Qoheleth is not urging his readers to find the grace of God in the results of their works. He is not teaching what is called “works righteousness.” Ecclesiastes reveals that one cannot know anything about God by seeking his acceptance in a system based on distributive righteousness. Qoheleth’s complaint, if one wishes to call it a complaint, is that the system is broken.

Whether it is love or hate, man does not know by what is before him—everything to everyone according to one end: to the righteous, to the wicked, to the good, to the clean, to the unclean, to the one who sacrifices, and to the one who does not sacrifice. As to the good, so also to the sinner, to the one who swears, as to the one who is frightened of an oath (Ecc 9:1b-2).

Thus no verdict that God takes pleasure in anyone can be ascertained by works of the law. All this falls under the *deus absconditus*, and from him no comfort ever comes. Therefore, this grace of God can only be found where God has revealed himself as the God of grace, and that is in his word—which is that to which Qoheleth points his readers, even if it might appear that he does so obliquely.

This life of faith is the basis for Qoheleth's imperative to his readers to "see life" (9:9). The word "see" (ראה) figures prominently throughout Ecclesiastes. It is also a recurring term in Genesis 1 and again appears in the following chapter with the need for the making of the woman. In Genesis 1, it is persistently linked with the word טוב. The first appearance of both of these words is in Genesis 1:4. God says, "Let there be light." And there was light. Then we read, "and God saw the light, that it was good" (וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב). Claus Westermann comments:

The first sentence of v. 4 has a structure peculiar in Hebrew which is difficult to translate adequately. W.F. Albright, "the Refrain 'And God Saw ki tôb' in Genesis," *Mélanges bibliques, en l'honneur de André Robert*, 1955, 22-26, translates: "And God saw, how good was" or in other places, "And God saw, that it was very good." The procedure in itself is quite clear: a craftsman has completed his work, he looks at it and finds it is a success or judges that it is good. The Hebrew sentence includes the "finding" or "judging" in the act of looking. He regards the work as good. The work was good "in the eyes of God," it exists as good in God's regard of acceptance.⁴⁹

The act of seeing is a declarative or forensic act. It is the sentence of judgment. God declares his creation acceptable in his eyes. Westermann's comment that the work is good "in the eyes of God" recalls the words of Genesis 6:8, where Noah finds favor in the Lord's eyes (וַיִּרְחַם יְהוָה עַל-נֹחַ). Nahum Sarna also attests to the "seeing of creation as good" as an act of judgment by God, calling it "a formula of divine approbation."⁵⁰ Thus the act of "seeing good (טוב)" and רצה (accepting with pleasure) are in many ways parallel.⁵¹ In 9:9 the reader is counseled to "see," that is, urged to make a judgment about life that is contrary to what the eyes and the "under the sun" reason might cause him to make. What God has justified, declared approved (רצה), see (ראה) as good and enjoy.

White garments and oil upon the head are fitting for the person who sees life rather than death. This life which Qoheleth urges his reader to enjoy in 9:9 is lived in companionship with the woman the reader loves, with his wife. Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler note that this is

⁴⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 113.

⁵⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: the Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (The JPS Torah commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 7.

⁵¹ The word ראה occurs in the context of seven out of the eight Enjoyment Statements in Ecclesiastes (2:24; 3:13; 3:22; 5:17; 7:14; 9:9; 11:7).

“the only reference to a wife in the book”⁵² of Ecclesiastes. While this reference may appear to be an unexpected intrusion, especially given the supposed misogynistic comments in 7:26–28, it is possible that this mention of the wife is another key for Qoheleth’s readers to recall God’s gift of a woman to the man in Genesis 2. Fox remarks, “In spite of his acrid comments about women in 7:24–29, Koheleth does not think it is good for a man to be alone.”⁵³ Man is to live life with a female counterpart all the days of his life, for this is his portion in life and in his toil. That family life is part of God’s command and gift to man is even to be found in the curse placed upon the woman (pain in childbirth). But also the “promise of the seed” is to be found there, as God promises that deliverance will come through the “seed of the woman.” If this is the case, it adds weight to the thesis that Qoheleth is urging his readers to look to the *deus revelatus*.

Qoheleth’s final causative phrase is found in 9:10. Man is to give himself fully, with all his might, to his work—to his vocation—because “there is no scheming or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.” Is this an unexpected turn for him? It should not be thought of in such a way. Qoheleth the realist will not let his readers lose sight of the fact that life “under the sun,” which is precisely where his readers (whom he urges to fear and trust God) live, is lived under the curse of death. They live—yes, even people of faith live—in the absurdity of a world gone wrong.⁵⁴

VII. Conclusion

Still, now is the time for life, with all its scheming, all its knowledge, and all its wisdom—which are all partial and flawed at best—and for vocation. Faith lives life knowing that life will end, and faith finds life as a gift from God to be enjoyed. Enjoyment is thus the proper, albeit paradoxical, expression of the faith of a believer living in a penultimate world. Qoheleth asks the question, “Who is like the wise and who knows the meaning of the saying: ‘The wisdom of a man makes his face to shine and changes the hardness of his face?’” (8:1). His answer as to what it is that can make a man’s face shine (with joy) and change his countenance is found in God’s acceptance of one’s doings, based upon, as Luther puts it, the discovery of a gracious God. The righteousness of faith is the answer.

⁵² Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers; Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 210.

⁵³ Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 63.

⁵⁴ NIV’s choice of the word “meaningless” here obscures the point. Life is not meaningless, but it is absurd.