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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

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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 from the Epic of Gilgamesh until today (Reese 2020: 306-309; Harari 2017: 23-26). And technology keeps this quest alive even if the majority of its proponents suspect that that they will most likely not be 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' (Garrett 1993: 254). 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. As such, 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' (Murphy 1990: 269). 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. 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 least it has the advance of coherence and order, which is essential when trying to isolate a given theme of the book However, since the author always reasoned about

God in relation to other 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, with a rich, diverse and continuing debate on its authorship still going on (Seow 1997: 36-47; Longmann 2008: 140-149). We believe 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"' (Garrett 1993: 264). 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 as a literary device (Salyer 2001: 167-238). As Estes shows, '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' (Estes 2005: 279.). 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 הבל (vanity) occurs 38 times in this book alone, and Ecclesiastes 'makes the most individual use of' it (Seybold 1978: 3.313-320). Citing C.C. Forman, Garrett considers the possibility that 'the frequent refrain that all is 'meaningless' may be a play on the name of Abel, the murdered son of Adam' (Forman 1960: 256-263). Specifically, the interjection 'Vanity!' (hevel) would have evoked the brutal death of Abel (hevel) as 'result of sin.' Both words have the same vowels and consonants, and the accent falls on the same vowel: הבל (Koehler 1994-200). Even though semantically הבל 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' (Seow 1997: 47; Estes 2005: 281; Goldingay 2006: 590-591). 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). According to

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Longmann, the translation 'vanity' may be problematic due to the fact that today it is 'primarily used in reference to self-pride.' Hence he opts for 'meaninglessness' instead of 'vanity' (Longmann 1998: 61). Seow rather focuses on the sense of 'anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory' (Seow 1997: 47). 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' (Seybold 1978: 3.318).

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' (Oden 1992: 35). Although *Ecclesiastes* bears the stamp of Wisdom Literature, at no point did the author think of God as the God of the philosophers. A notable exception, among others, is Paul Tillich, who called Qohelet the 'great existentialist of his period,' noting that the spirit of the Preacher 'fills our philosophy and our poetry' (Tillich 2005: 167). 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 (Estes 2005: 279). 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. Now, 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 . 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 lifer 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. 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.' Seow, however, argues that, unlike the phrase 'under the heavens' – which is a 'spatial designation (referring to what 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' (Seow 1997: 113). But 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, Longmann argues, Qohelet used only the name Elohim to speak about God, never 'God's personal, covenantal name Yahweh' (Longmann 1998: 35). Longmann also believes 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.' Seow argues that 'this deity does not relate personally with anyone..., God does not enter into a covenant with anyone' (Seow 1997: 56). He does 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. 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

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realities that seem to contradict each other. Even so, he does not picture Elohim as an indifferent deity. 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' (Eichrodt 1967: 494). 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 עלם (olam) can be translated. The word has 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 עלם with αἰώνˊ usually in stereotypical way with the sense of 'eternity,' or in the formula 'for ever' (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα χρόνον). Generally, the debate is concerned with whether this word is used with a positive or a negative 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 (Barton 1909: 105). A similar interpretation is adopted by Crenshaw, who considers other instances where 'olam' can mean 'something hidden,' or 'a dark counsel,' alluding to Job 28:21, 42:3, and also Ugaritic and Phoenician inscriptions (Crenshaw 1987: 97). 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 (Gordis 1968: 231; Preuss 1978: 330-345). Murphy and Seow adopt a more positive interpretation, seeing עלם as 'duration' (Murphy 1992: 35) Seow focuses on how Qohelet used the word in other instances (3:14; 1:4, 10; 2:16; 9:6; 12:5), hence translating 'eternity' (Seow 1997: 163). Some authors choose the sense of 'long time', 'prehistory' or even 'future apocalyptic times' see 'Olam' (Koehler 2002). 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 (Seow 1997: 173). 'God is responsible for giving both *time* [the first part of the verse: 'every beautiful in *its time*'] and eternity....Humanity knows of *eternity*, but can only cope with activities in their *time*' (italics mine). Estes shows that 'under the sun, this sense of the eternal cannot be satisfied, because humans are unable to grasp the whole divine plan' (Estes 2005: 314). Garret too points to the 'sense of alienation and bewilderment in time' that is stirred by eternity in our hearts (Garret 1993: 299). In

his view, we are 'grieved to be trapped in time. If the author saw עלם 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 (Seow 1997: 173). Walton argues that 'the Israelites had no hope of heaven, and...had no fear of hell' (Walton 2017: 246). 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). Most scholars in this category list a number of passages that portray a rather pessimistic view of life after death. In Goldingway'view, Qohelet found no evidence that human beings 'would enjoy a positive afterlife' (Goldingway 2006: 644). Notice the following passages:

> '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 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. In this sense Estes talks about the literary pattern according to which the texts develops and it comes back with the movement of the 'spiral' (Estes 2005: 279). On the one hand, Qohelet wonders if the spirit (רוח) 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 (רוח) '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. Garrett agrees with the conclusion that 'Ecclesiastes asserts that humans are mortal,' a characteristic that they share with the animals (Garret 1993: 304). This is not, however, an assertion that 'no form of afterlife whatsoever is possible for humans.' Eccle-

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siastes does not build an 'either...or' argument, but a 'both...and' one. Garret contends that, 'Because by nature we are dependent and contingent, our hope of eternal life must be founded in God and not ourselves, as in Ecclesiastes 12:7, 13-14.' As Rykens observed, this truth is affirmed in the context of a 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' (Ryken 1993: 268-280).

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'. As Preuss noted, 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 (Preuss 1996: 133-197).

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 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' dwelling, but with the human attitude toward God, namely, with 'caution, reverence, restraint, moderation, and sincerity.' 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' (Scott 1965: 227). 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 a 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 (Murphy 1992: 50). That Qohelet does not insist on divine immance 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. Estes shows 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 (Estes 2005: 285).

2. Creation

In the view of Eichrodt, 'there is no doubt that the Preacher has modelled his life on the creation story in Genesis' (Eichrodt: 494). Longmann, however, points out 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 (Longmann 1998: 119). Still, what Eichrodt alludes here to is Ecclesiastes 3:11 (Eichrodt: 494). 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 עשה, (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 (Ringgren 2001: 11.387-403).

Another important term is the word 'beautiful' (הֹהפאי יִפֶה). 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!' (Ecclesiastes 3:11; Eichrodt: 494). Evidently יפה probably has more than aesthetic connotations here. Most commentators interpret it as 'appropriate,' or 'right,' or 'proper' (Fox 1989: 193; Garret: 299). Although the word 'everything' encompasses more than physical creation, the creative aspect of God's activity is unmistakable. Interestingly, Murphy links יפה with the word טוב from Genesis 1, used by the author to conclude every day from God's creation; hence the phrase 'and it was good' (Murphy 1992: 35).

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. 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' (Gordis 1968: 233). 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' (Fox, 1989: 195). 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' (Farmer 1991: 161). Regarding the idea of the 'eternity' of creation, Qohelet does not imply

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'that everything God does is everlasting' (Seow 1997: 174). 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.'

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 (Fox, 1989: 308-309). 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' (Seow 1997: 382). 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. Notice here the text of 7:29: 'See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes,' an allussion to the Genesis account of the Fall. We have already shown that the word lb,h,î 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' (Forman 1960: 256-263). 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' (τῇ ματαιότης ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη), where ματαιότης is the LXX translation of the Hebrew הבל, as was also the case in Romans 8:30 (Danker 2000; Lust 2003). The pessimism of Qohelet was shared by the Scripture as a whole: until things will get better, they are getting worse.

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 (Wright 2004: 179-79). 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 a 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. In this sense, Seow argues that, when thinking about social injustices, Qohelet 'shares the honest perspective of Job' (Seow 1997: 56-57). 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 a 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 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 contradic-

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tory. This verse, then, may be a later gloss' (Crenshaw 1987: 102). Scott believes Qohelet uses an orthodox interpretation of divine justice as a straw man, 'only to discard it' (Scott 1965: 223). Similar views are held by Barton, who believes that this verse is the work of a Chasid (Barton 1909: 108), and Gordis, for whom the verse is authentic, but is meant as a *satirical* note (Gordis 1968: 235). 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' (Seow 1997: 175).

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' (Seow 1997: 391). 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,' according to the Babylonian Talmud *Sabb*. 30b (Seow 1997: 395). 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' (Murphy 1992: 117).

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:

> '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. Crenshaw, however, argued 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' (Crenshaw 1981: 128).

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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 pilling 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. It is entirely possible that in some circles the book of Ecclesiastes was not received with too much sympathy. Even the simple addition of a different ending (with the people's knowledge) would be seen as a necessary correction. In other words, if the final addition was ever made, it need not have been made in secret. As Estes argued (Estes 2005: 378-379):

> 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.

The fact still remains that the theory of a final editor it remains a conjecture. It most definitely 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 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' (Brueggemann 1997: 378-379). 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 (Von Rad 1972: 234). 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. While other teachers acknowledged the mystery that surrounded God, for the most part that thought did not disturb their faith.

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' (Ellul 1990: 250). God not only creates, but he administers *justice* amidst his creation, even though at times He appears to be the source רע (evil) of as well (Walton 2017: 183). 'In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one, as well as the other' (Ecclesiastes 7:14). Here, however, and contrary to what many authors have argued for, Qohelet listed one very convincing explanation for the phenomenon of רע and that of injustice: human rebellion and fall. We may note here Ecclesiastes 8:12 as well: 'The sinner does evil a hundred times'. That is why Ecclesiastes is firm that 'there is a reckoning and an accountability that cannot be escaped' (Bruegemann: 394). 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. Fox diverges, however, arguing that Qohelet left the question of injustice suspended, offering no satisfactory answer. Fox asks 'how can there be 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' (Fox 1989: 145). We believe rather that, in employing the word רַע some eighteen times, often in direct relation הבל (vanity) Qohelet intentionally created a level of tension in his work. This is how we explain the pair הבל and רע in the formula 'vanity and an evil task is this' in 4:8. 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' (Brueggemann 1997: 397).

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