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The God of Qohelet: Positive Divine Attributes for an Age of Technology

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ABSTRACT

The book Ecclesiastes has been regarded as one of the most profound pieces of “wisdom” literature in the ancient Orient. It rivals in depth and the courage to challenge the institutional status quo with the literature from Mesopotamia and Egypt. It has puzzled readers in the last three millennia with its unparalleled courage to ask uncomfortable questions about faith, gods and humanity. Ironically, many of the questions that Ecclesiastes asked have found reverberations in the hearts of post-modern men and women today. On the one hand, the author affirms his belief that one can discern the “hand of God” dispensing justice even in the most tragic of circumstances. On the other hand, Ecclesiastes confesses that, even though he applied his heart “to know wisdom and to know madness and folly,” in the end he perceived “that this also is but a striving after wind.” His conclusion? “Vanity of vanities: all is vanity!” Statements like these have compelled us to approach Ecclesiastes in order to find the equilibrium in his vision between “despair” and “hope.” To do so, we will select a number of divine attributes that offer clarity not only to the vision of God in Ecclesiastes, but also to the sensitive issues of the meaning of life, suffering, justice, death and eternity. In the course of our analysis we will examine the views of contemporary scholars who have written on this subject. We will show how Ecclesiastes’ vision takes into account human suffering and despair, without sacrificing the integrity of hope.

KEY WORDS: Ecclesiastes, death, creation, God, immortality.

INTRODUCTION

Technological advances characterize our society more than anything else today. Specifically, the fields of artificial intelligence and nano-technology have been merging very optimistically to the point of raising possibilities that one would have found hard to believe a few decades ago. For example, even though many scientists doubt that scientists will be able to repair and enhance the DNA in order to prevent the body from aging, more and more voices are taking this possibility very seriously. It looks like the quest for immortality has not changed

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from the Epic of Gilgamesh until today.² And technology keeps this quest alive even if the majority of its proponents suspect that they will most likely not among the beneficiaries. As Yuval Harari puts it, “it is not easy to live knowing that you are going to die, but it is even harder to believe in immortality and be proven wrong.”

When it comes to the question of the existence of God, however, the technological age offers too little for anyone to be optimistic. In fact, most of AI visionaries do not share the fundamental Judeo-Christian vision on life. We could say that, in a sense, the religious outlook today may be as bleak as during the days in which Ecclesiastes was written. With its motto “Vanity of vanities: all is vanity!”, the book of Ecclesiastes fits rather well within the confines of the twenty first century. Perhaps that is why Duanne Garret calls it “the Bible’s resident alien.”³ It is true that the book does not share the religious skepticism or the atheism of authors like Reese, Harari, Kurzweil and de Grey. Still, the questions that it raises made Ecclesiastes a voice that the technological age, with its emphasis on creating artificial consciousness, cannot afford to ignore.

There is a certain nuance of mystery, one that evades the Western preference for systematization, in the way Qohelet unveils his portrait of God.⁴ But Qohelet has many things to say about God; some of which echo the ancient affirmations which Israel’s scriptures made about Him, like justice, mercy, holiness, and the like, and others that do not. The question we want to ask, however, is if one may include “mystery” into Qohelet’s vision of God, and then, along with the other attributes of God which the author lists throughout his book, to draw a portrait that will make better sense to the reader. We are aware that there is an inherent risk of *artificiality* that comes with selecting only those passages which describe God.⁵ However, since the author always reasoned about God in relation to other

² Thus Byron Reese, *The Fourth Age: Smart Robots, Conscious Computers, and the Future of Humanity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 306-309, and Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017. Kindle Books), 23-26, citing gerontologist Aubrey de Grey and Ray Kurzweil, two of the leading exponents of the view that within the next hundred years it is likely that science will triumph over death.

³ D. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1993), 254.

⁴ Roland Murphy sees the concept “work of God” as Qohelet’s way of preserving a certain mystery about God, never really giving the reader the satisfaction of having understood the ways of God in the world. Hence, “he repeatedly and explicitly describes the work of God as unknowable.” “The Sage in Ecclesiastes and Qohelet the Sage,” in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, J.G. Gammie and L.G. Perdue eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbraus, 1990), 269.

⁵ One way in which this can be done would be to analyze each verse which deals with our subject according to the book’s verse order. A better approach, we think, is to group the “God” references according to related topics, i.e., verses which deal with God’s moral attributes, and so forth (the topical approach). This would represent a departure from the original outline of the book, but at

themes, we will consider them both as immediate contexts for the references to God and as components of the author's world-view, out of which we hope we will present a correct picture of some of the most important attributes of the God of Qohelet.

THE PHENOMENON OF VANITY

The book of Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most puzzling piece of literature in the entire Old Testament.⁶ As we will argue later, if one does not grasp the unique literary and rhetorical structure of the book, he or she will fail to understand and to accept the unitary vision of the book. Its author is a master of controversy, and that only because he employed controversy is a literary device.⁷ He will declare defeat on the answer to the question of where will the human spirit go after death, only to assert later that the spirit will ascend to God, who created it?

Regarding the theological vision of the author, even though he does not doubt that God exists, he wonders at times whether He is good, all-knowing, or all-powerful. The reason why the author raises questions like these is that life seems often times quite meaningless. Before exploring the content attributes in the book of Ecclesiastes, one needs to ask what did the author of Ecclesiastes mean by "vanity"? The word *הֶבֶל* (vanity) occurs 38 times in this book alone, and Ecclesiastes "makes the most individual use of" it.⁸ Citing C.C. Forman, Garrett considers the possibility that "the frequent refrain that all is 'meaningless' may

least it has the advance of coherence and order, which is essential when trying to isolate a given theme of the book.

⁶ It is not our purpose here to explore the history of scholarship on the issue of date and the authorship of Ecclesiastes. The history of scholarship is rich in diversity on this issue. On this topic one may want to consult C-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 36-47, and T. Longmann III, "Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation," *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, T. Longmann, P. Enns, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 140-49. For the present, we will assume with Garrett that "the nature of the text can coexist with the idea of Solomonic authorship" and that "as we read the book, we are more and more absorbed in the words not of 'King Solomon,' but of 'Solomon-become-the-Teacher.'" Thus *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 264.

⁷ Note Salyer, G.D., *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (London: A&C Black, 2001), especially "The Epistemological Spiral: the Ironic Use of Public and Private Knowledge in the Narrative Presentation of Qohelet," 167-238, and Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279, for the fact that "one of the features that makes the structure of Ecclesiastes so difficult to discern is its nonlinear arrangement," which is less like a chronological development and more "a set of circles that return to the same point," that is, the pattern of a "spiral."

⁸ Thus K. Seybold, "hebhēl," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:313-20.

be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam.”⁹ Specifically, the interjection “Vanity!” (hevel) would have evoked the brutal death of Abel (hevel) as “result of sin.”¹⁰ Even though semantically הֶבֶל ranges from the literal sense of “breath, whiff, puff, steam” to the notion of “deep emptiness” , “absurd,” and the prepositional phrase “in vain,” in Ecclesiastes it usually describes the feeling of “futility” and “worthlessness.”¹¹ This experience has both an emotional and an intellectual dimension. Emotionally, it echoes the feeling of frustration conveyed at the very beginning of the book by the interjection lament: “Vanity!” (Eccl 1:2).¹² The intellectual aspect is evidenced by the idea that “under the sun,” that is, as far as the human mind can comprehend reality, some things remain |incomprehensible, unintelligible.”¹³

As a religious book, one would expect Ecclesiastes to focus mainly on the question of the existence and providence of God. As a sapiential work, however, the book also deals with the sensitive issues of the futility of pleasure, even intellectual pleasures, the meaning of work and of material accomplishment, and the danger inherent in human relations. And yes, Ecclesiastes accepts the raw challenges of undeserved and unpunished suffering, and the agony over the question of life after death. The manner in which he appears to appease this feeling of agony is to insist upon the only reality that one can be sure of: the nature of God.

POSITIVE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES IN ECCLESIASTES

According to Thomas Oden, “attributes of God are qualities that belong to God’s essential nature and that are found wherever God becomes self-revealed.”¹⁴ Although *Ecclesiastes* bears the stamp of Wisdom Literature, at no point did the

⁹ Thus C.C. Forman, “Koheleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JJS* 5 (1960): 256-63, op. cit. in Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 279.

¹⁰ Both words have the same vowels and consonants, and the accent falls on the same vowel: הֶבֶל. Thus L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000, BibleWorks module).

¹¹ Thus C-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47, and D.J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 281; J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. Israel’s Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 590-91; P. Enns, “Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, 121-32;

¹² Note, however, the view of T. Longmann III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 61, that the translation “vanity” may be problematic due to the fact that today it is “primarily used in reference to self-pride.” Longman opts for “meaninglessness” instead of “vanity.” See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47, for the sense of “anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory.”

¹³ Seybold, “hehbel,” 3:318.

¹⁴ *The Living God* (New York: Harper, 1992), 35.

author think of God as the God of the philosophers.¹⁵ It is true that Qohelet reflected on philosophical themes like the meaning of life, happiness, work, pleasure, and justice, but he arranged them in a form which escapes precise definition, in part because the Qohelet employs a poetical style as well.¹⁶ So, is it appropriate even to bring up the idea of divine attributes? We believe that it is. In the first place, Qohelet uses the word *Elohim* some forty times in twelve chapters.¹⁷ And secondly, many of these occurrences involve some forms of divine activity, like creation, or exercising providence and dispensing justice, which entail the existence of attributes i.e., wisdom, power, being just, and the like. It may not be fully consistent with Semitic thought to portray God in Platonic or Aristotelian categories, but it would be equally unwarranted to exclude the possibility of distinguishing among the activities of God (as described in Ecclesiastes), and arranging them in a framework that will allow one to understand better Qohelet's religion.

1. *Eternity*

Two of the problems that consumed most of Qohelet's attention were the sense of meaninglessness and injustice. For example, he expressed the attitude of "meaninglessness" whenever he observed that human beings will never attain lasting fulfillment and happiness, no matter how hard they work, or how wise or rich they have become (chapter 2). His disillusionment appears to be so deep that everything that is done under the sun is "vanity and a striving after wind" (Eccles 1:2, 14; 2:17).

Now, injustice is an interpersonal and societal problem. It may or may not give birth to ultimate questions such as the existence of God and life after death. The feeling of meaninglessness, however, forces one to wonder whether life as he or she experiences it is all there is. And contrary to what many scholars claimed, the book Ecclesiastes took a more positive view on the issue of life after death and eternity.

Throughout the book Qohelet uses the expression "*under the sun*" as a means of delineating the stage – spatial and/or temporal – in which human life is played, especially the events that have to do with the living, not the dead.¹⁸ But

¹⁵ A notable exception, among others, is Paul Tillich, who called Qohelet the "great existentialist of his period; *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE, : University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 168, noting that the spirit of the Preacher "fills our philosophy and our poetry."

¹⁶ Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279.

¹⁷ Whether the omission of the Tetragrammaton is intentional or not in Ecclesiastes remains outside of the scope of our paper. The matter, nevertheless, remains worth exploring.

¹⁸ The phrase appears some 29 times in Ecclesiastes alone. It may be rendered as "in our physical universe," or "the world as we know it." Note, however, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 113, who argues that, unlike the phrase "under the heavens" – which is a "spatial designation (referring to what

indirectly, this phrase creates the impression that God's world is different from our own. It is true that God appears to be intimately involved in human affairs in "the world as we know it" (he gives wisdom, happiness; he administers justice; he approves or disapproves certain things, etc.). But for Qohelet, God does not seem to be affected by the unfolding of historical events, even those that pervert the pristine order he intended in the first place (7:29). In other words, God transcends both the physical and the temporal limitations of life under the sun. Perhaps that is why Qohelet used only the name Elohim to speak about God, never "God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh."¹⁹ We know that Ecclesiastes is a highly structured piece of literature, and that the author had a clear rhetorical purpose in choosing a term against another and affirming realities that seem to contradict each other. Even so, he does not picture Elohim as an indifferent deity. Thompson's idea that the joy that comes from God is like a "narcotic that numbs the recipient to the true nature of reality" does not do full justice to Qohelet's vision of God.²⁰

Perhaps the most direct reference to the transcendence of God against time, and implicitly the eternal dimension of humanity, is found in 3:11, "He has made everything beautiful in *its time*; also he has put *eternity* into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

The term "eternity" has troubled interpreters because of the different ways in which the word עולם (*olam*) can be translated.²¹ Generally, the debate is concerned with whether this word is used with a positive or a negative

is happening in the world)" – the expression "under the sun" denotes a temporal reality which refers to "this world of light and life, as opposed to the world of darkness in the netherworld."

¹⁹ Thus Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 35, stating that Qohelet's use of the name Elohim "leaves the reader with a sense of distance between God and Qohelet," while Yahweh "would invoke warm, covenantal feelings and memories." Likewise Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 56, argues that "this deity does not relate personally with anyone..., God does not enter into a covenant with anyone." Seow does allow for the possibility of an intentional theological device here. In his view, "Qohelet appears to be so intent on avoiding any reference to divine immanence that he does not risk even the language of divine omnipresence."

²⁰ God gives wisdom to the one who pleases him (3:26), He gives people wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, as well as joy in their heart (5:19-20), God created humans as upright (7:29), He will do good to those who fear Him (8:12). In Eichrodt's words, the Preacher knows that "joy can be praised as the first the Creator's gifts." In *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, translated by J.A. Baker (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1967), 494.

²¹ Note, עולם, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, for the sense of "long time" or "duration," "eternity," but also "future time" or "times to come." The word also refers to immemorial ages or "prehistoric times" (Isaiah 51:9). It applies to God in the formula "everlasting God." The LXX translates ~l[o with aivw,n, usually in stereotypical way with the sense of "eternity," or in the formula "for ever" (eivj to.n aivw/na cro,non), in *The Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie eds. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003. BibleWorks module),

connotation. In Barton's view *olam* should be rendered as "ignorance" (with a segolate noun vocalization) a thought similar to Genesis 3:22, or the *Story of Adapa*, where the gods were concerned that humans may become their equal.²² Gordis reviews the noun's meaning in several contexts, and concludes that the idea of "the world," found also post-biblical Hebrew, fits best with Qohelet's overall purpose.²³ Murphy and Seow adopt a more positive interpretation, seeing עולם as "duration" (Murphy) or, as Qohelet used it in other instances (3:14; 1:4, '0; 2:16; 9:6; 12:5) simply "eternity" (Seow).²⁴ According to Seow, human beings are caught up in a tension between the awareness of time and eternity, which underscores the theme of "ephemerality" so characteristic to Ecclesiastes. "God is responsible for giving both *time* [the first part of the verse: "everything beautiful in *its time*"] and *eternity*.... Humanity knows of *eternity*, but can only cope with activities in their *time*" (italics mine).²⁵ If the author saw עולם as "eternity," then we have here an implicit allusion to God as eternal, or at least, as able to implant a sense of eternity in the human heart.

Viewing eternity as a human experience, scholars have debated whether Qohelet believed in human immortality or that he intended this passage as a reflection only on God's eternity.²⁶ Most list a number of passages that portray a rather pessimistic view of life after death.²⁷ Notice the following:

"For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has

²² George Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 105. A similar interpretation is adopted by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 97, who considers other instances where "olam" can mean "something hidden," or "a dark counsel" (see Job 28:21, 42:3, and also Ugaritic and Phoenician inscriptions).

²³ Robert Gordis, *Kohelet. The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 231. Similarly, H.D. Preuss, "olam," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 330-345.

²⁴ Ronald E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 35. See also C.L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 163. For the sense of "long time," "prehistory" or even "future apocalyptic times" see "Olam," *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

²⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173, and Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 314, who shows that "under the sun, this sense of the eternal cannot be satisfied, because humans are unable to grasp the whole divine plan." Similarly, Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 299, for the "sense of alienation and bewilderment in time" that is stirred by eternity in our hearts. We feel, Garrett adds, that we are "grieved to be trapped in time."

²⁶ For a more recent statement on this issue see Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians*, 246, who argues that "the Israelites had no hope of heaven, and...had no fear of hell." In the case of Ecclesiastes, Walton argues for "only one possible destiny after death: Sheol, which was clearly not a place of reward, but neither was it a place of punishment (Eccles 6:6)."

²⁷ Note Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. Israel's Faith*, 644, for the view that Qohelet found no evidence that human beings "would enjoy a positive afterlife."

no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?" (3:19-21)

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going" (9:10)

"So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity" (11:8)

Nevertheless, passages like 3:11, 12:5 and 12:7 show that the statements that Qohelet made about death and immortality have to be understood not only philosophically, but rhetorically as well.²⁸ On the one hand he wonders if the spirit (רוּחַ) of "man goes upward..." (3:21), while on the other he states that matter will return to earth, from which it came, and the spirit (רוּחַ) "shall return unto God who gave it" (12:7). If no hard, syllogistic affirmations were made about human immortality – not at least with the eschatological terminology of the New Testament – it was because, first, the role of Ecclesiastes was to question life with an intentional "under the sun" perspective.²⁹ One that stated the truth in the context crisis, "making us feel the emptiness of life and the attractiveness of a God-filled life that leads to contentment with one's earthly lot."³⁰ Second, Ecclesiastes belonged to a unique Wisdom genre that, like Job, did not revert to "a simplistic retributive theology" to unlock the difficult questions of life and death. And third, Qohelet did reveal his belief that human beings would experience life after death in a spiritual manner (notice 12:5, man is going to "his eternal home" – בֵּית עוֹלָם).³¹

In closing, it is worth mentioning that in close connection with the attribute of eternity is that of "transcendence." Thus Qohelet states in 5:2, do not "let your

²⁸ Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279: for the literary pattern of the "spiral."

²⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 304, agrees with the conclusion that "Ecclesiastes asserts that humans are mortal," a characteristic that they share with the animals. This is not, however, an assertion that "no form of afterlife whatsoever is possible for humans." Ecclesiastes does not build an "either...or" argument, but a "both...and" one. "Because by nature we are dependent and contingent, our hope of eternal life must be founded in God and not ourselves (Eccl 12:7, 13-14)."

³⁰ L. Ryken, "Ecclesiastes," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, L. Ryken and T. Longmann eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 268-80, op. cit. in Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 279.

³¹ H.D. Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, translated by L.G. Perdue (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 133, for the idea, in spite of the fact that "the human person is on the way to his or her eternal home" (Eccl 12:5), life "is still worth living." Preuss doubts, however, whether in the religious worldview of Qohelet there existed an "equalization or retribution in the future life."

heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.” Evidently, the author was not concerned with the nature of God’s dwelling, but with the human attitude toward God, namely, with “caution, reverence, restraint, moderation, and sincerity.”³² But implicitly, we are made aware of God “as Wholly Other, the transcendent One.” Here, the *transcendence* of God functions as a reminder of both who people are and how they should approach Him. R.B.Y. Scott believes the sage “is expressing his contempt for thoughtless participation in cultic worship.”³³ This “casual” attitude toward the deity was also criticized in the *Egyptian Instruction of Ani*, where one is urged not to be “free with him.” We conclude, however, that if Qohelet appears to view God as an overly transcendent deity, it is for a specific methodological reason. In the midst of everything transient, something or someone must remain unchanged. That is why we should never disregard the distance that separates humans from God, or view Him as a person who can be manipulated.³⁴ That Qohelet does not insist on divine immanence may be due simply to his specific theological agenda for this book, not to his general theological vision about God. It is the thought of God as *transcending the temporal element* that shapes the human response in a world that He created good, but which turned evil.³⁵

2. Creation

In the view of Eichrodt, “there is no doubt that the Preacher has modelled his life on the creation story in Genesis.”³⁶ What Eichrodt alludes here to is Ecclesiastes 3:11. The Preacher (Qohelet) “knows that the Creator has made everything beautiful in its time, and has put eternity in Man’s heart, thus binding him inwardly to himself.” Even though the verb עָשָׂה has a wide range of applications and subjects (human beings included) in the mind of the original readers it has clear overtones from the act of creation recorded in Genesis. In fact, it is the most important and widely used word in the narrative of creation, where it appears some 18 times in the first three chapters of Genesis, describing the creation of both nature and human beings.³⁷

³² Ibid., 197.

³³ *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 227.

³⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

³⁵ Thus Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 285, who argues that, in spite of Qohelet’s insistence to view life “exclusively under the sun” and thus risk diminishing the role of God, he ends up “acknowledging him as the transcendent Creator and Sovereign who deserves the worship of all humans.”

³⁶ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 494. Note, however, Longmann, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 119, for the argument that Qohelet could have used the “creation” verb *bara*, but instead used the “bland verb” *asah* due to his “lack of enthusiasm about God’s creation.”

³⁷ Thus H. Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 11:387-403.

Another important term is the word “beautiful” (יָפֵה, yapheh). For Eichrodt, it describes an act the mysterious order of which “sets everything in its right place,” which is why it is given here such an eloquent expression: “He has made everything beautiful in its time!” (3:11).³⁸ Evidently יָפֵה probably has more than aesthetic connotations here. Most commentators interpret it as “appropriate,” or “right,” or “proper.”³⁹ Although the word “everything” encompasses more than physical creation, the *creative* aspect of God’s activity is unmistakable. Interestingly, Murphy links יָפֵה with the word טוֹב from Genesis 1, used by the author to conclude every day from God’s creation (“and it was good”).⁴⁰

A second passage alluding to this theme is 3:14, namely, “whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so in order that men should fear before him.” The concept of “adding and subtracting” was familiar to the author of Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 13:1, where Israel is called not to add or take away anything from God’s law. In Ecclesiastes 3:14, creation is linked with “fearing God” (which may be also implied in the Deuteronomistic passages). In other words, the work of God - whether physical or spiritual - will endure for ever, and this reality, if understood properly, can have a didactic purpose, i.e., lead people to fear God. Crenshaw asks, “Does Qohelet think of the deity as jealously guarding divine prerogatives (an idea that occurs in a few ancient text, Gen 3:22, 11:6)?” The idea that fear has negative connotations in this passage is also shared by Barton and Gordis, who detects here the primitive theme of “the jealousy of the gods.”⁴¹ Along with Seow and Farmer, Fox thinks that “fear” is not imposed by God, but should be the appropriate response on our part once we acknowledge we are “dealing with a sovereign and inscrutable deity.” Farmer too believes that fear should be an appropriate response to the anxiety which results from “trying to guarantee that our actions will have permanent results.”⁴² Regarding the idea of the “eternity” of creation, Qohelet does not imply “that everything God does is everlasting.”⁴³ Rather, the author thinks that the work of God, unrestricted by time and space, is different from the achievements of human beings, who toil “in this physical world.” In Seow’s own words, “their activities are only transient, whereas God’s are eternal.”

³⁸ *Theology of the Old Testament*, 494.

³⁹ Thus Michael Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1989), 193, *The Hebrew-Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 299.

⁴⁰ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

⁴¹ Gordis, *Kohelet*, 233.

⁴² Kathleen Farmer, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes - Who Knows What is Good?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 161. See Michael Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 195.

⁴³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

Finally, Qohelet views God as the *creator of the human soul*. The statement that the human spirit “returns to God, who gave it” (12:7) has given birth to a number of opposing interpretations. A number of authors believe that the idea of the soul returning to God falls short of the later Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul. Fox shows that an analysis of other verses dealing with the idea of human destiny will reveal that, for Qohelet, “the return of the life-spirit to God simply means death,” or extinction.⁴⁴ Others like Seow, Gordis, Murphy, and Crenshaw link this verse with 3:21, where the author speculates whether the human spirit ascends upward (apparently to God). For them it is not clear whether Qohelet believed life after death was possible in another form. What is evident is that the author believed that human life itself “is possible only because of the life-breath that God gives.”⁴⁵ As we have argued so far, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Qohelet did not take a materialistic view on the fate of the human soul. This verse is a clear indication that Qohelet saw God as the *creator* of all life. As the gift of God, the life-breath will return to him when one dies (Ps. 104 29-30; Job 34:14-15; Isa 42:5; Ez 37:5). As *creator*, God dispenses physical enjoyments and fame (2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 6:2; 9:7), wisdom (1:13; 2:26), and ultimately human life (5:18; 12:7).

In closing we could say that Qohelet’s vision was shaped both by the event of creation and by that of the fall.⁴⁶ We have already shown that the word *הָבֵל* can describe the experience of “vanity” and the proper name Abel (as both words have the same vowels and consonants, and the accent falls on the same vowel). We have also introduced the view of C.C. Forman, namely, that “the frequent refrain that all is ‘meaningless’ may be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam.”⁴⁷ An interesting corollary to the concept of creation and the fall appears in Romans 8:20, where the apostle Paul talks about creation being “subjected” to “frustration” or “futility” (*הַתְּחַלְּתָאֲמָנָה*) where *ματαιότης* is the LXX translation of the Hebrew *הָבֵל*.⁴⁸ The pessimism of Qohelet was shared by the Scripture as a whole: until things will get better, they are getting worse.

⁴⁴ Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 308-309.

⁴⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 382.

⁴⁶ Notice especially the text of 7:29: “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes,” an allusion to the Genesis account of the Fall.

⁴⁷ C.C. Forman, “Koheleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JJS* 5 (1960): 256-63, op. cit. in Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Songs*, 279.

⁴⁸ “ματαιότης,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, F.W. Danker ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. BibleWorks module) and *The Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie eds. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibellgesellschaft, 2003. BibleWorks module), which cites the occurrence of *ματαιότης* in Romans 8:20.

3. *Justice*

It is important to establish at the outset that approaching the phenomenon of “injustice” in a way that disturbs the sensibilities of the conservative reader is one of the hallmarks of Wisdom literature, especially in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.⁴⁹ Before analyzing *morality* and *justice* as *divine characteristics* in Ecclesiastes, it should be pointed out that Qohelet often mentions them apart from any connection with God. For example, in connection to God he says that “it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God” (8:13). But the same theme is contemplated apart from God, as in 7:15 - “there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil-doing.” Each verse has different moral implications, depending on how one understands the character of God as viewed by Qohelet. The distinction is important, because in the first case God is involved - thus the idea of justice against the wicked - whereas in the second he is not; here, the wicked seem to have escaped justice. We do not mean to suggest that whenever God is mentioned justice and morality receive preferential treatment, and vice versa. A number of scholars have noticed the connections between the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, the two books that address the issue of injustice in the most critical manner.⁵⁰ But it is important to distinguish between Qohelet’s reflection on justice/injustice in general, on the one hand, and justice/injustice linked with God, on the other hand. It is possible that behind the assertion “who can make straight what God has made crooked” he may imply that things which are wrong could not be so unless God ordained them. However, in spite of the many enigmatic inquiries which he often leaves unanswered - as if they were just observations on life in general - Qohelet never questions the moral character of God. God is involved neither in the events described in 7:15, where Qohelet saw the wicked prospering, nor in those of 4:1, where the oppressed have no comforter and the oppressors have the power.

Now, given Qohelet’s belief that God controls the affairs of this world, and that no one can straighten what He made crooked (7:13), it is possible to speculate that God is at least indirectly responsible for unjust acts. But it is highly improbable that Qohelet was unable to follow the logic of his assertions. Like Qohelet, the Old Testament seems to hold God’s sovereignty and the presence of injustice in creative tension. Human freedom, though alluded to in 7:29 (where the man whom God made upright “sought out many devices”), is not given a great deal of attention here. This does not mean that Qohelet did not

⁴⁹ Note C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 179-79

⁵⁰ Representative here is Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 56-57, who argues that, when thinking about social injustices Qohelet “shares the honest perspective of Job.”

believe in it. He tells us too little concerning freedom that we may form a reasonable opinion about his beliefs.

One will also notice that in 3:17 Qohelet describes God as a judge who has appointed “a time for every matter;” in this case, to “judge the righteous and the wicked.” Crenshaw considers Qohelet’s other statements about the lack of justice against the wicked, and concludes that “the affirmation of divine judgment appears contradictory. This verse, then, may be a later gloss.”⁵¹ Scott believes Qohelet uses an orthodox interpretation of divine justice as a straw man, “only to discard it.”⁵² Similar views are held by Barton (this verse is the work of a Chasid) and Gordis (verse is authentic, but is meant as a *satirical* note).⁵³ Seow and Murphy reject the “editorial” interpretation, and explain that Qohelet does not refer here to eschatological judgment. As in 3:11, Qohelet in fact claims that God has appointed a “proper” time for everything. The time-frame need not be definite; “the statement is merely an acknowledgment that whatever will be done is entirely in the hand of God.”⁵⁴

Likewise, a number of authors have argued that verses like 11:9; 12:13; and 12:14 were glosses made later by an editor who sought to balance Qohelet’s views on divine justice. For instance, Seow acknowledges that 12:9-14 “is an appendix of some sort.”⁵⁵ He compares Qohelet’s earlier claims on divine justice and concludes that 11:19 and 12:14 are clearer explanations of how God will judge, whereas earlier he only admitted that God will simply judge (3:17). Seow also says that “it is the possibility of such a hermeneutical move that assured the acceptance of Ecclesiastes into the canon (see b. Sabb. 30b).”⁵⁶ However, unlike Barton, Crenshaw and Gordis, he believes that “the perspective in vv 13b-14 is not contradictory to the rest of the book.” Murphy too shows that, while various interpreters view 11:9 as a latter gloss (“but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment”), the “Israelite tradition of divine judgment is too strong for him [Qohelet] simply to negate it.”⁵⁷

Nevertheless, we believe that the author of Ecclesiastes impressed upon his work a clear literary and theological structure. The charge of glosses and editorial tensions does not do justice to the literary/theological integrity of the work. The following verses reflect a consistent thematic integrity on the issue of human sin, injustice and divine retribution:

⁵¹ *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

⁵² *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, 223.

⁵³ Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 108, and Gordis, *Qohelet: the Man and His World*, 235.

⁵⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 175.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁵⁷ *Ecclesiastes*, 117.

“For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind” (2:26)

“When you vow a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools” (5:4)

“Let not your mouth lead you into sin,...why should God be angry at your voice, and destroy the work of your hands?” (5:6)

“See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (7:29)

“Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God” (8:12)

“...but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God” (8:13)

“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth...But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (11:9)

“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the duty of man” (12:13)

“For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14)

It is so evident that idea of God judging the wicked does not contradict other assertions about injustice made by Qohelet. First of all, it agrees with the wider context of the Old Testament view to which Qohelet would often refer. Furthermore, there are several other instances where Qohelet's choice of words like sin, sinner, the man pleasing to God and the one fearing God indicate that the moral universe he believed in was not vastly different from the ancient Jewish faith.

On the other hand, one notices in Qohelet an attitude of pessimism and despair that set him apart from most of the traditional Jewish authors of the Old Testament (Job is a notable exception). It is possible that the author of the book may have suffered a spiritual crisis which affected his world-view, to the effect that his message became not the norm, but the exception in Wisdom Literature. But throughout the book one will find references such as these which recall traditional Old Testament beliefs, a fact which proves that in spite of his pessimism, Qohelet never fully abandoned the ideals of justice and righteousness. Whether it was the sinner or the oppressor, the attitude of a fool

or of a liar, Qohelet believed that there was an intrinsic moral reaction within God against perversions like these, and that God's final word will uphold justice, in his proper time.⁵⁸

We have argued that Qohelet made certain affirmations concerning divine justice from the beginning of the book that confirm the views taken from 11:9 on. It is true that chapter 12 seems to conclude the book on a strong ethical note, one that is a bit unusual for the claims the author made earlier. And yet, it is still difficult to believe that the so called "editor" was so ignorant (or hurried) as not to realize that by piling up all these strong ethical claims at the end he will arouse the suspicion of later readers. As a scholar invested with the authority to edit religious works – if indeed the work was edited – he certainly knew how to insert ethical claims in the appropriate places, so that the overall structure of the book may appear coherent, and thus preclude any suspicions on the part of the readers.⁵⁹ As Estes argued:

If the author of the book employs the persona of Qohelet to examine a test case, in which he unsuccessfully seeks to find advantage under the sun in order to demonstrate that genuine advantage comes only through remembering God the Creator, then the epilogue can be construed as the conclusion to which the author has been leading the reader...By viewing the epilogue as the actual position of the author, the recurrent exhortations to accept life with all of its enigmas as a gift from God are pointers to the conclusions of the book, not orthodox interpolations into the purportedly subversive doctrine of Qohelet.⁶⁰

The fact still remains that the theory of a final editor has not yet answered all the problems raised by ending of Ecclesiastes.

CONCLUSION

The scope of this essay was to review the majority of the claims made by Qohelet on three attributes of God: *eternity/transcendence*, *creation* and *justice*. Although not all references to God fit the category of "attribute," those which did helped clarify certain forms in which God was intelligible to Qohelet. The

⁵⁸ But see J. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: an Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981), 128, for the view that "Qohelet could muster no confidence in God's disposition to reward virtue and punish vice." Crenshaw adopts a multiple-author view which includes at least Qoheleth and his "epilogist," or admirer. The essential Qoheleth, in Crenshaw's view, "lacked trust in either God, or knowledge."

⁵⁹ It is entirely possible that in some circles the book of Ecclesiastes was not received with sympathy, and so even the simple addition of a different ending - with the people's knowledge - would be seen as a necessary correction. In other words, the final addition need not have been made in secret.

⁶⁰ *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 378-79,

two attributes of *eternity/transcendence* and creation impress on the reader the acknowledgment that God is not bound either by time or space. As Walter Brueggemann sees it, in Ecclesiastes “God will outlast all creatureliness and will preserve all that is, was, and will be. God is the all-comprehensive and all-sufficient.”⁶¹ God’s transcendence also hinders people from fully comprehending the logic of his actions and the area of *justice* as well. And this may have contributed to the pessimism of Qohelet; and implicitly to the widely critical readings of his book. Von Rad may not be wrong to call this a *new* and *alarming* thought in the Old Testament, although we disagree that this phenomenon was necessarily new.⁶² While other teachers acknowledged the mystery that surrounded God, for the most part that thought did not disturb their faith.⁶³

But Qohelet also viewed God in more positive and affirming ways, as the source of life, the dispenser of human pleasures, and the giver of wisdom; in other words, as *creator*. As Jacque Ellul observes, “in Qohelet God is above all the One who gives. For this reason we disagree with those who reduce the God of Qohelet to a vague or bland divinity.”⁶⁴ God not only creates, but he administers *justice* amidst his creation, even though at times He appears to be the source of רָע (evil) as well.⁶⁵ Here, however, and contrary to what many authors have argued for, Qohelet listed one very convincing explanation for the phenomenon of רָע and that of injustice: human rebellion and the fall: .⁶⁶ That is why Ecclesiastes is firm that “there is a reckoning and an accountability that cannot be escaped.”⁶⁷ There is no point in denying that Qohelet’s crisis of evil influenced his views of justice in the world. There is also no reason to doubt that in Qohelet, as in Job, intense questioning was in itself a literary and theological motif.⁶⁸ Employing the word רָע some eighteen times, often in direct relation to

⁶¹ *Theology of the Old Testament*, “Ecclesiastes: The Far Edge of Negativity” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 394.

⁶² The fact remains that the state of alarming negativity was not typical exclusively of Wisdom literature. Voices like those in the Psalms of the suffering, Jeremiah, and others, expressed their bewilderment at what they perceived to be that dimension of God which they had never experienced before.

⁶³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom In Israel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 234.

⁶⁴ Jacque Ellul, *Reason For Being - A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 250.

⁶⁵ Thus J. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017), 183, with reference to Ecclesiastes 7:14, “In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one, as well as the other...”

⁶⁶ Note also 8:12: “The sinner does evil a hundred times” (חַטָּא עֲשֵׂה רָע מֵאָתָר).

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 394.

⁶⁸ But see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 145, among others, who argues that Qohelet left the question of injustice suspended, offering no satisfactory answer. Fox asks “how can there be

הַבַּל (vanity) attests to the tension that characterizes his work.⁶⁹ This tension was intentional, not born out of fatalism. In the end, as Brueggemann observes, Qohelet does not stand alone in raising up his lament and faith in God's justice at the same time. "Israel's way is to voice all of its enraged candor, but always to bear in mind the One who must be addressed, and then obeyed."⁷⁰

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injustices (as there are) if God is just (as he is)?" In this end, "Qohelet sees no answer." Without even trying to resolve this tension, he only "teaches how to live with it."

⁶⁹ Thus the pair הַבַּל וְעֵינֵן רָע הוּא in the formula "vanity and an evil task is this" (הַבַּל וְעֵינֵן רָע הוּא) in 4:8.

⁷⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 397.

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