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# QOHELETH: ENIGMATIC PESSIMIST OR GODLY SAGE?

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*The enigmatic character and polarized structure of the book of Qoheleth is not a defective quality but rather a deliberate literary device of Hebrew thought patterns designed to reflect the paradoxical and anomalous nature of this present world. The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition—that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue.*

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## INTRODUCTION

THE book of Qoheleth,<sup>1</sup> commonly known as Ecclesiastes, is perhaps the most enigmatic of all the sacred writings. It is this quality which has been a source of sharp criticism. Virtually every aspect of the book has come under the censure of critics—its professed authorship,<sup>2</sup> its scope and design, its unity and coherence, its theological orthodoxy, and its claim to a place among the inspired writings.

A superficial reading of Qoheleth may lead one to believe he is a man with a decidedly negative view of life in its many facets. This negative quality has been disproportionately magnified by liberal

<sup>1</sup>Though the meaning of  $\text{הִלְלֵךְ}$  continues to be much debated, the sense accepted here is connected with the Hebrew verb for assembling ( $\text{לְהִלָּךְ}$ ), and its form suggests some kind of office-bearer (the feminine ending). Qoheleth was one who assembled a congregation for the purpose of addressing it, thus the Preacher. See H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966) 7.

<sup>2</sup>The Solomonic authorship has been widely rejected by scholars, both critical and conservative. Some noted conservatives opt for a post-exilic dating of the book. See, e.g., E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (reprint;

critics and conservatives alike. Understandably, then, Qoheleth has become the delight of critics and the embarrassment of conservatives. Embarrassment has led to greater perplexity about the book, and perplexity has brought negligent disuse of this valuable book.

Certainly the viewpoint of Qoheleth upon the world and life must be included in any discussion of OT ethical problems. If the book is indeed a unity, the composition of a single wise man, what is its theme? Is it pessimistic? Can a completely pessimistic view of life be admitted a place in the canon of Holy Scripture? Does not the recurring theme of "a man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (cf. 2:24; 3:12, 13; etc.) suggest an Epicurean influence? Perhaps Stoicism, too, has influenced Qoheleth, for he claims, "All is vanity" (1:2; etc.). What exactly is Qoheleth's view of the world and of life? What was the source of his ethics? Is Qoheleth the record of a man's search for meaning gone awry, ending in cynicism? Or, is it the book of a godly wiseman who gives orthodox counsel for directing one's path through the labyrinth of life?

#### QOHELETH IN THE HANDS OF LIBERAL CRITICS

Modern critics have seized upon the alleged disunity of Qoheleth and upon the presumed contradictions. This alleged antithetical character has led critics to disavow the single authorship of Qoheleth, to discredit the theological expressions, to disclaim its ethics and view of the world and of life, and to displace the book from its authority and position as one of the writings of Holy Scripture.

Earlier critics, such as Tyler, postulated a late date (ca. 200 B.C.)<sup>3</sup> for the book in order to accommodate the alleged influence of Greek philosophical schools. Tyler sought to explain the discordance within Qoheleth in terms of conflicting influences from Epicureanism and Stoicism.<sup>4</sup> To Tyler the recognition of discontinuity and discordance

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Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1977) 1-15 and E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 339-41. Young suggests that the author, being post-exilic, placed his words into the mouth of Solomon, employing a conventional literary device of his time (p. 340). However, in favor of Solomonic authorship see G. L. Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" *JETS* 12 (1969) 167-81.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Tyler, *Ecclesiastes* (London: D. Nutt, 1899) 30-32.

<sup>4</sup>Tyler (*ibid.*, 54) states, "Our book possesses a remarkable antithetical character, its contrasts not unfrequently assuming the form of decided and obvious contradiction. This antithetical character is especially marked in those two great thoughts of the philosophical part of the book—the Stoic, ALL IS VANITY; and the Epicurean, EAT, DRINK, AND ENJOY."

within Qoheleth is an assumed fact without need of proof. Hence, it is of little consequence for Tyler to claim Greek philosophical influence upon a late Hebrew writer, subject to the erosion of the ancient Jewish faith.<sup>5</sup>

Tyler disallows any attempt to demonstrate a genuine continuity in Qoheleth which would show that it has no real discordant or antithetical character and especially no "obvious contradictions, as for example, that between the Stoic and Epicurean. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

One might fancy that the author of Ecclesiastes intended that the contrarities of this book should in some sort reflect and image forth the chequered web of man's earthly condition, hopes alternating with fears, joys succeeded by sorrows, life contrasting with death. It must not be supposed, however, that we can find an adequate explanation in the hypothesis that the author of Ecclesiastes arranged his materials in a varied and artistic manner.<sup>7</sup>

The denial of an overall literary plan for Qoheleth and a dislike for its ethical expression, which motivated Tyler's criticism,<sup>8</sup> also motivates other negative criticisms. Recent critics do not identify Qoheleth's philosophy as being derived from or influenced by Greek schools.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Qoheleth's literary method is still looked upon as a "most serious defect."<sup>10</sup> Assuming the accuracy of this assessment, Jastrow seeks to recover the true and original words of a purely secular Qoheleth by stripping away additions and corrections of later pious redactors who sought to reclaim the book.<sup>11</sup> In this manner he essays to isolate the interpretation of pious commentators and the maxims which were added to counterbalance the objectionable character of the book.<sup>12</sup>

Other critics represent the alleged discontinuities of Qoheleth in varying manners. Siegfried divided the book among nine sources.<sup>13</sup> Yet, none of the scholars who attempt to reconstruct the words of Qoheleth by isolating redactors' statements demonstrate why the book

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>See Ibid., 63-64 where Tyler concludes that *הַלֵּל* must be the personification of *Philosophy*, a designation in which the speculations of several philosophers are embodied.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., R. B. Y. Scott, *Qoheleth*, (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 197.

<sup>10</sup>Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919) 124.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 197-242.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 245ff.

<sup>13</sup>See the citation by George Barton, *Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971) 28.

should have attracted such an effort on the part of pious interpolators and sages to legitimize it. It could have been easily suppressed or dismissed. Gordis properly points out,

But that the book was subjected to thoroughgoing elaboration in order to make it fit into the Biblical Canon is an assumption for which no real analogy exists, indeed is contradicted by the history of the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha after their composition.<sup>14</sup>

Recent critics recognize a basic unity in Qoheleth, abandoning the assumption of widespread interpolation. Yet, Qoheleth continues to be viewed negatively in its ethics and world and life view. Scott sees both heterodoxy balanced by "unimpeachable orthodoxy."<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is the divergence from the orthodox which is emphasized. Scott states, "It denies some of the things on which the other writers lay the greatest stress—notably that God has revealed himself and his will to man, through his chosen nation."<sup>16</sup> He adds further that,

In place of a religion of faith and hope and obedience, this writer expresses a mood of disillusionment and proffers a philosophy of resignation. His ethic has no relationship to divine commandments, for there are none. It arises rather from the necessity of caution and moderation before the inexplicable, on the acceptance of what is fated and cannot be changed, and finally on grasping firmly the only satisfaction open to man—the enjoyment of being alive. The author is a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist (the terms are not used pejoratively!).<sup>17</sup>

Even for Scott it was necessary for an orthodox interpreter to affix the two closing verses (12:13, 14) in order "to safeguard the faith of the uncritical reader,"<sup>18</sup> and to assure Qoheleth a place in the canon.

The critics, with unified voice, decry Qoheleth's ethics and his world and life view as being opposed to that of the remainder of the OT. He is perceived as a maverick among the sages who propounded incompatible propositions.

#### QOHELETH AS VINDICATED BY CONSERVATIVES

In response to liberal critical views, several conservative scholars have attempted to vindicate the apparently negative view of life in

<sup>14</sup>Robert Gordis, *Qoheleth* (New York: Schocken, 1968) 71–72.

<sup>15</sup>Scott, *Qoheleth*, 191.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 191–92.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 194.

Qoheleth and have affirmed its rightful place in the canon of Holy Scripture. Among evangelicals there is a general acknowledgment that Qoheleth is the composition of one individual.<sup>19</sup> However, many evangelicals agree with liberal critical opinions concerning Qoheleth's world and life view.

The Jewish conservative scholar Gordis assumes a negative character about Qoheleth's world and life view and seeks to alleviate some of the tension of his polarized expressions. He resolves the alleged dilemma of antithetical expressions in Qoheleth by accounting for many of the "apparently pious sentiments" as quotations cited for the purpose of discussion.<sup>20</sup> For example, Gordis claims that יודע (8:12) is used by Qoheleth to introduce "a quotation of conventional cast which he does not accept."<sup>21</sup> But the verb claimed to be introductory appears in the middle of the portion it is claimed to mark off as a quotation.

Leupold, in laying out introductory principles for the interpretation of Qoheleth, states that the recurring phrase, "under the sun," indicates that Qoheleth deliberately restricted his observations and explanations of human events to a human perspective. By this Leupold means that Qoheleth, in his observations and reflections upon life, assumed a position of complete neglect of revelation and the world to come. He spoke from the perspective that God had not revealed Himself, and, furthermore, that God is inaccessible.<sup>22</sup> In actuality, though, Qoheleth was a "true man of God who is offering invaluable counsel."<sup>23</sup> For Leupold, Qoheleth was a rationalistic apologist who sought to lead his readers to true happiness by showing how miserable life is "under the sun," that is to say "apart from God." He attempted to direct men toward God by seeking to convince them rationalistically of their despair apart from God.

The *New Scofield Reference Bible* extends Leupold's approach.

Ecclesiastes is the book of man "under the sun" reasoning about life. The philosophy it sets forth, which makes no claim to revelation but which inspiration records for our instruction, represents the world-view of the wisest man, who knew that there is a holy God and that He will bring everything into judgment.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>This is true even of those who reject Solomonic authorship. Some have maintained that Solomon was the original author, but that at a later time, before the exile, the book was edited and enriched (see Young, *Introduction to OT*, 340-41).

<sup>20</sup>Gordis, *Koheleth*, 174.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 283; cf. 287.

<sup>22</sup>Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 28; cf. 42-43.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>24</sup>C. I. Scofield, ed., *New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University, 1967) 696. This interpretive approach virtually abandons Qoheleth to the grasp of

Both Leupold and the *New Scofield Reference Bible* have misunderstood Qoheleth's use of his phrase "under the sun." He did not employ it to restrict his perspective to common ground with natural man. He was no mere philosopher who, working from a system of "natural theology," sought to understand God's creation without the interpretive revelation of the Creator. The phrase "under the sun" is not a restriction upon the *manner* of Qoheleth's reflections, but it circumscribes the *sphere* of those things which he observed in contrast to that sphere in which God's reign knows no opposition. The expression, "under the sun," therefore, speaks of the earth upon which man dwells as does Qoheleth's phrase, "all that is done under heaven" (cf. 1:13, 14; etc.).

An older commentator, Moses Stuart, energetically tried to vindicate Qoheleth from charges of impiety. However, he too accepts the charge that Qoheleth's book contains blatant contradictions and several impious conclusions. Nevertheless, Stuart acquits the author by suggesting that those objectionable portions must be understood in the same way as the "objectors" who appear in the apostle Paul's letters.<sup>25</sup> Stuart characterizes the book as a replaying of the struggle through which Qoheleth's mind had passed when he set himself on

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liberal critics, for one wonders how such an espousal of worldly wisdom could possibly hold any valid claim to canonicity. This approach agrees that Qoheleth hopelessly contradicts himself, but such contradiction is accounted for by a not-so-lucid device of separating *revelation* from *inspiration*. See, e.g., the note on 9:10 concerning Qoheleth's characterization of the dead: "This statement is no more a divine revelation concerning the state of the dead than any other conclusion of 'the Preacher' (1:1). No one would quote 9:2 as a divine revelation. These reasonings of man apart from revelation are set down by inspiration just as the words of Satan (Gen 3:4; Job 2:4-5; etc.) are recorded. But that life and consciousness continue between death and resurrection is directly affirmed in Scripture . . ." (p. 702). Such an approach vitiates the whole character of Qoheleth's book. If one isolates 9:10 from the context of Qoheleth's burden, one may argue that Qoheleth did not believe in the conscious existence of the dead. But to assert such a conclusion goes far beyond Qoheleth's intention. Qoheleth does not concern himself with the state of man after death. He addresses the matter of death from the vantage point of things done "under the sun," i.e., the realm of the living (see 9:3, 6, 9). His purpose is to celebrate life, for as long as man has breath he has influence and activity in all "the things done under the sun" (9:6). But once a man dies, he no longer has anything to do with the activities of man "under the sun" (9:10). It is the same perspective that King Hezekiah held in his prayer to the Lord who spared his life. "For the grave [sheol] cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness" (Isa 38:18-19). In the same way Qoheleth only seeks to urge men to the full enjoyment of life *now*, "for it is now that God favors what you do" (9:7), for "anyone who is among the living has hope" (9:4).

<sup>25</sup> Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, ed. and rev. by D. C. Robbins (Boston: Dreper and Halladay, 1880) 36-39.

the course of philosophical inquiry. Along this course it does not matter that doubts and improper conclusions "had passed through the author's mind, for they had greatly perplexed and disturbed him. The passing through his mind does not stamp them with the authority of opinions settled, deliberate, and final."<sup>26</sup>

Hengstenberg also succumbs to the claim that Qoheleth wrote several contradictions and antithetical assertions in expressing his ethics and world and life view. However, Hengstenberg seeks to vindicate Qoheleth from the charge of self-contradiction by means of a different approach. For him an understanding of the historical milieu out of which the book of Qoheleth arose is absolutely necessary. He states, "This book is unintelligible except on the historical presupposition that the people of God was [*sic*] in a very miserable condition at the time of its composition."<sup>27</sup> He claims that the book was composed in post-exilic days (contemporary with or slightly later than Malachi)<sup>28</sup> when the Persians held dominion over God's people. They were in a most miserable condition, slaves in their own land. Heathens ruled over them. Degradation, injustice, and misery ruled everywhere. The glorious splendor of Solomon's days had long passed and the Jews were now in a time of persecution.<sup>29</sup>

With this understanding of the times of Qoheleth, Hengstenberg finds it easy to take the various apparently contradictory or impious expressions and place them into the mouths of tyrannized impious Jews. Qoheleth only quotes them as reflecting the popular sentiment of the times. So, Hengstenberg says, "Vanity of vanities was the universal cry: alas! on what evil days have we fallen! They said to one another, 'How is it that the former days were better than these?' Ecclesiastes vii. 10."<sup>30</sup>

Hengstenberg's method of interpretation is observed in his remarks upon Qoh 9:5-7. Of Qoheleth's words, "the dead know nothing" (9:5), he says,

Such is the language of natural reason, to those whose eye all seems dark and gloomy that lies beyond the present scene, because it fails in this world to discern the traces of divine retribution. The Spirit says on the contrary: "the spirit returns to God who gave it."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 39. He states further, "It only shows what embarrassments the writer had to remove, what perplexities to contend with. The question is not, whether this or that occupied his mind, which he has recorded in his writing, but whether this or that was adopted by him, and made up a part of his settled and ultimate opinion" (pp. 39-40).

<sup>27</sup>Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 2-16.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 212.

Hengstenberg then explains in his comments on 9:7 that Qoheleth had spoken in vv 1-6 "as the representative of the then prevailing spirit of the people," but in v 7 he takes up the cause of God "to oppose the popular views and feelings."<sup>32</sup>

Hengstenberg, along with many evangelicals, has followed many liberal scholars in dating the book late based upon internal evidence. The external evidence for Solomonic authorship has been almost universally rejected by scholars.<sup>33</sup> Along with an appeal to its language,<sup>34</sup> scholars cite the condition of Qoheleth's times as an argument against Solomonic or early authorship.<sup>35</sup> As widely accepted as this argument may be, it seems to be begging the question. If, indeed, Qoheleth must be understood as post-exilic in order to interpret it and to make its meaning intelligible, then what continuing value does it have for God's people? Certainly, it can be argued that it is useful for men in hard times and when under affliction; but Qoheleth's perspective is not so restricted. He touches upon virtually every conceivable condition of life, and his verdict upon it all is the same, whether prosperous or poor, wise or foolish, industrious or slothful, whether times are good or bad (cf. 7:13, 14). Qoheleth was not provincial in his world view; he set out to explore "all that is done under heaven" (1:13). He states with sincerity and not exaggeration, "then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun" (8:12).

The nature of the book itself argues against Hengstenberg and others who would find internal historical evidence to place it during the post-exilic Persian domain over Palestine. The book defies such attempts. The book presents a world and life view which is in accord with the rest of Scripture. It does not occupy itself with local phenomena such as Hengstenberg claims. Quite to the contrary, it depicts life which is *universally* true throughout all of earth's history since the fall of man in the garden. The book deals with things which are common among men everywhere without a necessary connection to a particular historical milieu. An element common to many conservative scholars is their assessment of Qoheleth's ethics and world and life view. For them, Qoheleth was a man who, though he feared God, looked upon the world around him from the vantage point of a "reason" that had little to do with his faith in the Creator. They see a

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>33</sup>See, e.g., the arguments of Christian D. Ginsburg, *Coeleth* (London: Longmans, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1861) 245ff.

<sup>34</sup>See Archer, "Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" 167-81 for a technical defense of Solomonic authorship.

<sup>35</sup>See Ginsburg, *Coeleth*, p. 249; Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 38-39.

dichotomy between faith and reason.<sup>36</sup> This view hinders the grasping of Qoheleth's true world and life view.

One final trend among some conservative scholars must be addressed. This is the trend to differentiate between "appearance" and "reality." One says of Qoheleth's world and life view, "There is much that superficially viewed, has the appearance of disordered confusion. But that this is the real state of the case is here emphatically denied."<sup>37</sup> Again concerning the theme of the book, it is asserted

The problem really discussed is the *seeming* inequalities of divine providence. These are reconciled with the justice of God, as they are in the book of Job reconciled with his mercy and goodness.<sup>38</sup>

These comments fall into a dichotomous pattern because they refer to Qoheleth's observations of the world as things he only judged to be "apparent." Sierd Woudstra clearly expressed this perspective: "Kohleth is on the one hand dealing with life as he observed it, while on the other hand he knew and was convinced by faith that things were different."<sup>39</sup>

Shank astutely observes,

Woudstra here raises an important issue in the interpretation of Qoheleth. If there does exist a distinction here, that distinction is *not* between faith and reason, but between faith and *sight*, i.e. between "faith" (that comes from special revelation) and that revelation presently available to any natural man as he perceives the creation about him. . . . But, *in what sense and to what degree* is such a "distinction" relevant to Qoheleth?<sup>40</sup>

Qoheleth did not look upon the world from the perspective of a *tabula rasa*. Nor was his observation of creation and "all that God has done" (8:17) conducted upon the foundation of "natural theology." His reflections upon this world and life are not the aimless ramblings and superficial remarks of one given to "sense-experience theology."

<sup>36</sup>Cf. H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *WTJ* 37 (1974) 61. Hengstenberg (*Ecclesiastes*, 26) states, "The problem before the writer is considered from the point of view of Natural Theology with the aid of experience, and of reason as purified by the Spirit of God."

<sup>37</sup>See the article attributed to Greene, "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (1857) 422.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 423-34. Cf. Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes* (Chicago: Moody, 1979) 17.

<sup>39</sup>Sierd Woudstra, "Kohleth's Reflection upon Life" (unpublished Th.M. thesis; Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959) 58. He criticized Leupold for his nature/grace dichotomy (p. 106). But see Woudstra's attempt to Christianize Qoheleth (pp. 91ff., esp. pp. 99-101).

<sup>40</sup>Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View," 61.

Rather, Qoheleth's whole approach was governed by foundational presuppositions: his firm beliefs that God had revealed Himself through the biblical themes of creation, the fall of man, and the ensuing history of redemption; and that God had cursed man and the earth so pervasively that nothing was left untouched by evil.

Qoheleth lived among a people who knew the Lord God and his relationship to the world through the special revelation of the *Torah*. Therefore, his knowledge of the world and of life was regulated by his antecedent knowledge of God, the one whom he feared. This being true, Qoheleth's "faith" and "sight" were not two entirely distinct and independent modes of observation.

"Faith" and "sight" do not oppose one another in Qoheleth. His "sight"<sup>41</sup> (his perception of this world and life) is his "faith" put into operation to consider "all that God has done under the sun" from the orientation of his firm belief in the fall and the curse of man as recorded in Genesis 3. He looked upon the world and all of life from the vantage point of a genuine OT believer who well understood not only the reality of the curse of God placed upon life "under the sun," but also its pervasive effect upon everything "under heaven." It is just such a world and life that Qoheleth depicts in vivid terms.

#### QOHELETH REVISITED

Thus far it has been the burden of this paper to suggest that it is the assumed antithetical character and presumed contradictions which have hindered correct interpretation of Qoheleth. Many commentators suggest that more than one mind was operative in the composition of the book. Even some evangelicals portray Qoheleth as a combination of at least two divergent philosophies or perspectives: natural reason devoid of special revelation and orthodox affirmations of faith (though they be few). It is the thesis of this article that Qoheleth's enigmatic character cannot be resolved by following either of these two conventional lines of interpretation. The enigmatic character and polarized structure of the book is not a defective quality reflecting opposing and contradictory philosophies. On the contrary, the book's antithetical character is a deliberate literary device set in Hebrew thought patterns designed to reflect the paradoxical and anomalous nature of the world which Qoheleth observed. The difficulty of interpreting this book and of understanding its message is proportionally related to one's own readiness to acknowledge the true nature of this world—a world in bondage to the tyranny of the curse placed by God

<sup>41</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, 68–70, where Shank astutely discusses Qoheleth's phrasology. "I perceived."

upon all creation (cf. Rom 8:20ff.). If one fails to recognize this foundational presupposition of Qoheleth, then he will fail to comprehend the message of the book.

### *Qoheleth's Arrangement*

Many scholars have contended that Qoheleth has no cohesive plan or design. Long ago Delitzsch stated:

A gradual development, a progressive demonstration, is wanting, and so far the grouping together of parts is not fully carried out; the connection of the thoughts is more frequently determined by that which is external and accidental, and not unfrequently an incongruous element is introduced into the connected course of kindred matters. . . . All attempts to show, in the whole, not only oneness of spirit, but also a genetic progress, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail.<sup>42</sup>

Hengstenberg follows suit:

A connected and orderly argument, an elaborate arrangement of parts, is as little to be looked for here as in the special portion of the Book of Proverbs which begins with chapter X., or as in the alphabetical Psalms.<sup>43</sup>

Surely such assertions are extreme, for even a cursory reading of Qoheleth should convince anyone that its character is quite different from the book of Proverbs.<sup>44</sup> With the book of Proverbs one can select at random a single verse or two and observe a complete unity of thought in them that may not have any real connection with what precedes or follows. Yet this does not hinder interpretation of its meaning. However, Qoheleth is not at all so characterized. "It is useless to take a text and ask 'What does that mean?' unless we have in our minds some scheme for the whole book into which that text

<sup>42</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (reprint in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, by C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 188.

<sup>43</sup>Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 15. He continues to say, "Such matters of plan and connection have been thrust into the book by interpreters who were incapable of passing out of their own circle of ideas, as by degrees became evident from the fact that no one of these arrangements gained anything like general recognition, but that on the contrary each remained the sole property of its originator and of his slavish followers." Concerning the theme of the book, he writes, "It is quite misleading to represent the work as occupied with a single narrow theme. . . . A superficial glance at its contents will amply show that they are of far too rich and varied a nature to be comprehended under one single theme" (p. 16).

<sup>44</sup>See Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 28ff.

must fit."<sup>45</sup> The book of Proverbs may be read at several sittings, disconnected and randomly without disrupting one's understanding of its isolated parts. However, Qoheleth is like the book of Job; it must be read with great attentiveness given to its design and scope, for apart from the context of the complete book, any isolated portion will be wrongly interpreted. It is precisely because this principle has not been observed that so many contradictory interpretations have been spawned. When detached from the overall design of the book, any one of Qoheleth's refrains or expressions may be given extremely negative interpretations. So it is that his recurring phrase, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless" has been dealt with as the exasperated outburst of a cynical pessimist. Qoheleth's repeated, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" has been segregated from his theme and corrupted to become the slogan of the indulgent Epicurean sensualist, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!"<sup>46</sup> "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me" (2:17) is ascribed to a slothful pessimist. Examples of "decontextualized" misinterpretations of Qoheleth could be multiplied many times. But these serve to illustrate how his words in various portions have been isolated from one another so that when they are retrieved and placed back together, one is left only with a mutilated Qoheleth. With such a method, no two pieces fit together. Is it any wonder that critics and conservatives alike hear so many strange and contradictory voices in Qoheleth?

However, the solution to determining Qoheleth's arrangement and design is not to go to the other extreme. One states,

There is clear and consistent plan in the book of Ecclesiastes . . . one in fact of the most strictly logical and methodical kind. Not only is the argument well conducted, conclusive and complete, but its various points are so admirably disposed, its divisions so regular, and its different parts so conformed in structure as to give evidence that the whole was carefully considered and well digested before it was put together.<sup>47</sup>

One must keep in mind that these are the words of one who wrote at a time prior to the present resurgence of interest in Hebrew studies, which has brought with it a heightened sensitivity to the many peculiarities of the language and its literature. Recent studies of Qoheleth

<sup>45</sup>Cf. J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. by Walter Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 136.

<sup>46</sup>See F. C. Thompson, ed., *The New Chain-Reference Bible*, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: B. B. Kirkbridge, 1964) 199 in the section "A Complete System of Biblical Studies."

<sup>47</sup>[Greene], "The Scope and Plan of Ecclesiastes," 427.

have shown a much greater appreciation for the qualities of Hebrew literature and its thought patterns which find their matrix in the Near Eastern and not the Western mind.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the structure of Qoheleth remains elusive. Once its scheme is traced out, it must still be acknowledged that the progression of its argument is not readily detectable. In many respects the book defies the Western mind that looks for clear breaks in thought around which it may be outlined. Like I John, its contours are fluid. Its boundaries are obscure. It is characterized by reiteration and recurring phrases. It is cyclical as it traverses a course around its subject. As the apostle John treated the life which is in union with Christ, he chose a spiral course for considering the manifold character of fellowship in the life of Christ.<sup>49</sup> The subject is of such magnitude that a glance at it from one perspective will not suffice. So it is with Qoheleth. His subject, too, is immense. A single gaze upon the world and upon life from a remote vantage point could never do justice to its multiform character.

Although Qoheleth's arrangement is difficult to determine, certain structural devices do come to light. Setting aside the book's title (1:1), epigram (1:2; 12:8), and the epilogue (12:9-14), one finds that Qoheleth begins and ends with a poem. The first poem is on the endless round of events in which man forever comes up short in his laborious toil (1:3-11). The book ends with another poem in which Qoheleth calls upon men to enjoy life while they yet have breath, for if death does not cut one off in mid-life, old age will deteriorate one's satisfaction with life and still death will finally wrench the spirit from the body (11:7-12:7). It is these two poems which set the tone and direction of Qoheleth's reflections upon life. Focusing upon the inscrutability of divine providence, Qoheleth guides his readers to acknowledge the meaninglessness of events under the sun. He directs the reader's focus away from an attempt to understand providence and toward enjoyment of life as the gift from God. "Enjoyment of life," not a search for meaning, should be man's guiding principle.<sup>50</sup>

There is much to commend Addison Wright's view of the structure of Qoheleth which he suggests in his provocative study.<sup>51</sup> He tries

<sup>48</sup>See J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979).

<sup>49</sup>Cf. Donald Burdick, *The Epistle of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1970) 14-15; Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 1-24.

<sup>50</sup>Robert Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 38 (1976) 12-18. See also his study in *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 95-102.

<sup>51</sup>Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 313-34.

to demonstrate that there is a break between 6:9 and 6:10. The first half of the book (1:12–6:9) is characterized by the verbal pattern “all is vanity and a chase after wind.” The cessation of this phrase at 6:9 signals a major break in the book.<sup>52</sup> The lines following this (6:10–12) form a transition to a different verbal pattern which is carried out throughout the remainder of the book. These verses introduce two themes which are developed in what follows: (1) what is good for man during his lifetime? and (2) who can tell man what will come after him?<sup>53</sup> Wright points out that chapters 7 and 8 are structured around the first of these themes. It is developed in four sections with each marked by the verb אָפֵן.<sup>54</sup> The second motif expressed in 6:12 is developed in 9:1–11:6. The end of each unit is marked with the verb יָרַךְ or the noun תַּעֲרֵךְ.<sup>55</sup> Though one may not agree with all the details of Wright’s analysis, there are grammatical indicators which suggest his general divisions.

The structural development of the book can be summarized as follows. The title (1:1) and the poem (1:3–11) set the tone and direction of Qoheleth’s reflections by focusing upon the fruitlessness of man’s toil in contrast to the incessant endurance of the earth. The first major section (1:12–6:9) shows that man’s toil is vanity and “a chase after wind.” The second half of the book (after the transition of 6:10–11) develops two themes: “what is good for man” (7:1–8:17) and “man does not know what will come after him” (9:1–11:6). The poem on youth and old age (11:7–12:8) and the epilogue (12:9–14) conclude Qoheleth’s considerations.<sup>56</sup> However, this structural pattern does not deny that there is an overlapping of themes between sections. For example, the inability of man to comprehend life’s meaning and his failure to see what will happen after he is gone first appears in 3:11 and 3:22. Though 1:12–6:9 can be characterized as Qoheleth’s investigation of life and 7:1–11:6 (after the transition of 6:10–11) as his conclusions, there is an intermingling of both in each portion. It is this fact that prohibits any rigid outline of the book.

### *Qoheleth Interpreted: The Prologue*

Qoheleth knew the great expanse of the subject he was about to undertake, so he prepared his plan of investigation accordingly. He says, “I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom *all that is done under heaven*” (1:13, italics added). His inquiry into the meaning of life and his examination of the character of this world were not

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 322–23.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 322.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 324.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 325.

restricted to provincial peculiarities, nor was his reflection narrowly conceived. He deliberately opened up his observation to the *whole* world and to events common among men universally. This he did in accordance with wisdom,<sup>57</sup> a wisdom guided by preestablished beliefs which show themselves throughout his discourse.

Qoheleth bursts upon his reader with his concise and vigorous exclamation: "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Preacher, 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (1:2). The intensity of the expression could hardly be exceeded. With such brilliance the book commences.

Now when the preacher gives prominence to words of such strength and to an expression so captivating, one would suppose that there would be little need to look further for the theme which the book seeks to develop and to prove. However, it has not so impressed some scholars. Hengstenberg claims,

It is quite misleading to represent the work as occupied with a single narrow theme. . . . A superficial glance at its contents will amply show that they are of far too rich and varied a nature to be comprehended under one such single theme.<sup>58</sup>

But Qoheleth puts his arresting expression concerning meaninglessness in the position that a book of this nature would normally place its theme. Furthermore, the phrase, "everything is meaningless" (with its variations),<sup>59</sup> is the most dominant and pervasive of all Qoheleth's recurring phrases in the book. Also, as the book opens, so it closes with an exclamation of meaninglessness (see 12:8). Therefore, it seems advisable to adopt 1:2 as the theme which Qoheleth seeks to prove throughout the entirety of the book.

Phrases with the word *הבל* appear no less than 30 times. Of this class of phrases, Woudstra well states the main exegetical question, "Is Koheleth only saying that man's accomplishments under the sun are transitory in character, are devoid of any permanence, or is he saying that human existence and everything that goes with it is futile and meaningless?"<sup>60</sup> This latter sense of *הבל* is rejected by Leupold as "a pessimistic meaning . . . that is not warranted by facts"<sup>61</sup> in Qoheleth. He avows that the word can only refer in Qoheleth to

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Stuart's discussion of "wisdom" (*Ecclesiastes*, 50ff.) where he points out that, for Qoheleth, the contrast between wisdom and folly is not equivalent to the Proverbs' use where wisdom is piety and folly is wickedness. In Qoheleth, wisdom bears the sense of sagacity and folly, the lack of it.

<sup>58</sup>Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 16.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8.

<sup>60</sup>Woudstra, "Koheleth's Reflection upon Life," 38.

<sup>61</sup>Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

"that which is fleeting and transitory, and also suggests the *partial* futility of human efforts."<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, Woudstra defends the latter sense of הבל and denies that it implies pessimism.<sup>63</sup>

One should not be too hasty to translate הבל with a single word as do most translations.<sup>64</sup> The word הבל, meaning "vapor" or "breath," is employed figuratively of anything that is "evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity."<sup>65</sup> The particular sense of the word must be derived from its usage in any particular context. It is employed as a designation for false gods (Deut 32:21; 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8, 15; Jonah 2:9; Ps 31:6). The term הבל also represents the exasperated sentiments of individuals.<sup>66</sup> Job complains about the brevity and uncertainty of his life; it is an exasperation to him (Job 7:16).<sup>67</sup> The use of הבל in Ps 39:5, 6 is similar to its use in Qoheleth:

You have made my days a mere handbreadth, the span of my years is nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro; He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.<sup>68</sup>

The majority of the uses of הבל in the OT appear in Qoheleth, yet even here the word is more flexible than most translations would suggest. There are four general categories into which Qoheleth's use of הבל can be placed. First, there are passages in which the word expresses "meaninglessness" in the most general sense. Among these, 1:2 and 12:8 are the most prominent, for they summarize the whole book in compressed form. Other passages in this category are 2:1, 26; 4:16; 5:7, 10; 6:4; 7:6; 9:9. Second, the author employs הבל to express his vexations arising from the laboriousness of his work and his inability to control the disposition of his possessions when he departs from the earth (2:11, 17, 19, 21, 23; 4:4, 7, 8; 6:2). Third, the expression is used of Qoheleth's frustration over the delay of retribution. Retribution, adequate, appropriate, and final does not take place in the present world. The connection between wickedness and condemnation, righteousness and deliverance is not direct and obvious but shrouded and often turned upside down (2:15; 6:9; 7:15; 8:10, 14). Finally, הבל is employed by Qoheleth to vent his deepest vexation

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. Italics added.

<sup>63</sup>Woudstra, "Koheleth's Reflection upon Life," 38.

<sup>64</sup>KJV, "vanity"; NASB, "vanity"; NIV, "meaninglessness."

<sup>65</sup>BDB, 210-11.

<sup>66</sup>For example, Isa 49:4. The servant Israel says, "I have labored in vain [ריק], I have spent my strength for nothing [תהוה] and vanity [הקל]."

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Job 7:16 with Qoh 2:17.

<sup>68</sup>NIV, Qoh 5:16-17.

with this present world—his lament over the brevity of life and the severity of death (3:19; 6:12; 11:8, 10; cf. 12:8 following the graphic portrayal of death). The quality of life is “empty” and “vacuous” and its quantity is entirely “transitory” and “fleeting.”<sup>69</sup> How appropriate, then, is הבל with its many nuances to express the nature of this world and life in it!

Shank sums up well Qoheleth’s employment of הבל:

Different “aspects” of the idea of vanity are employed by Qoheleth to vividly illustrate the reality of the curse of God placed upon the work of man after the Fall (cf. Gen. 3:17–19). Therefore, an attempt to find a “static” meaning to *hebel* in Ecclesiastes . . . fails to take note of the richness of the concept as used by Qoheleth.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, Qoheleth does announce his theme in 1:2. It is not narrowly conceived nor is it too singular. The theme of evanescence, unsubstantiality, meaninglessness, vanity is carefully carried through the whole book as a weaver threads his theme color throughout his fabric. It is sufficiently broad in its formulation, for it accurately summarizes the full contents of Qoheleth (if one does not restrict the word הבל to a rigid or static meaning).

What the Preacher states with pithy conciseness in 1:2, he restates in further summary form before he begins the body of his work. This he does in 1:3–11 in the form of a *compendium*. The opening poem serves as an abstract which compresses the essence of the book into a brief introduction.

The Preacher first asks, “What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). Qoheleth clearly indicates by his question the inquiry that led to his announced verdict of evanescence and meaninglessness (1:2). The query expresses in typical Hebrew concreteness the quest for the *meaning* and *purpose* of life in this present world. This often escapes the occidental mind which posits the question in more abstract terms. Qoheleth’s fondness for the book of Genesis<sup>71</sup> throughout his work influenced how he framed his question. As scholars have observed, wisdom literature in the OT is “within the framework of a theology of creation.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, one can understand why Qoheleth structured his inquiry based upon man’s divinely appointed occupation within creation (cf. Gen 2:5, 15)

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Victor Hamilton, “hebel” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 204–5.

<sup>70</sup>Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View,” 66.

<sup>71</sup>See Charles C. Forman, “Qoheleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JSS* 5 (1960) 256–63.

<sup>72</sup>Walter Zimmerli, “The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *SJT* 17 (1964) 148.

rather than ask abstractly, "What is the meaning of life?" His interest is not economical but truly philosophical; it does not concern pecuniary profits but life's purpose and meaning.

Qoheleth states his conclusion (1:2); then he asks the question to which his conclusion is the answer (1:3). He then turns to prove his conclusion about this world and man's part in it by means of the poem in 1:4-11. This introductory poem serves as a compendium in which the message of the book is summarized. Qoheleth seeks to establish his conclusion of 1:2 by rehearsing the inflexible cyclical nature of the world and its enduring character in contrast to transitory and evanescent man. He declares, "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever" (1:4). The earth, methodically plodding along in its routine course, does not skip a beat of its rhythm to celebrate a man's birth nor to mourn his death.

This rhythmic uniformity of seasons and events forms the context within which man dwells. It provides stability so that much of his life becomes routine; there are not shocking surprises everyday. Man can depend upon the recurrence of the daily appearance of the sun. As it sets in the westerly sky in the evening, so it shall rise in the east the next morning (1:5). Man has come to recognize the course of the wind which brings warmth or cold. It, too, is cyclical. Daily the winds change their direction bringing a variety of weather conditions (1:6). Man does not need to fear that the seas will swallow up the land, for though the rivers and streams all flow into the ocean, the sea does not overrun its boundaries. The waters dissipate and return as rain upon the land to keep the rivers flowing to the sea (1:7).

Times and seasons are a blessing to man, for God promised a regularity and uniformity upon which man could depend. "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Gen 8:22). However, this blessing which gives man some measure of predictability about life becomes wearisome to him. Uniformity and repetition breeds monotony in this cursed world. Regularity has an eroding effect; it wears man down. So it is that Qoheleth declares, "All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, or the ear its fill of hearing" (1:8).

Man comes to expect the recurrence of events. Even in man's brief existence upon the earth, he comes to learn that even those few things that may occur only once in his lifetime are not new (1:9). The joy of discovery is dampened by earth's stubborn uniformity. As one excitedly exclaims, "Look! This is something new," the excitement quickly fades with the realization that, "It was here before our time" (1:10).

Uniformity; regularity; methodical, orderly recurrence; cyclical, rhythmic routine; these are all descriptive of the world which Qoheleth

observed. But there is an intruder which interrupts man's part in the profound cycle of events. It is the culprit which transforms the beauty of uniformity into a monotonous machine which mercilessly carries the sons of Adam through the corridors of time into oblivion (1:11). It is the curse which has put a blight upon everything. Nothing has escaped its clutching grasp. Surely, God's providential directing of the affairs of this world is carried out with uniform precision and beauty, yet the curse hides the full character of the one who governs the universe.

Such is the broad, sweeping picture that Qoheleth portrays in his compendium (1:3-11). The stage, with its backdrop and props, obstinately endures as earth's systems methodically press on with no apparent direction, for everything about it repeats itself. Much to the grief of the actors, they themselves have no such permanence. "Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever" (1:4). To add insult to injury, even the product of their work falters with them (1:3), so they become forgotten men (1:11). Such is the scene which stirs Qoheleth with vexation to announce with startling boldness, "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Preacher, 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (1:2).

It is Qoheleth's prologue which sets the theme, the tone and the movement of the whole book with its incessant repetition. The book takes on the shape of the world as it imitates the cadence of creation by the use of its many recurring phrases and themes. Not only has Qoheleth captured with words the pointlessness of man's life of labor in a world which outlasts him, uninterrupted by man's coming and going, but he also leads his reader to *sense* the incessant rhythm of the world by his own calculated refrains. It is precisely this recurrent character of Qoheleth with its polarized structure which should aid the reader to a proper interpretation of the book. Rather, it has become the chief point of criticism and dispute.

### *Qoheleth Interpreted: The Recurring Themes*

As Qoheleth develops his world and life view it is imperative to observe his pattern. He sets before the reader motifs and themes, all calculated to support his verdict announced in 1:2. Qoheleth's argument will be considered under four headings: 1) polarity of themes, 2) theology of creation, 3) elusiveness of meaning, and 4) celebration of life.

#### Polarity of Themes

The antithetical character of Qoheleth is not to be resolved by positing contradictory thought patterns within Qoheleth himself, nor

by appealing to the voices of presumed editors, redactors, and glossators as the liberal critics do. Rather the polarity of structure and expression found in the book reproduces the *character of this world*. As the world which Qoheleth observed is characterized by its ceaseless recurrent cycles and paradoxes of birth and death, war and peace, and the like (cf. 3:1-8), giving it an enigmatic quality, so Qoheleth reproduces its pattern in literary form, repeatedly turning back upon himself to reiterate and restate themes and observations upon various subjects which support his verdict.<sup>73</sup> This he does by casting his work into a polarized structural form as illustrated by 3:1-9.<sup>74</sup> Just as there is no place "under the sun" to find a tranquil resting place devoid of life's vexations where the movement of this world ceases to erode the strength and vitality of man, so Qoheleth's composition does not permit its readers to settle their minds with contentment upon a particular portion of his book. There is always tension as various observations and reflections upon life are juxtaposed in polarity. He hates life (2:17), yet he commends its enjoyment (2:24ff.). Death (7:1ff.) and life (9:4ff.) hold prominence in Qoheleth's polarized expressions. On the one hand he can say, "The day of death is better than the day of birth" (7:1) and on the other "a live dog is better off than a dead lion" (9:4). Illustrative of this polarized character of Qoheleth, 7:16, 17 stand out: "Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?" It is these paradoxical observations and expressions which characterize the book and cause such great difficulty for so many exegetes. The tension cast by Qoheleth's observations and reflections is unrelenting.

Qoheleth involves the *whole* reader in an incessant movement of thought as he carefully weaves his various strands of thread into a multiform fabric, fully reflecting this world and life in it. His literary image reflects the harsh realities of this present world as he places side by side contradictory elements to portray the twisted, disjointed and disfigured form of this world (see 1:15; 7:13). Man as observer is not exempted from the tension. His emotional and mental involvement in the contradictions of this world create a complexity of thought, motives and desires. Qoheleth was a man torn by the presence of evil and vexed by the ravages of injustice, oppression and death. He compels his reader to confront this diverse nature of this paradoxical world in which evil has supplanted the good. In this

<sup>73</sup>See Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View," 57-73 for an excellent study of Qoheleth's recurring phrases.

<sup>74</sup>Cf. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth*, 29ff.

world wickedness drives out justice (3:16). Oppression replaces charity (4:1ff.). Everything is marked by twisting and incompleteness (1:15). In the place of sweet labor (which was man's original allotment), the sweat of the brow embitters one's work with the brine of wearisome and laborious toil which is fruitless (cf. Gen 3:17-19; with Qoh 2:11, 17f., etc.).

The world which Qoheleth observed is cursed; it is disjointed; it is upside down. Death and decay dominate. The appointment of every man has become the grave. As a man is born, so he must die (3:1). He comes into a world naked and leaves stripped of all the profits from his labors (5:15-17). He leaves his wealth to be squandered by one who has not worked for it (2:17-21), or it falls into the hands of a stranger by some misfortune (6:1-2). But the greatest evil of all is the fact that death is no respecter of persons (9:3). It comes upon men so haphazardly, often leaving the wicked to live long in their wickedness (7:15).

In this paradoxical world no man knows what shall befall him—whether love or hate (9:1), good or evil (7:14), prosperity or destruction (11:6). An adequate and appropriate retribution is absent from this present world. The connection between wickedness and condemnation, righteousness and reward is hidden and apparently non-existent (cf. 2:15; 6:9; 7:15; 8:10, 14). It is upon this subject that Qoheleth's polarized expressions have caused his readers to become most disconcerted and unsettled. For on the one hand he complains that wickedness has driven out justice in the place where one would expect to find equity (3:16). Yet, he quickly offsets the present scene with an expression of confidence that "God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed" (3:17). Qoheleth vents his grief that sentences for crimes are not quickly executed (8:11). Yet, he again expresses confidence that the final day will bring justice where it is now absent (8:12-13). But immediately Qoheleth turns the reader back to view the paradox that vexes him most: "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say is meaningless" (8:14).

Herein lies the chief source of Qoheleth's dilemma; divine providence in this present world disproportionately distributes deserts—the wicked prosper and the righteous flounder (cf. Job 21:4-33; Ps 73:4-12; Jer 12:1-4). 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 monotonony 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 (see Mal 2:17; 3:14-15; 2 Pet 3:3-7). 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. It is precisely this character of the world which gives rise for the need of patient endurance on the part of the righteous as they await the fulfillment of God's promises of justice and deliverance (cf. 2 Pet 3:8-13, 15).

### Theology of Creation

The Preacher's occasion and purpose for writing his book is found in his opening question: "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). He asks this question repeatedly (2:22; 3:9). This may seem to be a rather narrowly conceived question for setting the theme of Qoheleth which is broad in its discussions and investigations. It has been stated earlier that Qoheleth's interests were not merely to investigate the measure of profits gained from labor, but the inquiry expresses tangibly man's quest to know the meaning and purpose of life. The entire book of Qoheleth is a reflection upon life in this world in order to search out its meaning. The theme question found in 1:3 is conceived in terms of man's original divine mandate to work in paradise and to subdue the earth by ruling over it as king (Gen 2:5, 15; 1:28). The creation motif holds a significant place in the formulation of Qoheleth's thoughts. He acknowledges, as does the Genesis account, that man was made from the dust of the ground and will return to it (Qoh 12:7; 3:20; cf. Gen 2:7; 3:19); that man was designed to live in companionship (Qoh 4:9-12; 9:9; cf. Gen 1:27; 2:21-25); that man is bent toward sin (Qoh 7:29; 8:11; 9:3; cf. Gen 3:1-13); that human knowledge is derived and has God-given limitations (Qoh 8:7; 10:14; cf. Gen 2:17); and that God is sovereign over all (Qoh 3:10-13; cf. Gen 1:28-30; 3:5).

Johnston observes, "Perhaps most importantly, Ecclesiastes and Genesis exhibit substantial agreement as to the central focus of the creation motif—that life is to be celebrated as a 'good' creation of God."<sup>75</sup> But the problem that exists for Qoheleth is the intrusion of sin and God's curse upon all creation and, in particular, upon man. When God created man, his design was that man till the soil as an extension of God's hand to carry on the work which God had made (Gen 2:4-7). Man's purpose, then, was to work upon the earth, an earth which yielded readily to the hands of Adam to produce only

<sup>75</sup>Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic,'" p. 22.

those things which "were pleasing to the eye and good for food" (cf. Gen 2:9). But the curse of God came upon man and his environment because of Adam's rebellion. It changed the scene drastically so that no longer would man's work be pleasurable. Instead it is characterized by laboriousness and pain and yields a meagerly disproportionate return for the energy expended (Gen 3:17-19). Thorns and thistles grow where once beautiful and luscious produce sprang forth. Man was made to eke out a living under adverse conditions. His whole life became involved with this effort. Thus, the real question of the meaning of life is the query Qoheleth asks: "What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?" What does man have left when all his painful and wearisome toil is complete? What goal is there for a life which is so consumed with such endless and exhausting drudgery? If there is meaning to life, where is it concealed?

It is Qoheleth's orientation to the Scriptural account of creation which forms his presuppositional basis for a world and life view. He recognized a great disparity between his world and that which came directly from the creative hand of God; the curse had intruded to disrupt the harmony of creation. The evil that Qoheleth observed "under the sun" was not inherent in nor of the essence of creation, but was externally imposed. The curse of Gen 3:17ff. becomes in Qoheleth's language *disjointedness* and *discontinuity* or kinks and gaps which are irrevocable (1:15) because they have been imposed by God (7:13). By the curse God subjected creation to the frustration of bondage and decay (cf. Rom 8:19-21), creating the enigma which bewilders men. The world has been turned upside down, so that it bears little resemblance to the pristine paradise that it once was. For Qoheleth, then, the world was neither what it once was nor what it will be. Therefore he designed his book, not to "wrest some form of order from chaos"<sup>76</sup> or to *master* life, but to bring men to acknowledge that this world and life in it is marked by aimlessness, enigma, and tyranny. 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.<sup>77</sup> 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. The fact that he unequivocally maintained both is not proof that Qoheleth was a double-minded man—secular and religious. He was not a pessimist who saw nothing better than to indulge the flesh. He was a godly sage who could affirm both the aimlessness of life "under the sun" and the enjoyment

<sup>76</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 420.

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 (cf. Rom 8:19-21). *Because* Qoheleth was a man of faith, he held this perspective, for it was through his faith in the God who revealed himself that Qoheleth knew what the world once was and what it will be again. It was because of this orientation that so many enigmatic and antithetical considerations and observations are held in proper tension within his mind and within his book.

### Elusiveness of Meaning

The identification of 1:3 as the theme question, the question of life's meaning, is confirmed by the book itself. In 3:9-11 Qoheleth reveals the breadth of the question. It was no mere *economic* question about one's wealth, but it was a *philosophical* inquiry about life's meaning and purpose. After a poetically structured recitation of the divine appointment of affairs which touch every man in this cursed world (3:1-8), Qoheleth breaks forth with his thematic question, "What does the worker gain from his toil?" (3:9). The relentless tide of events described by Qoheleth is reminiscent of the cosmological cycle earlier recited (1:4-11). It is precisely to such unalterable and rhythmic recurrence of events "under the sun" that the Preacher affixes his question of meaning (1:3 before the poem in 1:4-11; 3:9 after the poem in 3:1-8). Man is part of the cyclical flux of time and circumstance "under the sun." He both inflicts adversity and suffering upon others and is victimized by the incessant recurrence of events. Man struggles for life and meaning in an environment that taunts him with its paradoxes: birth and death, weeping and laughter, love and hate, war and peace, and the like. Such a relentless and inflexible cycle of events extends beyond the grasp of man's control and understanding. Qoheleth never suggests that a man should resign himself *passively* and put forth no "effort to avert the times and the circumstances."<sup>78</sup> Yet, his purpose is not to aid his reader to *search* for order so as to master life.<sup>79</sup> Von Rad is misleading when he offers the following wisdom literature's intention: "There was surely only one goal, to wrest from the chaos of events some kind of order in which man was not continually at the mercy of the incalculable."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Cf. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic,'" 22-23.

<sup>78</sup>See the improper conclusion of Louis Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 64.

<sup>79</sup>Cf. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic,'" 26-27.

<sup>80</sup>G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. J. D. Martin (New York: Abingdon, 1972) 316.

Though Qoheleth surely is not a passive victim of the cruelties of the endless rounds of this life, neither does his focus become the task of mastering life, straining to "wrest some form of order from chaos."<sup>81</sup> Rather, his entire concentration is on how one directs his life through the labyrinth of this meaningless life; it is guidance and counsel to his readers to enjoy life in spite of the inscrutable and enigmatic world in which they live.

On the one hand, precisely where one might expect pessimistic resignation from Qoheleth, the notion is resisted. On the other hand, he does not counsel his readers to search for order in an attempt to manipulate life. It is his burden to show from his consideration of life's limits and enigmas the futility of man's attempt to understand the whole of life and thus to master it. He counsels his readers to replace false and illusory hopes of understanding providence (thereby manipulating life) with a well-established, joyful confidence that creation is God's gift.<sup>82</sup>

One may be puzzled about the connection between the question of 3:9 and the statement of 3:10. However, if one remembers that the inquiry of 3:9 is not economic but the basic question of life's meaning, the connection is clear. If every event in this cursed world has its appointed time (depending not upon human influence but upon the determination and providence of God), "what does the worker gain from his toil" (3:9)? What purpose and meaning does life hold? In response to his inquiry, Qoheleth says, "I have seen the burden God has laid on men" (3:10).<sup>83</sup> What is this burden (הַקִּיָּיִן)? Hengstenberg refers it back to the moil and toil of v 9 "to which men subject themselves in that they desire, and yet are unable to effect anything, because everything comes to pass as it has been fixed and predetermined by God."<sup>84</sup> However, the inquiry of v 9 is not so restricted but is a philosophic question relative to the basic meaning and purpose of life. It does not merely have in view moil and toil. Rather, it encompasses the whole of life's activity in a cursed world where labor and life is subjected to drudgingly irksome and fruitless efforts. Thus, the *burden* spoken of in v 10 is not to be identified as simply the moil and toil in which men are occupied.

The quest in v 9 is linked with v 11 through v 10. The burden (הַקִּיָּיִן) is comprised of this: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11). To express the fact that God has made everything *beautiful* in its time, Qoheleth

<sup>81</sup> von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 421.

<sup>82</sup> Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic," 26.

<sup>83</sup> See Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 53–54 concerning the singular לְכִי הָאָדָם.

<sup>84</sup> Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

uses נִיָּה as a synonym for טוב. Yet, the beauty can hardly be that goodness which the Lord God observed in the work of his hands at the beginning (cf. Gen 1:31, etc.), for creation's subjugation to bondage and decay had not yet come. But after the fall, God's creation was pervasively marred by the curse as is seen in the paradoxes of human affairs listed by Qoheleth (3:1-8). The beauty of which the Preacher speaks consists in this, that what occurs among men comes to pass at its appointed time as a constituent portion of the whole of God's work among men.<sup>85</sup>

Not only has God ordered the affairs of all creation beautifully, he also has put אֶת-הָעֵלֶם in the hearts of men (בְּלִבָּם). The suffix in בְּלִבָּם refers to the הָאָדָם in v 10. How is הָעֵלֶם to be understood? Some older commentators attempted to translate the word in the sense of the Arabic *ʿlam* as 'knowledge' or 'understanding'.<sup>86</sup> With this interpretation, מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר is translated "without which," so that the sense of the text is: "He has also set *knowledge* in the hearts of men, *without which* they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."<sup>87</sup>

This exegetical course is rejected by most commentators.<sup>88</sup> Apparently Luther took אֶת-הָעֵלֶם to mean "the world," "the desire after the knowledge of the world," or "worldly mindedness."<sup>89</sup> However, it seems best to follow the lead of Delitzsch and others who take הָעֵלֶם as "eternity."<sup>90</sup>

The "eternity" which God has put into the hearts of men is a certain inquisitiveness and yearning after purpose. It is a compulsive drive, a deep-seated desire to appreciate order and beauty, arising because man is made in the image of God. It is an impulse to press beyond the limits which the present world circumscribes about man in order to escape the bondage which holds him in the incessant cycle of the seasons and in order to console his anxious mind with meaning and purpose.<sup>91</sup> It is man's desperate attempt to make sense out of what seems senseless and meaningless. Yet, הָעֵלֶם must not be restricted to this, but also must include a residual knowledge of God's eternal power and divine nature which God has placed in every man (cf.

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 259.

<sup>86</sup>Cf. Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 174-75. But see Delitzsch's response to this, *Ecclesiastes*, 260.

<sup>87</sup>Stuart's strained conclusions on 3:11 are inconsistent with his comments on 8:17. See Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 173-74 and 308.

<sup>88</sup>See Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 260.

<sup>89</sup>Attributed to Luther by Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 260.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*

Rom 1:19),<sup>92</sup> for it is this knowledge which gives man his sense that there is purpose and meaning (though it entirely eludes him).

This compulsive desire to appreciate the beauty, symmetry and order of creation shows itself differently at various levels. Aesthetically man seeks to appreciate creation's beauty as he imitates his creator by fashioning beauty with his own hands. Philosophically man pursues knowledge of the universe to know its character, composition and meaning. Theologically man seeks to discern creation's purpose and destiny. Since man has this craving for meaning, a deep-seated inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in this world fits together, he seeks to integrate his experience into a meaningful whole. He yearns to connect the various pieces of his experience to see each portion in the context of the whole of his life. He desperately desires to have a meaningful understanding of the world and of life to give him direction and mastery. He is like Qoheleth who sought to add "one thing to another to discover the scheme of things" (7:27).

Herein then is the task or burden which God has laid upon the sons of Adam: the search for meaning in a disjointed and topsy-turvy world. It is not a burden because man is a creature who has only limited and derived knowledge. It is a heavy and frustrating burden because man's quest for meaning is now performed in a cursed world wherein inexplicable paradox dominates—there is birth and death, hate as well as love, and more war than peace fills the earth. It is this kind of world, uniform yet twisted and marked by gaps, which Qoheleth explored and declared to be meaningless.

In spite of the fact that God has "made everything beautiful in its time" (an orderly arrangement even of chaos), and despite the certainty that "He also has set eternity in the hearts of men," Qoheleth declares, "yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11c). This incapacity of man is emphasized repeatedly by Qoheleth to establish the meaninglessness which he announced at the beginning as his theme. The inability to discover God's purposes and design from events and experiences is an essential thread which Qoheleth weaves into the fabric of his work. The elusiveness of meaning becomes the dominant motif in 6:12–11:6. Man is reminded that he "cannot discover anything about his future" (7:14; cf. 3:22) because God has made both good and evil to befall men quite haphazardly. Is proof needed for the inscrutable ways of God? Qoheleth declares, "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness" (7:15). The tyrannies and the benevolences in this

<sup>92</sup>Otto Zöckler, *Ecclesiastes*, trans. William Wells, in vol. 5, *Commentary on the Holy Scripture*, ed. by J. P. Lange (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960) 67.

world, both caused by God, come upon men with disparity and inequity, for "righteous men get what the wicked deserve and the wicked get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). God has not revealed to men the secrets of the purposes which move his actions (cf. Deut 29:29).

Man's limitation and fractional knowledge, as he seeks to "add one thing to another to discover the scheme of things" (cf. 7:27), is emphasized in 8:7-8a: "Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death." The disproportionate allotment of God's providence ruins men's illusory hopes of mastering life and discovering the divine meaning and purpose for life's experiences and events. "There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men get what the wicked deserve and wicked men get what the righteous deserve" (8:14). Who would challenge Qoheleth? He is right! The incongruities and paradoxes that baffled Qoheleth bewilder every man. It is this disharmony and absurdity that compelled Qoheleth to impart to his readers a realistic perspective.<sup>93</sup>

When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night—then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it [8:16-17].

### Celebration of Life

It is precisely in the contexts where Qoheleth magnifies and emphasizes man's bewilderment that so many scholars have failed to understand Qoheleth. His candid and realistic confessions followed by counsel have brought severe criticism. On the one hand, he is accused of pessimism for his acknowledgement of the elusiveness of meaning and, on the other hand, he is said to be orthodox because of his counsel to sane living (see 12:13-14). At some places his counsel is viewed as grossly defective. Delitzsch asserts, "If Qoheleth had known of a future life . . . he would have reached a better ultimatum."<sup>94</sup> Delitzsch is referring to 3:12-14:

I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink, and find

<sup>93</sup>Cf. 9:1-3, 11-12.

<sup>94</sup>Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 262. In contrast to the negative interpretation by Delitzsch, see R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982) 87-98.

satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it, so men will revere him.

Now wherein lies the shortcoming of Qoheleth's counsel? He urges men to do good (טוב) and to be glad (לשמח). The enjoyment to be derived from life is coordinate with obedience to divine commandments.<sup>95</sup> This is how men are to conduct themselves as long as they are living (בחייהם). Furthermore, that which a man may eat or drink or find satisfying in his toil is confessed as "the gift of God." Above all, Qoheleth acknowledges that what God does, though it may be perplexing to man, he does "so men will fear him" (3:14). How could Qoheleth be more orthodox? Is not this the counsel of one who considers the eternal, the future existence of man? If Qoheleth did not believe in the resurrection, why would he counsel men to behave obediently, fearing God? What is there to fear, if it is not God's judgment of *resurrected* men?

Qoheleth's world and life view was not fashioned according to a natural theology restricted to the affairs of men "under the sun." If that were the case, he would have counselled his readers to revelry, for he saw in this world that it is the wicked who live long (7:15; 8:14). He does not envy the way of the ungodly as Asaph began to do, nearly to his own destruction (cf. Ps 73:3–17). If Qoheleth had no belief in final retribution—the demise of the wicked and the rewarding of the righteous—his counsel would have been, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (see 1 Cor 15:32), the very philosophy of which he is often accused. Qoheleth does not yield to pessimism and despair, nor to an ascetic withdrawal, nor to an anesthetic desensitized denial of evil. Instead, from the recognition that what the righteous and wicked receive is inverse to their deserts (8:14), he moves directly to his holy counsel: "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun" (8:15).

Qoheleth's perspective upon the incongruities of this life is the same as Job's who said of the wicked: "Their prosperity is not in their own hands, so I stand aloof from the counsel of the wicked" (Job 21:16). Qoheleth says,

Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God,

<sup>95</sup>See Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 262 concerning a discussion of Qoheleth's use of טוב in 3:12.

it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow [8:12-13].<sup>96</sup>

Qoheleth formed his world and life view with divine creation and divine retribution in mind. This creator-retributor perspective gives Qoheleth equilibrium and stability to dwell in a world subjected to the curse of God. The creation motif serves as the source of Qoheleth's counsel to celebrate life with joy, for it is a *good* creation of God. The eschatological judgment motif is behind his caution to behave obediently in view of the divine retribution which will reward the righteous and condemn the wicked. This counsel is gracefully harmonized by Qoheleth in his admonition to the young man:

Be happy young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigor are meaningless [11:9-10].

The joy and freedom of following one's desires is not to be dampened by knowledge of coming judgment but only controlled. This is not counsel to indulgent and indecent conduct but to freedom and joyful celebration of God's good gift of life, tempered by the knowledge that the God who created life also holds men accountable to revere him. The free pursuit of the heart's desires and whatever the eyes see is to be done within the moral boundaries of God's commandments (see 12:13). Qoheleth's counsel encourages one to celebrate life, unshackled from a search for the meaning of life.

### *Qoheleth Interpreted: The Epilogue*

Upon concluding his graphic poem on aging and death, Qoheleth closes the body of his book with the theme with which he began: "‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Preacher. ‘Everything is meaningless!’" (12:8; cf. 1:2). But the verdict is not the final word that Qoheleth has for his readers. Instead, he leaves them with a closing word of counsel on how to behave in a world that is aimless and meaningless as the result of the Creator's curse upon it. That counsel is not in the least out of character with the theme of the book. He concludes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole

<sup>96</sup>See Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983) 41-42. His comments are appropriate against those who presume an interpolated contradiction in these verses.

duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing whether it is good or evil" (12:13-14).

Qoheleth, throughout his book, had repeatedly raised the motif of eschatological judgment to motivate obedient behavior despite the fact that rotters advance in prosperity and live long in this world while the righteous flounder in their struggles and succumb early to the curse of death (cf. 3:16, 17; 5:4-7; 8:11-14; 11:9). The final judgment serves as a chief orientation to which Qoheleth directs his readers to steer them through the labyrinths of this meaningless life. The fear of God who shall judge men is to temper and regulate man's ethical actions and decisions throughout his sojourning here. And so it is appropriate that Qoheleth sums up the duty of man: "Fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13; cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; and 8:12-13 three times).

Fearing God is motivated by the fact that "God will bring every deed into judgment." These two great themes, fearing God and an appointed time for divine judgment, serve as integral elements in the development of Qoheleth's world and life view. They were not mere addendas to a series of unconnected discursive sayings and affirmations. Rather, the conclusion serves as the knot which secures the ethical threads carefully woven into the fabric of the work. Qoheleth asserts this to be the case, for he says, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter" (12:13a).

Consistent with his counsel throughout the book, Qoheleth does not permit his reader to despair even though "everything is meaningless." He counsels men to fear God and to obey him because there is a time for judgment when they will give account of their conduct and secrets, whether they be good or evil. These last words can hardly be taken in a crippling manner. Qoheleth did not design his words concerning the all-searching eye of God (v 14) to *inhibit* human enjoyment and behavior nor to cast his readers into *introspective* questioning of motives. Rather, knowledge of divine judgment should *regulate* one's conduct with a *prospective* gaze of expectation toward the day when justice shall eradicate all iniquity, when divine mercy shall purge out all oppression, when the righteous shall flourish as the wicked are cut off (cf. 3:16-17; 8:12-14).

### *Qoheleth's World and Life View Summarized*

As Qoheleth made his thorough investigation (1:13) of all that is done under heaven, he was governed by basic presuppositional beliefs which are expressed throughout his work. These presuppositions largely arise out of his knowledge of God's revelation of himself in Genesis 1-11. Foundational to his philosophical pursuit of meaning is his firm recognition that the world with all its systems, and man in

particular as actor, operate under the curse of God. This he expresses in terms of things *twisted* and things *lacking* (1:15). The presence of evil is not to be attributed to the essence of creation but as a foreign element imposed upon it, for "Who can straighten what he [God] has made crooked?" (7:13). Furthermore, God did not capriciously impose this curse, but "God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes" (7:29). Thus, it is the curse which accounts for the inequity, the tyranny, the oppression, the disparity of providence, and especially for the presence of death and its haphazard encroachment without respect to men's characters (cf. 9:1-3).

This basic presuppositional belief that the world is not what it was *originally* nor what it will be *finally* governs Qoheleth's ethical world and life view. This is due to the fact that the transformation of the world is not accomplished by some evolutionary process inherent within creation itself, but by the God who created the universe and also subjected it to its present frustration under the curse and who will finally liberate it (cf. Rom 8:19-21).

For Qoheleth, then, there is a second and much more ultimate presupposition which regulates all his observations of this evil world and his wise counsel on how to live in it. The entire book rests solidly upon the assumption that the Lord God of Israel is the Creator and Governor of all things. He is the *Creator* who set all things into motion (12:1; 11:5). He is the *Sovereign* who governs all that he has created. He does not merely permit or allow the present suffering and evil in the world. Qoheleth acknowledges that it is God who *causes* both the good and the bad to befall men irrespective of their characters (7:14-15). It is God who gives a man wealth and yet may not give him the enjoyment of it, an evil which is vexing to men (6:1-2). Though it is God who gives both the good and the evil, he is not to be charged with doing evil; he is only to be feared precisely because of all that he does among men (3:14).

God is also perceived by Qoheleth as *Incomprehensible Wisdom*, for the creator/creature distinction, aggravated by the curse, hides God behind a frowning providence which hinders man from discovering life's meaning in this cursed world (3:11; 7:13-14; 8:16-17; 11:3-6). Man's knowledge of what God does as he observes the world is fractional and frustrated by the perplexing paradoxes. It is precisely this fact, namely, that almighty God has hidden his full character behind a disparate providence, that necessitates his special revelation.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>97</sup>Shank ("Qoheleth's World and Life View," 68) astutely states, "We must maintain, contrary to the majority of critical and conservative commentators, that 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. . . . That perception also *includes* a deep, spiritual insight into the affects of the curse of God upon life and labor 'under the sun.'"

The antithetical quality of Qoheleth must be understood within this framework. The proposal of liberal critics that the oscillations of thought and expression are to be attributed either to a dialogue between two or more speakers or the result of glossators and redactors must be rejected.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the proposed solution of many conservative scholars also must be laid aside. The suggestion that Qoheleth's book is indicative of a man who wavers between secular and religious perspectives, oscillating to and fro, filled with doubts and perplexities, yet finally arising above them, has no true correspondence to the nature of Qoheleth. Even the attempt to resolve the paradoxical nature of the book by suggesting that the evils and inequities, of which the Preacher complains, are only an "apparent anomaly"<sup>99</sup> must be disallowed.

The paradoxical expressions and antithetical observations of God's disparate providence do not find their explanation from some internal struggle in Qoheleth between faith and reason. Nor are they resolved by postulating that they are the result of a dichotomy between sacred and secular perspectives. Rather, Qoheleth reflects the *real* world in its present state which is in conflict with the way it once was and the way it will be again. It is the curse, causing the twisting and incompleteness (1:15) of all things, that accounts for the dilemma which confronts man. Qoheleth hides no evil nor does he seek to deny it as merely apparent. He confronts the reality of evil and seeks to bring his readers to do the same. Yet, on the other hand, Qoheleth maintains an unwavering belief in the God who created and who will judge all men. For after all is said and done, it is God who has arranged the world as it is so that men will fear him (3:14).

Qoheleth does not shrink from acknowledging that it is God who has made both the good times and the bad (7:14). Yet, he never resorts to a fatalism which encourages either pious passivity or Epicurean indulgence. He takes the pathway of wisdom. The fact that God has inscrutably arranged this world under the perplexity and frustration of the curse, caused Qoheleth to declare, "Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future" (7:14b). Man is not to busy himself with the inscrutable. He is not to become occupied with trying to determine which course it is that is divinely chosen for him.

Qoheleth makes it clear that it is futile to seek to determine from the course of providential events whether or not divine approval rests upon one's amoral decisions, however great or small they may be.

<sup>98</sup>Cf. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 37-39.

<sup>99</sup>See [Greene], "The Scope and Plan of Ecclesiastes," 424. This view is too much dominated by presuming that the final retribution cuts its line *now* with vividness. See also *ibid.*, 424-25. Cf. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 17.

Searching divine providence to determine one's course of action is not piety, but folly which leads to inactivity and failure. For "whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap" (11:4). The mystery of providence is unfathomable and inscrutable (11:5). "No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it" (8:17). Trying to discern providence will drive one mad, for it presumes that God's providence bears a direct and invariable correspondence to the events among men. Such misguided efforts cause men to turn upon God in bitterness or berate themselves when evil days befall them, thinking that suffering is always caused by particular sins.

Qoheleth counsels against "providence reading," for those who follow such a course fail to succeed at anything (11:4). Instead, since no man can know which endeavors will prove fruitful, the proper approach to life is to give oneself to the responsibilities at hand *with freedom and diligence*, and to await the course of events to determine one's success (11:6). All the days a man is given ought to be enjoyed (11:8), for "it is now that God favors what you do" (9:7b). Life is a divine gift to be enjoyed to its maximum as long as there is breath in the nostrils, for "even a live dog is better off than a dead lion" (9:4). Life is an endowment to be presently celebrated in the presence of the Creator (12:1). The enjoyment of life is to be the dominant motif of one's existence upon this earth, not the mercenary fixation of a miserly workman who hoards his earnings to satisfy his soul when he retires from his labors. The days of trouble come too quickly and unpredictably upon men eroding their pleasure and enjoyment (12:1-2). This perspective upon life is not sensual; it is realistic. It is governed by the fact that this world is cursed, and the ultimate curse is death (9:1, 3). Death is not something to be desired as a release from the prison of the body (as in Neoplatonism), for it wrenches man away from the environment in which he was designed to dwell (cf. Ps 115:16-17). Death is no friend but an enemy which violently tears a man apart, severing the spirit from the body (12:7). This is the perspective that the whole Bible takes upon death (cf. Isa 38:10-20; 2 Cor 5:1-5).

For Qoheleth, then, two opposing realities serve to motivate his expressions in 9:5-10: (1) the curse of death comes to every man, and (2) the gift of life is man's to be enjoyed to its fullest "all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun" (9:9). His whole description of the dead in 9:5-6 is defined carefully by him—"never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun" (9:6b). His interest is not to describe theologically the *state* of the dead (as Jehovah's Witnesses might contend), but he portrays the

dead in relation to this world; they have nothing more to do with it. It is for this reason that Qoheleth so often reiterates his celebration of life:

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planting nor knowledge nor wisdom [9:7–10].

#### CONCLUSION

Qoheleth was no *enigmatic pessimist*. He was not a man who recorded the battle of tormenting and conflicting thoughts that raged inside his own mind as he oscillated between orthodox piety and indulgent secularism. Qoheleth was a *godly sage*. He was a righteous man regulated by his knowledge of and devout fear of the God of Israel. It is precisely because he was a God-fearing man that Qoheleth was capable of giving expression to such paradoxical and anomalous matters without denying the presence of evil in this world or without destroying his belief in God. Qoheleth records a godly man's reflections upon a cursed world subjected by God to vanity and frustration. It is the character of such a world which accounts for the polarized expressions and paradoxical observations in his book. It is precisely what one scholar dogmatically denied: "That the author of Ecclesiastes intended that the contrarities of his book should . . . reflect and image forth the chequered web of man's earthly condition, hopes alternating with fears, joys succeeded by sorrows, life contrasting with death."<sup>100</sup>

What Paul asserts in a few words in Rom 8:19–21, Qoheleth investigates at length. Where Paul spoke generally, the Preacher descended to uncover the particulars. Though Paul had the privilege of knowing that Christ will restore all things and even now, in principle, has begun to do so (cf. 1 Cor 15:54–57), both he and Qoheleth share one biblical assessment of the character of this world and of life in it since the fall. It is cursed! It is disjointed! It is upside down! It is in bondage to decay! It is meaningless! It needs to be liberated!

What Qoheleth saw obscurely in the coming day of final retribution, the apostle Paul makes clear: "creation itself will be liberated

from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). It is for the final redemption of God's people that creation awaits, for then will it be set free from what is now twisted and lacking (Qoh 1:15).