

THE MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES

by
Robert V. McCabe*

In the history of its interpretation, the book of Ecclesiastes has presented a plethora of difficulties.¹ The book has difficulties in interpreting its individual passages, unity of thought, textual criticism, language, and syntax. One of the major frustrations has been determining what is the basic message of this book. How do some of the negative elements such as Qohelet's² hating life (2:17) tie in with the more positive element of his commending the enjoyment of life (2:24)? Is the message of Ecclesiastes one of skepticism or hedonism? Many critical scholars have maintained that Qohelet was a skeptic. Crenshaw has stated that "Qohelet examines experience and discovers nothing that will survive death's arbitrary blow. He then proceeds to report this discovery of life's absurdity and to advise young men on the best option in the light of stark reality."³

*Dr. McCabe is Professor of Old Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

¹The concluding exhortations of Ecclesiastes are "Fear God and keep his commandments." Dr. William R. Rice was the type of pastor and seminary president who took these injunctions seriously. In obedience to God's commands, he has been consistent in his stand for biblical fundamentalism, in his commitment to a local church ideology, and in his desire for the proclamation of the whole counsel of God. In fearing God, he has had a submissive faith and this has been reflected by his reverence to our holy and sovereign God.

²Qohelet is a transliteration of the feminine participle קהלת. This feminine form has generally been understood as referring to one who holds an office. Since this Hebrew appellative is used to refer to the book's author, its transliterated form will be used in this article to refer to the author. The meaning of the term is uncertain. Following the Septuagint's translation of this with ἐκκλησιαστής, a number of translations have rendered קהלת as "preacher." The term קהל is used in reference to one who gathers an assembly and, consequently, may refer to the one who addresses the assembly, a teacher. In the Old Testament only קהלת is rendered as "preacher" in the KJV and NASB. Since the concept of preacher is more a New Testament one, this translation appears to be historically inconsistent. It is better to see קהלת as an "assembler" or a "teacher."

³James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 28.

However, this type of thinking is not confined to the critical scholar. A number of conservative scholars have interpreted the message of Ecclesiastes in a similar fashion. Stuart has stated that the perspective of Ecclesiastes “is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a *practical* atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result.”⁴ Another example of this is found in the introduction to Ecclesiastes in the *New Scofield Reference Bible*. “The philosophy it [Ecclesiastes] sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of one of the wisest of men, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment.”⁵ Perhaps we might think the editors of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* were inconsistent with their predecessor C. I. Scofield. But in his correspondence school course, Scofield reflects this same type of thought:

It is not at all the *will of God* which is developed, but that of *man* “under the sun” forming his own code. It is, therefore, as idle to quote such passages as 2:24, 3:22, etc., as expressions of the divine will as it would be to apply Job 2:4, 5 or Genesis 3:4. The constant repetition of such expressions

⁴Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 214. This is also the view advocated by Longman (Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 254).

⁵*The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 696. Though the editors of the Scofield Reference Bible surely did not intend it, their words could lead to an unwarranted dichotomy between inspiration and revelation. Paul affirms in 2 Tim 3:16 that “all Scripture is breathed by God.” Since “Scripture” is a translation of the Greek word γραφή which denotes what is written, inspiration (“breathed by God”) is what God originally produced in written form. In this context, special revelation relates to written truth (Scripture). Special revelation contains two forms of truth: descriptive and normative. Every word of the Bible as originally given is what we could label descriptive truth. This guarantees the accurate preservation of items such as Satan’s lie in Gen 3 and his desire to get Job to curse God in Job 2:4–5. Whatever Scripture records, it has preserved with historical accuracy. The statement by the editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible* suggests that the whole book of Ecclesiastes is only descriptive truth with two theological exceptions: there is a holy God and he will bring everything into judgment. Thus the implication is that only these two statements are Qoheleth’s normative truth. If this is so, then Ecclesiastes is different from every other book in the Canon. Normative truth, on the other hand, pertains to those truths by which the people of God are to regulate their lives. I would understand that Ecclesiastes is affirming much more normative truth than the editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible* allow. For more on the subject of inerrancy, see Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), pp. 267–304; and for information on how this relates to Ecclesiastes, see Weston W. Fields, “Ecclesiastes: Koheleth’s Quest for Life’s Meaning” (Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1975), pp. 116–27.

as “I perceived,” “I said in my heart,” “then I saw,” etc., sufficiently indicate that here the Holy Spirit is showing us the workings of man’s own wisdom and his reaction in weariness and disgust.⁶

Other interpreters have tended to interpret the message in a more positive manner. Gianto has advocated that the enjoyment motif plays a major emphasis in Ecclesiastes.⁷ While recognizing that Qohelet is a realist, Whybray maintains that man should “enjoy to the full what *good* things God has given; and indeed this is what God *requires* of them.”⁸ In an earlier article, Whybray refers to Qohelet as a “Preacher of Joy.”⁹ Though we recognize that Qohelet’s enjoyment motif is positive, the overall message of Ecclesiastes is not one of unbridled hedonism.

Each of these types of interpretations¹⁰ suggest that Qohelet was either a skeptic or a hedonist. In either case, we are left with a book that either makes no contribution to biblical theology or at best a minimal contribution. What then would be the contribution of Qohelet to normative truth? By comparing the final two verses of Ecclesiastes as well as the normative theology of Scripture as a whole, Stuart states that it is in our canon to serve “as a foil, i.e., as a contrast to what the rest of the Bible teaches.”¹¹ If this understanding of Ecclesiastes is correct, then this book is the antithesis of all other canonical books. However, we are persuaded that Qohelet¹² was a godly sage and that he made a signifi-

⁶*Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1959), 2:302.

⁷Agustinus Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qohelet,” *Biblica* 73 (1992): 528–32; see also Norbert Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (October 1990): 625–35.

⁸R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 2.

⁹R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87–98.

¹⁰For an extensive summary of the history of interpretation of Ecclesiastes, see Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 2 vols. in 1 (reprint ed., New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1970), 2:27–243). For more concise summaries, see G. A. Barton (*The Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908], pp. 18–31), Duane A. Garrett (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman, 1993], pp. 271–79), S. Holm-Nielsen (“On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity,” *Vetus Testamentum* 24 [1974]: 168–87), R. E. Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1992], pp. xlvi–lvi), and Neal D. Williams (“A Biblical Theology of Ecclesiastes” [Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984], pp. 88–168).

¹¹Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, p. 214.

¹²Though I am using the appellation Qohelet to refer to the author of Ecclesiastes, I am using it in conformity with the book. However, I am persuaded that Qohelet is Solomon and that he is the author of this book. For a good defense of Solomonic authorship, see Gleason A. Archer (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1994], pp. 528–37) and Garrett (*Ecclesiastes*, pp. 254–67).

cant contribution to biblical theology. How do we harmonize his apparently skeptical observations with his hedonistic advice? How do these tie in with the message of Ecclesiastes? My purpose in this article is to delineate the message of Ecclesiastes. This will be developed by initially examining Qohelet's subject of inquiry, followed by his response to this inquiry.

QOHELET'S SUBJECT

In any attempt to discover a wisdom writer's subject, we should initially consider his placement of it in prominent positions in his work. Our understanding of the subject will be further enhanced by an examination of the author's theological *a priori*s. The subject is further developed by the book's dialectical nature.

Statement of the Subject

After a brief introduction in 1:1, Qohelet provides a sweeping generalization in 1:2, "Breath of breaths, says Qohelet, breath of breaths, all is breath."¹³ Qohelet's placement of this motif at the inception of the

However, my persuasion is in contrast to the vast array of liberal and many conservative scholars. Childs notes that "there is almost universal consensus, shared by extremely conservative scholars, that Solomon was not the author of the book" (*Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], p. 582). Some of these include Hengstenberg (*A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* [reprint ed., n.p.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960], pp. 1–15), Delitzsch (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 3 vols. in 1, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], 3:207–16), Young (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], pp. 347–49), Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969], pp. 1072–78), and Longman (*Introduction*, pp. 248–50). Since the linguistic evidence against Solomon has been considered essentially irrefutable, how do conservatives explain passages such as 1:1 and 1:12–2:26 that strongly imply Solomonic authorship? Following the lead of Young, Bullock has referred to this as an "impersonation genre" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, rev. ed. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1988], p. 185). By comparing Ecclesiastes with Akkadian fictional autobiographical texts from the Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin and the Sin of Sargon, Longman has provided further support for this type of genre; he has classified Ecclesiastes as a "framed autobiographical" genre (see his *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991]). For a simplified form of Longman's position, see his "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiastes Reconsidered," *Theological Student Fellowship Bulletin* 7 [March–April 1984]: 5–9). The significance of the linguistic evidence for a post-exilic date has recently been challenged by Fredericks who has concluded that these earlier linguistic studies had "neglected the genre and dialectical uniqueness of Qoh, and have resulted in a scholarly consensus on a post-exilic date that is invalid" (*Qohelet's Language*, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies*, vol. 3 [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988], p. 266).

¹³This is a literal translation of 1:2; unless otherwise noted, all translations in this paper are my own.

book is where we might expect an author to place his subject. His catchword **רֵבִיב**, “breath,” is used five times in this verse. That this is the subject is further confirmed by the fact that Qohelet concludes his work with three uses of **רֵבִיב** in 12:8. This forms an *inclusio* marking the parameters of his work. Within this framework, **רֵבִיב** is used thirty other times. Since this is undoubtedly a key term in this work, an understanding of its semantics is necessary for interpreting Ecclesiastes. However, determining its semantics in Ecclesiastes has been a problem of no small import.

The noun **רֵבִיב** is used in the Hebrew Bible 73 times,¹⁴ and 38 of these occurrences are found in Ecclesiastes.¹⁵ The literal meaning of **רֵבִיב** is “vapor, breath.” In Isaiah 57:13 a “breath” will carry away idols. In this context **רֵבִיב**, “breath,” is parallel with **רוּחַ**, “wind,” in the preceding colon. The metaphorical use of this term denotes that which is “evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity.” Idols are **רֵבִיב**, “vain,” in Deuteronomy 32:21, Psalm 31:6, and Jeremiah 8:19.¹⁶ This metaphor is used of vain words in Job 35:16, for something that is “pointless” in Proverbs 21:6 or “fruitless” in Psalm 78:33.¹⁷ Outside of Ecclesiastes the metaphorical use of **רֵבִיב** consistently denotes something that is vain or has no value. This understanding has been carried over into its use in Ecclesiastes.

We can trace this metaphorical rendering back to the Septuagint translation of Ecclesiastes which rendered **רֵבִיב** as $\mu\alpha\tau\alpha\iota\omicron\tau\eta\varsigma$,

¹⁴Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1985), p. 279.

¹⁵My count is based on the MT. However, this count could be either 37 or 39 depending on how two text critical problems are treated. At 9:2 the Septuagint, Symmachus, and Vulgate have emended **רֵבִיב** to **רֵבִיב**. This would increase its uses to 39. Though it may be argued that this emendation provides an easier reading, there is no manuscript support for this. This is a case of *lectio difficilior*. In 9:9 **רֵבִיב** is found twice. **רֵבִיב רֵבִיב** is found in the first line and is essentially repeated with **רֵבִיב רֵבִיב** in the second line. The repetition of the phrase in the second line is not found in seven other manuscripts, nor the Septuagint, Vetus Latina, Targum, or the Vulgate. If this evidence is accepted, this is an example of homeoteleuton and would reflect that our catchword is only used 37 times in Ecclesiastes. However, this phrase could have been repeated for emphasis (see Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 89, n. 9b).

¹⁶Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press), p. 210 [hereafter cited as BDB].

¹⁷Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3 vols., rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm (Leiden: Brill, 1994–), 1:237.

“emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness.”¹⁸ Since the Greek term includes the nuance of “transitoriness,” it allows for a broader use than a strictly negative sense. However, the dominance of the pejorative sense of vanity owes its allegiance to Jerome, who translated הַבָּל with *vanitas*, “unsubstantial or illusory quality, emptiness, falsity, untruthfulness.”¹⁹ Since that time most versions have rendered הַבָּל as “vanity.” This is the rendering found in the KJV, NKJV, RSV, and NRSV. The TEV deviates from this pattern by translating it as “useless” and the NIV does likewise with its rendering as “meaningless.” The NASB translates הַבָּל as “vanity” 22 times, “futility” 12 times, “fleeting” twice, and “emptiness” once.²⁰

Besides translations, many individual scholars have also interpreted הַבָּל as “vanity” or some equivalent reflecting the nuance of having no value. Some of these include C. D. Ginsburg, Hengstenberg, Bridges, Barton, H. L. Ginsberg, Whitley, Woudstra, and Scott.²¹ Against this, a number of interpreters have recognized that this exclusively negative meaning of הַבָּל does not harmonize with Qohelet’s exhortations to enjoy the gifts of life and his commendation of wisdom. Furthermore, we should expect other synonymous words or phrases with הַבָּל to be used by the author if his point was that life had no value.²²

Gordis suggests that הַבָּל was used in Ecclesiastes with two different senses: “unsubstantial” and “transitory.”²³ In keeping with the first

¹⁸Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 495.

¹⁹P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 2010.

²⁰In 9:9 the translators of NASB have followed the emended form of the MT. As a result they have only 37 uses of הַבָּל (see supra, n. 15).

²¹Ginsburg (*Cobeleth*, 2:259–60); Hengstenberg (*Ecclesiastes*, p. 46); Charles Bridges (*An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* [reprint ed., n.p.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960], p. 5); Barton (*Ecclesiastes*, pp. 46–50); H. L. Ginsberg (“The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, *VTSup* 3 [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955]: 138–40); Charles F. Whitley (*Koheleth* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979], pp. 6–7); Sierd Woudstra (“Koheleth’s Reflection upon Life” [Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959], pp. 39–41); and R. B. Y. Scott (*Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, AB [New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965], p. 209). Though using different words to translate הַבָּל, the concept that ties these words together for Scott is that of having no value.

²²For a listing of these, see Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 28–29.

²³Robert Gordis, *Koheleth*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 205.

sense, he translates the vast majority of cases in the sense of “vanity” or “futile.” However, he translates the second use of *הֶבֶל* in 9:9 as “brief” and in 11:10 as “fleeting breath.”²⁴ Hamilton opts for three translation values of *הֶבֶל*: “vanity,” “senseless,” and “transitory.”²⁵ Meek has suggested five different uses: “futile,” “empty,” “sorry,” “senseless,” and “transient.”²⁶ Though the translation of a Hebrew word used many times in a book may have two or more uses, this is a problem in Ecclesiastes. If Qohelet announces in 1:2 and 12:8 that “all is *הֶבֶל*” and then describes the specifics of the all and evaluates these as *הֶבֶל*, then it must have a common nuance in Ecclesiastes.²⁷ This has also been noted by Fredericks, who has perceptively observed that it is an error “to see distinct spheres of meaning for the word and to select the correct one for each context, ending in a multifarious description of reality that is contrary to a significant purpose for the unifying and generalizing agenda of Qoheleth—‘everything is breath.’”²⁸

If *הֶבֶל* does not contain distinct spheres of meaning, what is the common sphere of meaning? Fox has opted for “absurd”²⁹ and Fredericks for “transience.”³⁰ The problem with Fox’s rendering is that it is tied to the assumptions of existentialism, specifically those of Albert Camus. This understanding of Ecclesiastes represents an irrational and oppressive world-view.³¹ Fredericks’s understanding, on the other hand, does not do justice to texts such as 8:14 where Qohelet observes that righteous men get what the wicked deserve and the wicked receive what the righteous are expected to receive. The difficulty with this viewpoint is that if this kind of apparent injustice is only a “fleeting” problem, why then is Qohelet so troubled by it?³²

²⁴Ibid., pp. 188, 196.

²⁵*TWOT*, s.v. “*הֶבֶל*,” by Victor P. Hamilton, 1:205.

²⁶Theophile J. Meek, “Translating the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (December 1960): 331.

²⁷Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (September 1986): 411.

²⁸Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, pp. 23–24.

²⁹Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel*,” pp. 414–27.

³⁰Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, pp. 18–32.

³¹Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, JSOT Supplements, 71 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 33–34.

³²Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 282–83.

Other options include “bubble,”³³ “ceaseless change,”³⁴ “contingency,”³⁵ and “incomprehensible.”³⁶ The problem with “bubble” and “ceaseless change” is that they are tied to a purely negative evaluation of life. If הֶבֶל represents a devaluation of life, can this legitimately be harmonized with his motifs of enjoying life and praising wisdom? Qohelet’s description of the sovereignty of God in 3:1–15 is too absolute to allow for the ambiguity associated with “contingency.” Though it would appear that no English term provides an equivalent to הֶבֶל, the closest of the options is probably “incomprehensible” or a synonym such as “enigma” or “mystery.”³⁷ However, a limitation of “incomprehensible” is that it does not necessarily account for the emotive connotations of הֶבֶל. This is expressed in 2:17 where Qohelet states that he hates life because his work had been grievous. We would grant that this is hard to comprehend, but it is more than that. Life with its difficulties and vicissitudes as a result of the Fall is a puzzle that finite man cannot figure out and it frustrates Qohelet in his search for meaning and purpose. In his attempt to master life, Qohelet eventually realizes with defeated expectations that he cannot understand God’s scheme of things. Though in English we do not have a precise word equivalent to the meaning associated with this Hebrew term, I would prefer to translate it something like a “frustrating enigma.” There are three reasons for this.

First, the phrase רָעוּת רֵיחַ, “chasing after wind,” provides a qualifying element to הֶבֶל. An example of this is found in 1:14 where רָעוּת רֵיחַ is used to complement הֶבֶל. This is also used in 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9. In 1:17 and 4:16 a closely related phrase is used, רָעוּת רֵיחַ, “chasing after

³³F. C. Burkitt, “Is Ecclesiastes a Translation,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1921): 27–28.

³⁴C. S. Knopf, “The Optimism of Koheleth,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 49 (1930): 196.

³⁵John McKenna, “The Concept of *Hebel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 45 (1992): 19–28.

³⁶Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *Bible Translator* 38 (July 1987): 301–7. In his commentary *Qoheleth* ([Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987], p. 28), Ogden acknowledges that this concept had been suggested earlier by W. E. Staples (“The ‘Vanity’ of Ecclesiastes,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 2 [1943]: 95–104 and “Vanity of Vanities,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 1 [1955]: 141–56) and by Edwin M. Good with his translation “irony” (*Irony in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., Bible and Literature Series [Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981], pp. 176–83). Recently, Roland E. Murphy has expressed a preference for this nuance, see “On Translating Ecclesiastes,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (October 1991): 572–73.

³⁷However, for some potential difficulties with this rendering, see *TDOT*, s.v. “הֶבֶל,” by K. Seybold, 3:318–20.

wind.” Both רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ and רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ are translated in the KJV as “vexation of spirit.” The translators of the NASB rendered these as “striving after the wind,” the NIV as “chasing after the wind,” and NKJV as “grasping for the wind.” The reason for the different renderings of רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ and רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ relates to its different uses.³⁸ Whether this be a “vexation of spirit” or “striving after the wind,” the difference is of no consequence for our contention. If the first is the case, this may reflect something that troubles one’s thoughts. The latter rendering reflects something that is beyond man’s control. As Shank has said, “A man may determine or make up his mind to accomplish something eternally significant in a creation subjected to vanity, yet no matter how hard he tries Qoheleth tells him it will be a fruitless endeavor. A man in his toil ‘under the sun’ grasps after the wind and attains precious little for all his labor.”³⁹ Thus, the concept of “chasing after wind” supports our contention that the semantic range of רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ includes a cognitive sense.⁴⁰

Second, if life has no value, how can we harmonize this with Qoheleth’s positive exhortations about life? At climactic points in this work, Qoheleth gives us advice to enjoy God’s gifts (2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17 [in Eng. v. 18]; 8:15; 9:7–10). These gifts include food, drink, work, wealth, possessions, marital relationship, and youth. Though wisdom is not the panacea for all of life’s adversities, Qoheleth commended it as a solution to many of life’s problems (2:13; 4:13; 7:11–12, 19; 9:13–18). These positive exhortations certainly suggest that life has some value.

Third, Qoheleth recounts his quest for meaning and purpose in life. The very nature of this quest was to gain understanding into what gives life meaning. It was not a haphazard search but had been a thorough quest in that it took into account the range of activities occurring “under the sun.” Rather than this prepositional phrase reflecting a limitation to “natural theology,”⁴¹ it denotes the place where these activities occurred, “on the earth.”⁴² The epistemological nature of this search is emphasized in passages such as 1:13 where Qoheleth sets his mind, לֵב, to seek and explore by his divinely given gift of wisdom all that had been

³⁸For a brief discussion of these, see Whitley, *Qoheleth*, p. 13.

³⁹H. Carl Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (Fall 1974): 67.

⁴⁰For other complementary phrases, see Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 21.

⁴¹H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 42–43.

⁴²Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View,” p. 67. The prepositional phrase תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, “under the sun,” is used 29 times in this book. An informative parallel is found in 8:14–15, Qoheleth describes an event that occurs עַל-הָאָרֶץ, “on the earth,” in v. 14; in the next verse, he replaces this with תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, which also is found in 8:16–17.

done upon the earth.⁴³ This is further emphasized by Qohelet's observations. He saw, הָאֵרָא , all of man's works in 1:14, wisdom and understanding in 1:16, madness and folly in 2:12, injustice in the halls of justice in 3:16, labor produced by rivalry in 4:4, riches hurting the one who possesses them in 5:13, one whom God has not enabled to enjoy his wealth in 6:1–2, retribution violating a strict cause and effect relationship in 7:15, unexpected victors in 9:11, inappropriate leadership in 10:7, and people dying in 12:3. The cognitive sense of הָבִינָה is also stressed in 6:1–11:6. Following Addison G. Wright's understanding of the structural unity of Ecclesiastes, this section of material (6:1–11:6) revolves around finite man's inability to understand God's work. In 7:1–8:17, Qohelet punctuates this unit with "not discover" and "who can discover" in 7:14, 24, 28 (twice), and 8:17 (three times). In 9:1–11:6 Qohelet emphasizes "do not know" and "no knowledge" in 9:1, 5, 10, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5–6 (three times).⁴⁴ All of this suggests that the use of הָבִינָה in Ecclesiastes relates to the issue of man's frustrating inability to comprehend the activities in his earthly sphere of existence.

Therefore, הָבִינָה is an appropriate term to encapsulate Qohelet's frustrating and puzzling search for meaning and purpose in life. The use of this term in the sentence "all is הָבִינָה ," as used in 1:2 and 12:8, sets the parameters for its use in Ecclesiastes. In every case where Qohelet evaluates life⁴⁵ with this catchword, we should translate it in a consistent manner with this understanding. We might translate 1:2 in this fashion: "Most frustratingly enigmatic, says Qohelet, most frustratingly enigmatic, all is frustratingly enigmatic."⁴⁶ Consequently, Qohelet's subject is the frustratingly enigmatic nature of all the facets of this life. However, did Qohelet draw upon this subject from his own rationalistic observations with a bare minimum of special revelation? Or were his observations influenced by a proper understanding of biblical theology? What were Qohelet's theological *a priori*?

⁴³The Hebrew verb הָבִינָה followed by לֵב , denoting a serious deliberation, is used in 1:13, 17; 7:2; 8:9, 16; 9:1. The construction is used to show Qohelet's examining wisdom, folly, the house of death, injustice, everything done on earth that he could examine.

⁴⁴Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (July 1968): 323.

⁴⁵This would take into account 32 of its 38 uses in this work. Those sections where הָבִינָה is not used as a catchword are 6:4, 11, 12; 7:15; 9:9; and 11:10.

⁴⁶See David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 44; Hubbard has clarified his thoughts about הָבִינָה since his earlier work, *Beyond Futility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 15.

Theological Presuppositions

To gain a fuller understanding of Qohelet's subject, we need to consider the theological presuppositions that have influenced him. Qohelet did not simply know that there was a holy God and that He would bring everything into judgment.⁴⁷ We are persuaded that he reflects a solid theological grasp of the early chapters of Genesis. In wisdom literature such as Ecclesiastes, we should expect this type of influence. Zimmerli has stated that wisdom is found "within the framework of a theology of creation."⁴⁸ This is especially true in Ecclesiastes where Qohelet's understanding of his frustrating and puzzling world is directly influenced by his understanding of Genesis.⁴⁹ We will briefly examine this influence.

The influence of Genesis is initially seen when Qohelet poses his thematic question in 1:3, "What is man's advantage from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" Qohelet has not changed his emphasis from his generalized subject in 1:2 but has reduced his reflections on life's meaning and purpose to a specifically identifiable biblical idea of labor. He poses his question in terms of the dominion mandate originally given to Adam, who as God's vice-regent was to subdue the earth (Gen 1:28; 2:5, 15).⁵⁰ However, when Adam chose to disobey God, the Fall occurred. This included God cursing the land, making man's labor one of strenuous toil (Gen 3:17–19; cf. Eccl 2:22–23). It is this curse that brought death and destruction, causing the creation to groan under this bondage longing for God's redemption (Rom 8:19–21). It is this quest to find significance through toil that characterizes Qohelet's search.

The interrogative particle מָה , "what,"⁵¹ introduces the rhetorical question in 1:3. The term translated as "advantage" is יִתְרוֹן .⁵² Gordis indicates that this is a commercial term denoting "the surplus of the bal-

⁴⁷*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 696.

⁴⁸Walter Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (March 1964): 148; see also William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), pp. 215–16.

⁴⁹Charles C. Forman, "Kohleth's Use of Genesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960): 256–63.

⁵⁰Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Merrill, and Darrel L. Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1991), pp. 13–16.

⁵¹ מָה is used ten times in Ecclesiastes at significant junctures, 1:3; 2:2, 12, 22; 3:9; 5:11, 16; 6:8 (twice), 11.

⁵²BDB, p. 452.

ance sheet.”⁵³ In Ecclesiastes, it⁵⁴ is used in the sense of ultimate advantage.⁵⁵ For example, in 2:12–21 Qohelet shows how he as a sage evaluated wisdom. He found that there were some benefits to wisdom. In 2:13 he states that “wisdom is more advantageous [יִתְרֹן] than folly as light is more advantageous [יִתְרֹן] than darkness.” However, in 2:14–16 Qohelet came to recognize that death happens to both the sage and the fool. That death happens to both indicates that the benefits of wisdom are relative and not absolute. Wisdom has an advantage in this life but it does not provide the ultimate advantage in finding meaning in life. Therefore, Qohelet’s quest for meaning and purpose is exemplified with this struggle to find significance by the sweat of his brow.

The Genesis account further informs the theology of Ecclesiastes concerning life and death. Man was made from dust and to dust he shall return (Gen 2:7; 3:19; cf. Eccl 3:20; 12:7). Furthermore, man’s unconfirmed creature holiness in Genesis 1–2 and subsequent depravity in Genesis 3 are also used as an informing motif in Ecclesiastes 7:29 (8:11; 9:3).⁵⁶ Drawing upon Genesis 3:16, Qohelet additionally notes the fractured relations between husbands and wives in 7:26–28.⁵⁷ Another motif drawn from the Mosaic account in Genesis is God’s role as Creator. In agreement with Genesis 1, God is the “Maker of all things” in 11:5 and “Creator” in 12:1. In Genesis 1–3 God is also presented as the Sovereign. In Ecclesiastes 3:1–15 Qohelet recognizes God’s absolute sovereign control over everything in life.⁵⁸

In Genesis God created man in his image and likeness. As God’s image bearer, finite man has derivative wisdom. Not only did man’s

⁵³Gordis, *Qoheleth*, p. 205.

⁵⁴יִתְרֹן is used ten times in Ecclesiastes, 1:3; 2:11, 13 (twice); 3:9; 5:8 (Eng. v. 9), 15 (Eng. v. 16); 7:12; 10:10, 11. Other cognate terms are used such as בְּיָדָא in 3:19 and יִתְרֹן is used in 6:8, 11; 7:11. יִתְרֹן is also used adverbially in 2:15; 7:16; 12:9, 12.

⁵⁵We would agree with Ogden that יִתְרֹן is used in reference to “ultimate advantage”; however, he correlates this advantage with the possibility of some advantage beyond death and suggests that this is significant for developing the concept of life after death which is more fully developed in the New Testament (*Qoheleth*, pp. 22–26). In the context of Ecclesiastes, this term is better interpreted as a reference to Qohelet’s quest for meaning in this life; none of the facets of God’s created order provide Qohelet with this ultimate advantage.

⁵⁶Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), pp. 116–17.

⁵⁷Duane A. Garrett, “Ecclesiastes 7:25–29 and the Feminist Hermeneutic,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (Spring 1988): 309–21.

⁵⁸Roy B. Zuck, “A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, Eugene H. Merrill, and Darrel L. Bock (Chicago: Moody, 1991), pp. 246–47.

wisdom have natural limitations as a created, finite being, but God also imposed other limitations (e.g., “do not eat...” [Gen 2:17]). When Satan tempted Eve, he challenged God’s holy image bearers to gain more wisdom by eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. What Satan did not tell Eve was that while gaining increased wisdom, she and her husband would use this increased wisdom in the context of their resulting depravity. The theology of Genesis has a profound affect on Ecclesiastes. As a sage, Qohelet diligently studied and explored with wisdom every activity done on earth. However, God’s curse on man and creation made this a burdensome task (Eccl 1:13). After his poem on God’s coordination of earthly activities with time, Qohelet observes that God has made everything beautiful in its season (3:11). Though unable to comprehend God’s work, our author is able to appreciate the beauty of God’s providential work. Man’s quest for the scheme of things is a God-given capacity within man that Qohelet calls עֹלָם . Because of its use in an equivalent manner in v. 14, this Hebrew term is best translated as “eternity.” עֹלָם is apparently part of man’s metaphysical constitution as God’s image bearer.⁵⁹ Though man’s longing to see God’s scheme of things is divinely given, in v. 11 our writer also indicates that God has placed limitations on man’s ability to understand the scheme of things. Because of man’s finiteness and the Edenic curse, God’s providence is veiled and burdensome to man. God has also limited man’s ability to comprehend His moral governing of the cosmos (7:15–18; 8:14) and the future (8:7; 10:14). Qohelet has thoroughly grasped the message of Genesis that God did not want mankind to pursue all wisdom and, “therefore, thwarted their efforts in its pursuits. That his own views on the limitations of knowledge and frustration that comes in its quest were based on Genesis seems apparent.”⁶⁰

Qohelet’s *Leitmotiv*⁶¹ about celebrating life is also dependent upon Genesis. As Johnston has noted about this recurring theme: “Perhaps more importantly, Ecclesiastes and Genesis exhibit substantial agreement as to the central point of the creation motif—that life is to be celebrated as a ‘good’ creation of God.”⁶² Though we will look at this motif more fully in subsequent pages, we should notice at this point that this recurring theme reflects Qohelet’s expectation that God will bring blessing to

⁵⁹Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 81.

⁶⁰Forman, “Kohleth’s Use of Genesis,” p. 261.

⁶¹This German term means “recurring theme.” Because of its use in literature dealing with Ecclesiastes, I will be using this term frequently in the remainder of this paper.

⁶²Robert K. Johnston, “‘Confessions of a Workaholic’: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (January 1976): 22.

his creation. Nevertheless, Qohelet recognizes that the Fall can adversely affect man's ability to enjoy life. Because of the Fall, God imposed a curse on creation. Since God directly made Adam and Eve, he created them in a state of innocence. When temptation came, they succumbed to it, and rather than being confirmed in creature holiness, they became totally depraved. Because Adam was the representative of creation, his sin resulted in all his posterity and the rest of creation becoming subject to the curse. In Qohelet's attempt to understand and master life, he came to realize that this was an impossible task. In Qohelet's own words, all creation has become twisted and crooked because of the Fall (1:15; 7:13). The curse was directly imposed by God. Yet God began a process of bringing blessing to his creation (see Gen 1:28; 3:15; 9:1, 26–27; 12:2–3). He will deliver his creation from the bondage of the curse. Qohelet as a godly sage recognizes God's curse on his creation, yet he also understands that God is working to redeem his creation.⁶³ This is why Qohelet can strongly recommend the enjoyment of the blessings of God. Caneday has perceptively stated it:

Qoheleth upholds the creational design to celebrate life as a divine gift which is to be enjoyed as good, something to be cherished reverently and something in which man delights continually. This, perhaps, is the greatest enigma in Qoheleth—his bold assertion of the meaninglessness of life “under the sun” and his resolute affirmation that life is to be celebrated joyfully.... He was a godly sage who could affirm both the aimlessness of life “under the sun” and the enjoyment of life precisely because he believed in the God who cursed his creation on account of man's rebellion, but who was in the process, throughout earth's history, of redeeming man and creation, liberating them from the bondage to decay to which they had been subjected.⁶⁴

Consequently, Qohelet's subject has been directly affected by his theological grasp of Genesis. When Qohelet affirms in 1:2 that “everything is frustratingly enigmatic,” this encompasses the negative features of life in a sin-cursed world and the positive dimensions of his expectation of God's restoration. Though he understands God's curse and blessing, he also lives in a world where God's providence is veiled. He desires to figure out God's scheme of things, but in his desire to understand and control life his expectations have been defeated. As such, Qohelet recognized that life has tensions. This reflects an antithetical

⁶³Two significant motifs in Genesis 1–11 are those of blessing and cursing; see Gary V. Smith, “Structure and Purpose in Genesis 1–11,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (December 1977): 307–19.

⁶⁴Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (Spring 1986): 43–44.

character to life. Though living in a cursed world which frustrated his quest for meaning and purpose, our author was also a man of faith who recognizes that God is working to redeem his creation. It is this theological foundation that has also influenced our author to construct his work on what could be described as a dialectical model.

Dialectical Nature

As we read Ecclesiastes, we almost feel at first glance as if Qohelet has a “schizophrenic outlook on life.”⁶⁵ Qohelet oscillates between a negative outlook on life and a positive perspective. These polarized perspectives reflect the dialectical nature of Ecclesiastes.⁶⁶ The antithetical nature of Qohelet's motifs has received various explanations. Some critical scholars have explained the opposed subjects as later additions.⁶⁷ Though this explanation may solve some problems, it leaves Ecclesiastes open to every new critic's innovation. If we are committed to a high view of bibliology, we must permit the biblical author to speak for himself, even when we cannot always harmonize the problems to every scholar's satisfaction. Another solution is that of Gordis who explains the opposed motifs as quotations. According to Gordis, Qohelet used quotations from orthodox teachings to refute them with his unorthodox teaching.⁶⁸ Gordis's quotation hypothesis is flawed because it tends to violate Qohelet's normal grammatical patterns.⁶⁹ Another solution, proposed by Loader, is that Qohelet introduces a subject and then presents a counter thought. According to Loader, this presents a tension that the author leaves unresolved.⁷⁰ Qohelet begins his analysis with the divine control of time in 3:1–9, which is based on a genuine polar structure. Loader then superimposes this grid on the vast majority of Ecclesiastes.⁷¹ Though his analysis is helpful in identifying a number of antithetical subjects, it is a creative oversimplification of the data. Fox has posed another solution to Qohelet's conflicting subjects. He has advocated that Qohelet intentionally used life's contradictions to demon-

⁶⁵Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), p. 200.

⁶⁶Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 320–28.

⁶⁷For a summation of various ways of handling these contradictions, see Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, pp. 19–28.

⁶⁸Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 96.

⁶⁹See his discussion of 8:11–14 (*Ibid.*, p. 105).

⁷⁰J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 33–34, *passim*.

⁷¹J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979).

strate that life is absurd.⁷² Though this sin-cursed world does have contradictory elements, his solution is that of an existential sage. If Qohelet is a godly sage, is it consistent with the general teaching of Scripture to have him affirming that life was absurd? If we see motifs in this work that are antithetical, does this necessarily demand the conclusion that life is absurd? While recognizing the contribution made by Loader and Fox, we are convinced that the contrasting material can be handled in a different manner.

There is a preferable solution in dealing with the antithetical motifs. Qohelet has crafted his work to reflect the realities of this world. The actual events behind the book of Ecclesiastes reflect Qohelet's search for meaning and purpose in life. He has examined perspectives and items of life such as wisdom, folly, building projects, pleasure, toil, and wealth. He leads us on a journey through his personal experiences in pursuit of his goal. He takes us down the path of wisdom but it comes to a dead-end. He takes us down the path of pleasure but this also leads to a dead end. We are taken down various dead end trails until finally we come to "the conclusion of the matter" in 12:13, and he informs us that the answer to his quest is fearing God and keeping his commandments. None of the theories, thrills, or things of life could provide the answer to Qohelet's quest.⁷³

Using various genres such as reflection stories, proverbs, comparative sayings, rhetorical questions, autobiographical material, Qohelet recounts his quest with a lyrical description. In recounting the details of his quest, Qohelet draws us into his world, where he takes us down a dead end path. However, he abruptly changes paths to one reflecting the beauty of a theocentric world view. Qohelet lives in a world where unresolved tensions are a part of the baffling puzzle of life. Rather than reflecting a sequential arrangement to his quest, he composes his work by using contrasting motifs to duplicate the tensions he faced in his fallen world. To legitimately interpret Ecclesiastes, we should follow an explanation that harmonizes passages asserting that life has many unresolved tensions with those advocating a celebration of God and his gifts. The overall plan of the book has negative passages being followed by positive passages. Ryken has tabulated that there are fifteen negative pericopes, thirteen positive passages, and three that combine the two perspectives.⁷⁴ Furthermore, in terms of space the negative passages exceed the

⁷²Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, pp. 11–14.

⁷³Leland Ryken, "Ecclesiastes," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 271.

⁷⁴Ryken, *Words of Delight*, p. 320.

positive ones by three or four to one.⁷⁵ As such, the negative passages receive major attention and the positive ones minor space. Qohelet's procedure is to initially treat a negative perspective and then follow up with the positive message. Why did he intermingle the two perspectives?

His mingling of negative and positive is realistic and faithful to the mixed nature of human experience. The technique keeps the reader alert. It also creates the vigor of plot conflict for this collection of proverbs, as the writer lets the two viewpoints clash. The dialectical pattern of opposites is a strategy of highlighting: the glory of a God-centered life stands out all the more brightly for having been contrasted to its gloomy opposite.⁷⁶

To demonstrate its dialectical nature, we will look at some of these motifs in more detail. Qohelet initially sets up the contrasting nature of his work in 1:4–11. After stating his thematic question in v. 3, our author introduces his work with a poem contrasting temporal man with an enduring cosmos. Generations of people come and go, but the world continues in an uninterrupted manner (v. 4). However, the permanent terrestrial sphere is marked by changes such as the movement of the sun, the wind, and rivers flowing into the sea (vv. 5–7). By the nature of the enduring cosmos being cyclical, we might expect finite man to ultimately comprehend the underlying forces at work in the natural realm. However, man is always taking in what he perceives with his senses and is never able to adequately describe his world; it is an endless task for finite man (v. 8). Qohelet characterizes this search as wearisome (עָיִץ). Because man is endlessly taking in the facets of life, surely he will discover something new. What is constant for man is that there is no novelty in life, there is “nothing new under the sun” (v. 9); and if he thinks something is unique, it is because he has forgotten past history (vv. 10–11). The enduring world is characterized by monotonous cycles and yet finite man will never be able to comprehend or describe his milieu. Consequently, Qohelet prepares us to view his work as a microcosmic representation of the realities of God's good creation subjected to the bondage of the Fall.

A wide range of polarized subjects is summarized in 3:1–8. Fourteen pairs of opposites are listed in vv. 2–7. These merisms range from birth and death, love and hate, war and peace, and many other contrasting features of life. These are part of the constant repetition in time that God directs according to his own good pleasure. Therefore, the activities of this life have a polarized nature.⁷⁷ Man's nature endeavors to under-

⁷⁵Ryken, “Ecclesiastes,” p. 270.

⁷⁶Ryken, *Words of Delight*, pp. 320–21.

⁷⁷Loader, *Polar Structures*, pp. 29–33.

stand how these polarized elements fit together, but God has not given this to him. Man can appreciate that this is part of God's plan and he can recognize that God's providential arrangement of all these activities is a symmetrical masterpiece (vv. 10–11), but God's ways are inscrutable for him. God has created us with a desire to comprehend what God is doing but our finiteness prevents this. By the nature of our depravity, our desire is marred by frustration and weariness.

In 2:11 Qohelet evaluates toil as being *הֶבֶל*. Furthermore he maintains that labor may not be satisfying because of envy (4:4–6) and selfish greed (4:7–12). This must be contrasted with his recommendation in 2:24 to find enjoyment in work (so also in 3:13, 22; 5:17 [Eng. v. 18]; 8:15).⁷⁸ Another tension is between life and death. In 7:1 Qohelet states that the day of death is better than the day of birth; however, in 9:4–6 he states that anyone who is living has hope and that a living dog is better than a dead lion. On the one hand, he hates life (2:17); on the other hand, he commends its enjoyment (2:24–26). Furthermore, death is no respecter of animate beings. Man has no advantage over animal life in that both die (3:18–21). A person may strenuously work all his life accumulating wealth, yet he will die like the profligate. When death comes, he must leave behind the results of his work, “as he came, so he departs and what is his advantage since he labors after wind” (5:15, Eng. 5:16). Like the rest of Adam's race, the sage has no control over the time of his death (8:2–8). Though one may live a godly life, death overtakes him just as it does the wicked (9:2–3). This reflects a life that is filled with tensions and distortions.⁷⁹

Perhaps Qohelet's most vexing tension relates to the issue of justice. Our author teaches that there is divine justice, but he is plagued by the injustices that God permits in his providence. If there is any place on earth where we expect justice to occur, it is in the court. Contrary to this expectation, our author affirms in 3:16 that “in the halls of justice, wickedness is there; and in the halls of righteousness, wickedness is there.” However, in v. 17 he expresses confidence that God will bring to justice both the righteous and the wicked. In 5:7 (Eng. 5:8), he observes that the oppressed have their rights denied. In some sense, we might contend that the oppressed and the judicially victimized may not be truly righteous. However, in 7:15 Qohelet describes a situation where a genuinely righteous person receives what the wicked should get; and the wicked person receives what the righteous person should get. In the first colon of this verse Qohelet evaluates this scenario as a *הֶבֶל* situation. In

⁷⁸Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 976.

⁷⁹Caneday, “Qoheleth,” p. 40.

8:12–13 Qohelet maintains that God does take care of the righteous and the wicked. However, he once again describes the same two exceptions that he mentioned in 7:15 and again categorizes this as a *תִּבְרָל* situation in 8:14. It is this incomprehensible situation that vexes our author.⁸⁰ While affirming that God is providentially controlling all aspects of life with their appointed times, he recognizes that divine providence is often veiled. Since the righteous and the wicked are under God's control and his providence is often veiled, no man knows whether his future holds "love or hate." Nevertheless, there is one event that everyone must experience, death (9:1–3). No one knows what his future will be or what is the way that will bring the most success in life (6:12; 7:14; 8:12; 10:14; 11:6).⁸¹ To Qohelet these types of inequities make divine providence inscrutable.

The almighty God who rules this world hides himself behind a frowning providence. It seldom appears that the benevolent God who created the universe has control of his own creation. It rarely seems that a rational and moral being gives motion to the world. Even the beauty of uniformity plagues man's thoughts about God. Uniformity becomes monotony in the present cursed world, for it is precisely upon the basis of the world's disjointed regularity that men scoff at God and his promises. The present world order becomes the occasion for wicked men to jeer God and for righteous men to vex their souls that divine justice is so long delayed.⁸²

In his pervasive search for meaning and purpose, Qohelet makes a generalization that all the facets of life are frustratingly enigmatic. This search is not based solely on empirical observation. Rather his search is predicated upon his theological understanding of Genesis. He recognizes that the infinite God created a good world but with the Fall God in holy judgment subjected it to his curse. Qohelet observes that all the dimensions of this earthly sphere are influenced by this supernaturally imposed curse. As a result, Qohelet's attempt to fully fathom life has been marked by one exacerbating conflict after another. Qohelet came to recognize that he could not comprehend God's work. He has designed Ecclesiastes to reflect these conflicts by following a dialectical pattern. Because of the infinite nature of God's being and finite man's depravity, Qohelet's attempt to master life with wisdom was misdirected. If the

⁸⁰Since Qohelet affirms God's justice, it is unwarranted to call this situation "vain." According to Fox, this involves a contradiction so he describes this situation as "absurd" (*Qohelet*, pp. 121–22). Since God does not bless or curse in an immediate fashion but always in accord with his timing, I feel it is unwarranted to call this "absurd." This is mysterious but not contradictory, hard to understand but not absurd.

⁸¹Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," p. 977.

⁸²Caneday, "Qoheleth," pp. 41–42.

only conclusion that we can draw from Ecclesiastes is that everything about life is frustratingly enigmatic, then Ecclesiastes only make a minimal contribution to normative theology. However, Qohelet as a godly sage realizes that God is actually working to restore his creation. Qohelet's biblical understanding of life thus has a profound influence on his response to the mysterious nature of life.

QOHELET'S RESPONSE

Since Qohelet's passion to master life was misdirected, we might expect him to respond with pessimism, existentialism, or secularism. Rather, he responds by exhorting us to judiciously and reverentially use and enjoy our divinely bestowed gifts in an attempt to make the most out of our God-given lives. In examining Qohelet's response, we will primarily focus on this *Leitmotiv* of celebrating life. Qohelet provides this alternative exhortation in order to assist us in navigating through the inscrutable maze of life. This exhortation to enjoy life repeatedly punctuates Ecclesiastes at key junctures. This refrain is found in 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19 (Eng. 5:18–20); 8:15;⁸³ 9:7–10;⁸⁴ and 11:9–12:1.⁸⁵ Based upon these, we can synthesize four responses in the face of life's baffling and incomprehensible nature. The first response relates to man's limitation in life. This limitation is highlighted by comparing this *Leitmotiv* with other portions of Ecclesiastes. Second, in each of the enjoyment motifs, Qohelet reflects a theocentric perspective of life. Third, each refrain challenges us to joyfully use God's good gifts. Finally, Qohelet views his advice as being normative truth for God's people.

Man's Limitations

Having presented a brief autobiographical sketch of his search for

⁸³Three of these refrains (2:24–26; 5:18–20; 8:15) have been used as dividing points for a fourfold outline of Ecclesiastes; see Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), pp. 19–24. Kaiser's use of these refrains as dividing points is based on an anonymous article, "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (July 1857): 419–40.

⁸⁴Though discussed on a more popular level, the significance of these six refrains for interpreting Ecclesiastes has been observantly pointed out by J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), pp. 133–50. For a discussion of the rhetorical significance of אֵין טוֹב ("there is nothing better than") in 2:24; 3:12, 22; and 8:15, see Graham S. Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (tôb-spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (December 1977): 489–505.

⁸⁵Often the first six passages are considered the refrains to enjoy life; I have included the last passage because it also includes this same motif. See Whybray, "Qoheleth," p. 87.

meaning in wisdom, pleasure, and the lack of permanence in life (1:12–2:23), our author introduces us to his first *Leitmotiv* about enjoying life in 2:24–26. In these verses, God enables those who belong to Him to enjoy their food, drink, and find satisfaction in their work. Furthermore, in v. 26 God gives those who are pleasing to him wisdom, understanding and joy, but to sinners God gives them the task of “gathering up” for his people. This is a way God has chosen to provide for his people by even using the labor of reprobates. What is indicated by this refrain’s content is God’s freedom in using people and their limitations to carry out God’s plan. Man’s limitations are further implied by the placement of 2:24–26 immediately after the description of Qohelet’s search for meaning in his autobiographical sketch. The longer negative perspective on life is contrasted by the shorter positive point of view. By placing these in juxtaposition, “the writer of Ecclesiastes has set for himself the task of making us feel the emptiness of life under the sun and the attractiveness of a God-filled life that leads to contentment with one’s earthly lot.”⁸⁶ One of Qohelet’s key responses to his subject is his focus on our limitations.

The book of Ecclesiastes asserts that man is limited by his natural weaknesses and sin.⁸⁷ For example, in 1:12–18 Qohelet recognizes that increased wisdom results in increased grief. A further limitation is seen in his search for meaning in pleasure-seeking (2:1–11) and comparing wisdom and folly (2:12–23). In 4:1–3 oppression reflects another sinful limitation of man, as does laboring for wrong motives in 4:4–16. In 7:20 Qohelet affirms that everyone is a sinner and in v. 29 reflects that God had originally made man upright but he has gone in search of his own “sinful” schemes. Sin extends to the core of man’s being. The issues of theodicy also vex our author in 3:16–21; 7:15–18; 8:12–14. Though our inability to understand God’s moral governance of the world is part of our creaturely weakness, this inability has been exacerbated by our sinfulness. One of life’s great frustrations is death. As indicated by its repetition, the frustration of death is also a major emphasis in Qohelet’s thoughts (2:12–17; 3:18–21; 9:1–10; 12:1–7). The items mentioned here provide a sampling of man’s limitations as a depraved, finite person.

Ecclesiastes also develops the limitations man has as a created being. The admonition in 12:1 exhorting youth to remember their Creator reflects a limitation in them as finite beings. As created beings, we have both a beginning and limited knowledge (3:11). Our limited knowledge

⁸⁶Ryken, “Ecclesiastes,” p. 271.

⁸⁷There is a difference between our weaknesses as finite beings and our innate depravity. Prior to the Fall, Adam would still have needed to grow in wisdom since he was not created omniscient. He obviously had limitations in knowledge. Once he fell, his weaknesses would have been intensified due to sin.

is highlighted in 9:17–10:20, where wisdom, though having great value, cannot help the sage to know the future. Since we cannot know the future, we cannot know if a business investment will succeed. Qohelet, therefore, recommends that we diversify our business investments in 11:1–6. As a finite being man has natural limitations.

A specific application of man's limitations as a sinful, finite being relates to Qohelet's misdirected attempt at mastering life. He came to realize "that he is not the master of events."⁸⁸ As God's image bearer, man has a natural inquisitiveness about eternal things; however, God has not given him the ability to understand these areas. In 3:10 Qohelet describes this as a "burden" and in 1:13 as a "heavy burden." God has designed life in this manner to demonstrate that we are finite (3:18). This inquisitiveness about eternal matters is undoubtedly part of Qohelet's motivation in attempting to master life. Our author makes an appeal to youth not to emulate his example. He recommends that they enjoy themselves during their "youth." After making a positive admonition in 11:9, he provides a negative exhortation in 11:10 to banish vexation from their heart and to cast off trouble from their body. The term for "vexation" (עָצָוָה) is also used in 1:18 where it relates to the burden associated with the increase of wisdom. In light of 1:12–17 this vexation is associated with Qohelet's attempt to understand and master life. Because of Qohelet's burdensome search, the vexation and trouble of 11:10 may refer to the same type of anxiety that would be produced in a youth if he imitated Qohelet's search. Qohelet's point in 11:9–10 is that young men should not get caught up in attempting to master life with its vexation; rather, they should make the most of their youth. Since man is limited in his ability to master life, he should refrain from this quest. Qohelet's misdirected quest was an experiment in folly.

Theocentric Perspective of Life

Having searched for meaning and purpose in the gifts of life and, subsequently, realizing that this quest had been foolishly misdirected, Qohelet finds the answer in the incomprehensible God. Some interpreters have maintained that the only orthodox admonition about God is found in the conclusion of the book (12:13–14). However, this could not be further from the truth. Each of the exhortations commending the enjoyment of life not only places an emphasis on enjoying life but also on God's presence. We will briefly look at an example from the refrain in 3:12–14.

¹²I know that there is nothing better for men than that they rejoice and do

⁸⁸George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (January 1968): 27.

well in life;¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his labor—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does this so that men should fear Him.

This passage indicates that God enables men to be happy, prosper, enjoy their food and drink, and find satisfaction in their work. This refrain is in a context describing Qohelet's ability to see the beauty of God's ordered arrangement of life, yet he is grieved by his inability to comprehend how the details of God's plan are being accomplished (v. 11). In light of this frustration, he recommends that we enjoy the basic elements of life that God has given us. With our limited capacity for knowledge, our author urges us to be content with what we do possess. In v. 14 he is convinced that nothing can change God's work and that the consequence of this is that men will fear God. From this, we should understand that Qohelet viewed life through a God-centered theology. In comparing 3:12–14 with the refrain in 2:24–26, this theocentric perspective is more strongly developed in 2:24–26. In the context of chapter two Qohelet despairs of life because he will have to leave the fruit of his labor to another who will not have labored over it and may not use it as wisely. The emphasis has been on what Qohelet had accomplished with God being excluded from his presentation; however, in vv. 24–26 the presence of God dominates every verse. In v. 25 Qohelet uses a rhetorical question, "Who can eat or find enjoyment without Him [God]?"⁸⁹ The point is no one can find enjoyment in life without God. Those enabled by God to find enjoyment are described in v. 26 as "those who please God." The emphasis is on a dynamic relationship with the Living God. Consequently, the refrain of 2:24–26 has a strong God-centered emphasis. Qohelet's theocentric perspective is seen in his other exhortations commending the enjoyment of life.

How extensive is Qohelet's theology? The editors of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* suggest that Qohelet used only two theological truths in the composition of his book, namely, that "there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment."⁹⁰ If this is correct, then we would have to agree with Murphy that Qohelet did not have a "finished *Weltanschauung* [world view]."⁹¹ However, the concept of

⁸⁹A comparison of this verse with the KJV and NKJV indicates that the prepositional phrase I translated as "without Him" has been rendered as "more than I." My translation is consistent with the translation found in both the NASB and NIV. There are a number of textual difficulties in this verse. See Whitley, *Koheleth*, p. 29; and J. De Waard, "The Translator and Textual Criticism," *Biblica* 60 (1979): 509–29.

⁹⁰*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 696.

⁹¹Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Coheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 306; see also Robert H. Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53 (March–December 1934): 108.

fearing God in Ecclesiastes points us to a more satisfactory understanding of Qohelet's theology. Not only does Qohelet refer to this concept of fearing God in 3:14 but he also uses it in 5:6 (Eng. v. 7); 7:18; 8:12, 13; 12:13.⁹² In 5:6 fearing God should correct insincerity in worship. Though God is external to creation in his transcendence (5:1 [Eng. v. 2]), in his immanence he is also involved with his people so that he knows their rash vows made in worship. In 8:12 God in his providence takes care of those who fear him, but in v. 13 he punishes those who do not fear him by not prolonging their lives. In 12:13, fearing God is coordinate with keeping his commandments, with the attached motivation in v. 14 that God will bring all things into judgment, even those things done in secret. God in his omniscience and omnipresence knows all things and will consequently prosecute his holy judgment (see also 3:17).

In 11:9–10 Qohelet commends the enjoyment of youth. In v. 9 Qohelet gives this exhortation: “Rejoice, young man, during your youth, and let your heart be glad in the days of young manhood. Follow the ways of your heart and the desires of your eyes.” This might be misunderstood as support for an uncontrolled hedonistic lifestyle; however, this is not the case, for the last part of this verse reads: “But know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.” The point is to enjoy life, but keep it within the God-given boundaries. Qohelet's enjoyment motif is coordinate with God's commandments. He follows up his exhortation in 11:9–10 with another exhortation in 12:1 to remember our Creator during the time of youth.

Furthermore, as we have already seen, Qohelet recognizes the Fall and curse in Genesis 3. He also recognizes that God is working to restore his creational design (see Gen 1:28; 3:15; 9:1, 26–27; 12:2–3). Qohelet is so bold to proclaim in 7:14 that God sovereignly disposes all the events of life, “in the days of prosperity, be glad; but in the days of trouble, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.” How God does this is beyond Qohelet's comprehension, according to 3:11. Because of his creaturely ignorance, he concludes in the last colon of 7:14, “Therefore, no man can discover anything about the future.” Qohelet's system of belief stresses the supremacy of God's knowledge and our limited knowledge.⁹³ This belief emphasizes the Creator-crea-

⁹²For an excellent discussion of the fear of God, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 229–42.

⁹³Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), p. 16.

ture distinction, God's incomprehensibility.⁹⁴ Qohelet's God is the Sovereign LORD who in His infinite wisdom created the earth and all living things, who is governing the world in his providence and will bring it to its appointed end, and who judged the world at the Fall and who will also judge all people at his eschatological judgment. Does this sound as if Qohelet was theologically deprived? As a biblical theologian, Qohelet's view of life is God-centered; this is to say his observations about life were conditioned by his understanding of special revelation. As Shank has stated,

Qoheleth's perception...refers to a knowledge which is a 'reflex-action' of his fear of God and which penetrates to the essence of the *meaning* of what this world of vanity is all about. Surely, Qoheleth does perceive the vanity 'under the sun' which does not *exclude* the intellectual element of knowledge of these things. Yet that perception also *includes* a deep, spiritual insight into the effects of the curse of God upon life and labor 'under the sun.'⁹⁵

In light of Qohelet's God-centered emphasis, we should conclude that Qohelet, rather than having a theocentric deficiency, has a theocentric perspective of life.

Enjoyment of Life

The enjoyment-of-life motif has been one of the most misunderstood portions of Ecclesiastes. An example of this misunderstanding is reflected by Scott. He has suggested that the mood of Ecclesiastes reflects disillusionment and that Qohelet's ethic is not based on divine commands. Consequently, Scott sees Qohelet's enjoyment of life as the only resignation open to man. For Scott, Qohelet "is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist."⁹⁶ Rather than following this conclusion about this *Leitmotiv*, we are convinced that in their contexts these passages do not lead to the skeptical conclusions of Scott.

When considered in light of death, Qohelet found no satisfaction in wisdom, pleasure, and toil (1:12–2:23). Everything that he labored to accumulate will be left to someone after him. In light of this he recommends in 2:24–26 that as God enables us, we should enjoy our food, drink, and work. He further affirms that God also gives wisdom, understanding, and joy to those who please him. The second refrain is found in the context dealing with God's sovereign appointment of life's events

⁹⁴This does not mean that God cannot be known, but that our knowledge is not equivalent to God's knowledge. We can know what he has revealed in his word about himself, but we can never know God in the same sense that he knows himself.

⁹⁵Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View," p. 68.

⁹⁶Scott, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 191–92.

with their divine timing. The God-given desire to understand God's sovereign appointments haunts Qohelet because he recognizes that it is a symmetrical masterpiece, but he is unable to comprehend it. His second refrain advocates that we should be happy and accomplish good in life. He further recommends again the enjoyment of our food, drink, and the fruits of our labor. His third refrain is found in 3:22. The context of this relates to injustice being permitted to take place in this world.⁹⁷ Qohelet affirms that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. He further notes that we are finite beings. Recognizing the infinite God's judgment and our finite limitations in this temporal sphere, he again recommends that we find satisfaction in our work.

The fourth refrain in 5:17–19 (Eng. 5:18–20) is situated in a chapter dealing with the liabilities associated with an excessive desire for wealth. In this context, he recommends that the value of riches is relative and that we should enjoy our wealth and possessions as God enables us. He again commends making the most of our food, drink, and work. The fifth refrain is in 8:15. While confident that God will judge, Qohelet is perplexed by how God morally governs his universe (8:1–14). In this refrain, Qohelet again commends the enjoyment of life, food, drink, and work. One of his more elaborate exhortations celebrating life is his sixth refrain in 9:7–10. In this context, Qohelet affirms that both the righteous and wicked are in the hands of God and neither know whether love or hate will occur in their future. All men share the same destiny of death. This being the case, he commends joy while we are alive, for the activities of this life will not take place in Sheol.⁹⁸ In vv. 7–10 he commends eating and drinking with a joyful heart, the enjoyment of fine clothes, perfume, and our wives.⁹⁹ He further commends that we labor diligently and astutely. The final exhortation is in 11:9–12:1. In a context dealing with the uncertain timing of death, Qohelet recommends that young people enjoy their youth commensurate with God's moral laws and that they have a faithful remembrance of their Creator.

This examination of these passages reveals that Qohelet challenges us to be actively engaged in and to enjoy our food, drink, work, results from our work, spouse, clothes, perfume, and youth. Since this enjoy-

⁹⁷Whybray, "Qoheleth," p. 90.

⁹⁸This text of Ecclesiastes has been used by cultic groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses to deny conscious life after death; however, the emphasis in this context is not to teach what life is like beyond the grave. It tells us what will not be there, but the point of the passage is not to affirm what is there. The point of this passage is to make the most of our earthly joys in life. To deal with the doctrine of life after death we need to go to passages dealing with this subject. For a helpful treatment of this subject in Ecclesiastes, see Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 2:999.

⁹⁹Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 93.

ment is correlated in some contexts with God's judgment and the fear of God motif, this certainly does not seem to be the remarks of a skeptic advocating unbridled hedonism. Qohelet sounds like an orthodox biblical theologian who had a solid understanding of antecedent revelation.

Normative Theology

Some have claimed that enjoyment-of-life refrains do not reflect normative truth for God's people. Illustrative of this is C. I. Scofield, who correlated the refrain of 2:24 with Satan's lie in Genesis 3:4.¹⁰⁰ Since Qohelet has coordinated these refrains with man's accountability to God, these cannot mean "Do what you will."¹⁰¹ Instead, we should notice that in the last part of 2:24, he said "this also I saw, that it was from the hand of God." This is to say, that the items enumerated in vv. 24–26 are from God. He makes a similar statement in 3:13 where the blessings enumerated are referred to as "the gift from God." In 3:22 the gifts given to man are referred as "his portion" (קָלָהּ). This term denotes that which has been apportioned or divided.¹⁰² It indicates what portion God has assigned to man. Man receives a portion but not all of God's blessings. Qohelet uses קָלָהּ twice in 5:17–18 (Eng. vv. 18–19). This same expression is used again in 9:9. In 8:15 "God gives" these blessings. I would conclude from this that Qohelet has designed his advice to be normative theology.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Having made a thorough study of life to discover meaning and purpose, our author has presented the results of his study in Ecclesiastes. He has presented the subject of his work in 1:2 and 12:8, "Everything is frustratingly enigmatic." This is to say, everything about life is a burdensome mystery. This subject was not based simply on empirical observations, but his observations were sifted through his theological grid. Qohelet understood that God created an originally perfect cosmos, but he subsequently imposed a curse on his cosmos and its inhabitants. However, he also recognized that God is working to restore his creational design. Because of his theological understanding of the early chapters of the Torah, his subject in Ecclesiastes has been shaped by his theological *a priori*s. In his search, Qohelet had attempted to master life but was faced with one frustration after another. He came to realize that

¹⁰⁰Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, 2:302.

¹⁰¹J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 5:1146.

¹⁰²BDB, p. 324.

he could not accomplish his objective and that the object of his search was not the creation but the Creator. As a result, he has used a dialectical structure to reflect the conflicts he encountered and to commend the enjoyment of life from a theocentric perspective.

In responding to his subject, Qohelet in summary form has exhorted us to judiciously and reverentially use and enjoy our divinely bestowed gifts. The primary thrust of his response focused on his *Leitmotiv* of enjoying life. From the placement and content of this *Leitmotiv*, four responses were synthesized. First, the placement of this motif highlighted our limitations as depraved, finite beings. Because of our limitations, we should not attempt to master life but to make the most of and enjoy what God has given us. Second, each of the refrains exhorting the celebration of life reflected a theocentric perspective on life. Third, the enjoyment-of-life motif has emphasized that we be actively engaged in and enjoy our food, drink, work, fruits of our labor, spouse, clothes, perfume, and youth. Because of this theme's coordination with God's judgment and the fear-of-God motif, this is a judicious and reverential use of God's gifts. Fourth, Qohelet regarded his exhortation to enjoy life as normative truth. In the midst of a sin-cursed world and a veiled providence, Qohelet has counseled us to have a submissive faith in our sovereign God, to be diligently involved in our responsibilities of life, and to enjoy God's blessings.

Qohelet ties everything together in his conclusion (12:8–14). In v. 8 he restates his subject, "Everything is frustratingly enigmatic." In vv. 9–10, he reminds us that he was a wise man and studied out the issues of life. In v. 9 he has carefully arranged his words. In v. 10 he wrote "acceptable words." The "acceptable words" are a reference to those which are delightful or profitable. This is to say, these words are compelling words designed to skillfully impact his audience. He further wrote "upright and true words." This is to say, these words are profitable for faith and practice. In v. 11 he states that the sayings of sages are like "goads." Goads were prods used to drive cattle.¹⁰³ Ecclesiastes was designed by our author to serve as a guide. What he has advised is special inscripturated revelation because ultimately it was given to him by the One Shepherd, God. Qohelet is claiming divine authority and inerrancy for his book. He reminds us then, in vv. 13–14, that we are to fear God and be obedient, something that only a believer can hope to do, and that we are accountable for our actions to God. Qohelet's intent is not to solve life's vexing mysteries but to recommend "an acceptance of life as given by God with both its joys and sorrows, and he argues for an active participation and engagement with life, despite its uncertainties."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 353.

¹⁰⁴Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic," p. 21.