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ECCLESIASTES

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This is a penetrating reflection on the nature of true wisdom. In accepting it as inspired, Jews and Christians challenge us to listen for the Spirit of God breathing through the words of someone who begins with the phrase: ‘The words of Qohelet’ [תְּהִלָּתוֹ]. The word Qohelet derives from the Hebrew word for the assembly, qāhāl [קָהָל]. Qohelet wishes to remain anonymous, for when we are listening to Qohelet reflecting on wisdom, we are expected to reflect on our own experiences as member of God’s chosen people, assembled for worship and communion.

In the Greek Version, ‘Qohelet’ is translated ‘Ecclesiastēs’ [Ἐκκλησιαστής, a member of the ἐκκλησία] – hence the traditional title of the book. In this introductory commentary we will call the book ‘Ecclesiastes’, and refer to the person addressing us as ‘Qohelet’.

Like the Hebrew word for wisdom, ḥokmāh [חֹכְמָה], and its Greek equivalent, sophia [σοφία], Qohelet is, grammatically, a feminine form. Is this because he wants us to see Qohelet as a personification of wisdom, or does he also want us to listen to a woman’s perspective as a counter to the traditional association of wisdom with the public (and therefore male) sphere of fame, power, wealth and success? To keep open this possibility, when referring to Qohelet, I will use the feminine pronoun (‘she’). Since in the culture of the time it is extremely unlikely that the author would not have been a male, when referring to the author I will use the masculine pronoun (‘he’).

However, from the outset an important complication is introduced: Qohelet is described as ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (Ecclesiastes 1:1). As we listen to the reflections of Qohelet, we are to have before our mind’s eye (or sitting on stage, if you see this as a drama), the man whom traditional wisdom has presented as renowned above all others for his wisdom:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore.

– 1Kings 4:29

People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

– 1Kings 4:34

YHWH gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him.

– 1Kings 5:12

The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.

– 1Kings 10:24

Solomon is *the* exemplar of all the benefits that flow from wisdom as traditionally understood: he was renowned for his power, wealth, and the astonishing success of all that he undertook. We know we are listening to Qohelet, but through her reflections we are listening to Solomon reflecting back over his life and we are challenged to ask ourselves what did all Solomon’s fame come to? Solomon’s united kingdom collapsed at his death. His son inherited Judah but the northern kingdom broke away. As will be explained shortly, Ecclesiastes was composed in post-exilic Judah (Yehud), a tiny fraction of the Judah conquered by the Babylonian army in 597.

The temple in which we are assembling was reconstructed from the rubble of Solomon's glorious temple, destroyed in 587. What became of his 'success' as a builder, of his power and wealth? How wise was he? The author is challenging much of the traditional understanding of wisdom. How could he do this in a more dramatic way than by having the great Solomon centre stage, recognising his failure and questioning the wisdom that was attributed to him?

In asking us to listen to Qohelet, and at the same time to hear the words as coming from Solomon, the author is asking a lot of us. At times he uses Qohelet to present his own position; at other times he presents what we might expect Solomon to have said, only to go on to demonstrate the error contained in the words. At times he holds up a point of view so that we will see how ridiculous it is; at other times he undercuts our prejudices with a statement that shocks, perturbs, and challenges us (as much today as it did his contemporaries). We must constantly be on the look out for irony and paradox. His critique of traditional wisdom is subtle in its way of questioning and undermining ways of thinking that were part of the accepted understanding of the time. We should not be surprised when we find that he is challenging our assumptions just as radically.

It is probably because Ecclesiastes challenged much of what was accepted as traditional wisdom, that not all first century AD Rabbis considered it worthy of a place among their sacred books. However, it was accepted as inspired by the Rabbis at Jamnia (c. 90AD). Traditionally Ecclesiastes is read at the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot). We will return to examine the significance of this connection with Sukkot later in the Introduction.

Before we examine some of the key elements in the critique of wisdom offered by the author of Ecclesiastes, let us look at the political, social and economic environment at the time. There are no historical references in the text, but the kind of Hebrew used, especially the influence of Aramaic, the presence of Persian loan words, and the absence of signs of Greek influence, point to its being composed some time during the period 450-350BC. This places it after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and before Palestine, along with the rest of the Persian Empire, was conquered by Alexander the Great.

It took a long time for post-exilic Yehud to recover from the devastation of Judah and Jerusalem in the early decades of the sixth century, and the depopulation that ensued. When some of the exiles returned home from Babylon, beginning in 539, they found it well nigh impossible to get the country functioning again. Yehud (post-exilic Judah) was considerably smaller than pre-exilic Judah (compare the hatched areas of the maps on page 122), trade and commerce were practically non-existent, and they had to struggle to meet the tax imposed on them by their Persian overlords.

It was only towards the middle of the following century (the period of Nehemiah and Ezra) that things started to improve. However, economically Yehud was in a very different situation from the subsistence agrarian economy that was the life of their ancestors – a life supported by traditional 'wisdom' that encapsulated maxims for the conduct of human life and affairs. Ecclesiastes fits generally among the works of Israel that comprise what is customarily called 'Wisdom Literature'.

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However, while the presence and action of God in the life of the community is central to our author's thinking, he is convinced that this presence and action are entirely mysterious and utterly beyond human comprehension. He begins his reflections, therefore, from observation of human behaviour and not from God's revealed will. He could see that much that traditionally went under the name of 'wisdom' was out-dated and provided little guidance in the changed environment within which he and his contemporaries had to work out their lives.

In many ways the Persian Empire was considerably more enlightened than either the Assyrian or Babylonian. It was also much better organised. The satraps and the provincial governors were encouraged to support local religious and other customs, and to develop a network of commerce between the various districts that spread from the Indus River in the East to Ethiopia in the West. Grants of property were bestowed on individuals, who, in exchange, were responsible for collecting taxes. These grants were not automatically handed on from father to son, but were given by the governor to whoever was judged better at raising taxes. Smart property owners sub-divided their properties and extracted tax from their tenant farmers. It doesn't take much imagination to recognise that the system was wide open to exploitation. It offered opportunities, but was fraught with considerable risks. It is the arbitrariness of the system, and the volatility of an economy which was much more dependent on inter-provincial commerce, that accounts for much of the advice contained in this Book. It also accounts for why we moderns find its 'wisdom' much more congenial than a lot of the traditional 'wisdom' of which our author is critical.

A picture of the social situation in the middle of the fifth century is provided by the following text from the Book of Nehemiah:

There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."

– Nehemiah 5:3-5

As Choon-Leong Seow puts it in his commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday 1997 page 34):

The economic environment favoured the political elite and the most influential entrepreneurs. In consequence, the gap between the rich and the dependent classes widened.

The prevailing insecurity and the difficulty of being economically self-sufficient in the new commercial environment that depended on the variability of inter-province trade, encouraged a mentality that fostered striving to have more, but never feeling secure, and so never being satisfied with what one had. There was a tendency for those who 'made it' to criticise the poor as being responsible for their condition. The legal system favoured the prosperous, so that justice was elusive. Greed and ambition flourished. People had to be careful in what they criticised, as reports got back to those who exercised power in the land. There was a prevailing fear of the arbitrary powers wielded by the rulers.

The author is well aware of the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition. We will notice him supporting values only to add the rider that we should not expect that following these values will lead to success. He offers guidelines, fully aware that they won't always help.

To appreciate the nature and importance of the author's reflections, we need to highlight two underlying limitations. He and his contemporaries took for granted that God controls everything that happens. They also assumed that death is the end of human life. Readers who approach this book from a Christian perspective join others in having serious reservations about the first assumption, and, in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, will see death from a very different perspective. If we are going to learn anything of value from Ecclesiastes (and there is much we can learn from it), we must listen to it from within the assumptions that were prevalent at the time. Let us examine them in turn.

A God who controls the world

We refer the reader to the Introduction to Lamentations (pages 70-72) where we reflected at some length on the understanding of divine control that permeates the books of the Older Testament. Behind everything we hear as we listen to Qohelet is an assumption that is prevalent throughout the Older Testament: namely, that God controls nature and history. The tradition inherited by the author saw happenings that were judged to be good as expressions of God's blessing, and happenings that were judged to be bad as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. Though he questions some of this, he states over and over that we humans have no control over what happens. God does it all.

This way of looking at things is based on his understanding of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the people of ancient Israel thought of God as 'Almighty', they were declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, but they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits. Because of his love, God has chosen not to control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary! Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

The author is aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. He is critical of the greedy landowners, and, generally, of those who wield power in the land. He also recognises that his readers are free to welcome or to neglect the joy that God is offering them. However, it never occurs to him to doubt that it is God, and God alone, who determines everything that happens in this world.

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Death as the end of human life

The author of Ecclesiastes inherited from his tradition the notion that human life, which depends on the life-breath given by God, ends with death when ‘the life-breath returns to God who gave it’ (12:7). The dead go down into the shadowy and lifeless existence of Sheol (the Jewish equivalent of the Hades of Greek mythology).

My soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

– Psalm 88:3-5

The dead do not praise the Lord,
nor do any that go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you;
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.
The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day;
fathers make known to children your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18-19

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
in place of the living who give thanks?
From the dead, as from one who does not exist,
thanksgiving has ceased; those who are alive and well
sing the Lord’s praises.

– Sirach 17:27-28

People prayed that God would preserve them from death and the underworld:

My heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

The notion of resurrection from the dead, which included the notion of a continuance of communion with God (and therefore a continuance of life) beyond the grave was espoused by some members of the Jewish community, but this was nearly two centuries after Ecclesiastes, and continued to be disputed into the first century AD.

This idea of life beyond death grew out of faith in the fidelity of God. The historical situation that brought about this conviction was the martyrdom of many pious Jews at the time of the persecutions instigated by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (167-165BC). It seemed impossible for God not to reward with life those who gave their lives so heroically for their faith. The first explicit statements concerning the resurrection from the dead belong to this period:

At that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

– Daniel 12:1-2

Our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God's covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance.

– 2Maccabees 7:36

Another witness to a belief that physical death is not the end of life, at least for those who have proved faithful to the covenant, is the following text that was included in the Isaiah scroll. It probably comes from the same period as Daniel and 2Maccabees. We read:

The dead do not live; shades do not rise — because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them.

– Isaiah 26:14

This fits with the tradition, and the author of Ecclesiastes would have been completely at home with it. However, the text goes on to say something that cuts across an assumption that is basic to everything written in Ecclesiastes:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:19

Our author takes it for granted that death is the end of life, the end of communion with God. There is no place in his thinking for reward or punishment beyond the grave. If the righteous are not rewarded in this life, they are never rewarded. If the unrighteous are not punished in this life, they never have to suffer the consequences of their behaviour. Again and again he portrays death as the ultimate leveller. Though he finds it an incomprehensible mystery that God would will the finality of death, he accepts it as a fact, and sees that it calls into question much of traditional teaching, which asserts that good is rewarded and evil punished.

Before moving on from this matter, it is important that we who choose to believe in life beyond death do not allow this belief to soften, romanticise or help us avoid the bewildering, and, in a real sense, 'ultimate' fact of death. Belief in the resurrection transcends death, it does not remove it. Death is the end of the only kind of experience we know. When he came up against it, Jesus shuddered to the depths of his being. On the cross he experienced abandonment, including from God. He still cried out to the one he called 'my God', but he faced the reality of death. We can see beyond Ecclesiastes, but we would be unwise not to listen to its author when he confronts us with the awful reality of death.

Vanity

Qohelet's (Solomon's) opening words are

Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 1:2

This is one pole of the paradox. The other is that everything is 'a gift of God' (5:19). In his meditation on Ecclesiastes entitled '*Reason for Being*' (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990, page 47), Jacques Ellul quotes Georges Bernanos:

In order to prepare to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.

Qohelet will lead us to place our hope in God, but she first requires of us that we face up to the fact that much of what traditional wisdom looked on as a sign of God's blessing is not what it is claimed to be, and we are unwise to chase after power, wealth, success or fame in our undertakings, thinking we can find meaning in them. Solomon didn't, and Qohelet tells us that we won't either. The list ('power', 'wealth', 'success in our undertakings') should prepare us modern readers to expect that the reflections we hear in Ecclesiastes might well have something to say to us, not only to its contemporaries.

In Ecclesiastes we hear the word 'vanity' 27 times. The Hebrew is הֶבֶל [hebel]. The image is of a wisp of smoke: there one minute, gone the next. It is no accident that this is the name given 'Abel' in the Genesis story. His sacrifice is accepted by God. He seems a better man than his brother Cain, but he quickly disappears from the story, leaving no trace (see Genesis 4:2-8). The author of Ecclesiastes, however, is not just commenting on the passing nature of things. He is challenging us to face up to the reality of the human condition in which there is no consistency between the expectations we have in regard to our actions and the actual outcomes we experience. If we work from the premise that God is just, we can make no sense of this. It violates logic. It is absurd.

One consequence of this is that it is foolish to find meaning in our lives from power, wealth or success. Everything 'under the sun' (1:3), everything other than the transcendent and necessarily incomprehensible God, is as fleeting, unpredictable and unreliable as a puff of smoke. Apart from God everything we experience is, in and of itself, insubstantial and deceptive, a pretence, an illusion. This is true of piety, even of righteousness, and of much that goes under the name of 'wisdom'. 'All is vanity' (1:2). Everything has its place if we see it as a gift of God. If, however, we look to anything other than God to find meaning in our lives we lack wisdom. Ecclesiastes doesn't just make this claim, it challenges us to look at our own experience, honestly and without evasion, to see for ourselves that it is so.

Power

Solomon is a symbol of power:

He does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

– Ecclesiastes 8:3-4

Yet he has to admit:

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun.

This also is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

Power is fragile. Lose the land to another and you lose your power (see 5:9). What would Solomon say if he could see the depressed state of his kingdom reduced to a tiny province in the trans-Euphrates satrapy of the Persian Empire, part of a system that is inherently corrupt:

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

– Ecclesiastes 5:8

With power comes fame, but fame, like perfume, quickly evaporates (see 7:1).

Wealth

All we have to do is to look at Solomon to see that money makes all things possible.

– Ecclesiastes 10:19

The trouble is that if we are driven by the desire for wealth we are never satisfied:

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 5:10

If we are unwise enough to think we can find meaning in wealth, we haven't the wisdom to see our way to break the cycle and free ourselves from our obsession. We are wealthy, so we spend, we consume, and so have to keep acquiring to feed our need. Riches can be 'lost in a bad venture' (5:14). Furthermore:

As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.

– Ecclesiastes 5:15

I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

– Ecclesiastes 2:20-21

We might recall Jesus' warning:

What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?

– Matthew 16:26

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Work

Ecclesiastes demands that we work. Our ability to do so is a gift from God:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

– Ecclesiastes 3:10

Our work gives pleasure to God (see 9:7). So Qohelet insists:

All your hand finds to do with the strength you have, do it..

– Ecclesiastes 9:10

Yet work does not, in and of itself, give meaning to our lives. How passing were the great building achievements of Solomon! If we want our lives to have meaning we have to look elsewhere.

Happiness

Again and again Qohelet tells us to accept whatever joy God chooses to give us, and make the best of God's gifts. All we have is the present moment. The past has gone. The future does not exist. It is good to seek what is better, so long as we recognise that this, too, is unreliable. As we have already noted, she warns people against the insatiable desire for more, a desire that gets in the road of enjoying the present moment. She also warns us not to be too greedy. In the complex and arbitrary world in which we live, there is little we can change, and whatever changes we do make can never guarantee success.

Look for happiness but know that it cannot provide what our restless hearts are searching for. Throughout Ecclesiastes Qohelet is focusing on our profound longing (borrowing Jesus' words) to 'live and live to the full'(John 10:10).

God has set the desire for eternity in human hearts.

– Ecclesiastes 3:11

In light of the author's understanding of the finality of death it is important to remember that by 'eternity' [עֲלָמִים, 'ōlām] he means 'indefinite duration', 'everlasting'. We want to be, to know, to love and be loved. We want to be in communion with the source of all life, God. Qohelet wants this for us, but is adamant in warning us not to try to satisfy our desire in all the wrong places, in what is 'hebel' ('vanity'). She calls us to do good, so long as we don't expect doing good to lead to a good outcome. God's ways are not our ways. We will never comprehend God or what God is doing in our world. The text just quoted continues:

Human beings cannot succeed in discovering that which God accomplishes.

– Ecclesiastes 3:11

We can surely learn from Qohelet's insistence that we live in the present moment. We are not saying (nor is Qohelet) that the present moment exists in isolation. It emerges from the past, and in turn affects the future, though in both cases we cannot know how. How much suffering comes from our getting locked into the past, and being paralysed by fear of the future. We would be wise to bear suffering as best we can, but not to let the clouds totally cover our sky. There are possibilities for joy: accept them with gratitude, and enjoy them to the full. The key is to stop putting ourselves in the centre of the frame. Qohelet would have been perfectly at home with another saying of Jesus: 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness'(Matthew 6:33).

Wisdom

The author of Ecclesiastes challenges much of what in his day was considered ‘wisdom’ [חֵכְמָה, ḥokmāh]. He challenged it because it lacked realism and was too dogmatic. He saw wisdom as a human activity, and so necessarily limited. He acknowledges the benefits of genuine wisdom. The heart of a truly wise person helps him; the heart of a fool brings harm (see 10:2-3). People are impressed by the words of a wise person (see 10:12). Wisdom has more power to save a city than does military might (9:14-15). It has greater effect than the ranting of a ruler among fools (see 9:17). Wisdom is a gift from God (see 2:26).

While acknowledging the importance and value of wisdom, the author of Ecclesiastes is conscious of its essential limitations. He continually warns us against basing our lives on what we inherit from the past without checking it against the facts of experience. In today’s terms he insisted that wisdom be evidence-based, and not lose its connection with knowledge [דַּעַת, da‘at]:

The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.

– Ecclesiastes 7:12

Wisdom that does not fit with actual experience is ‘vanity’. Furthermore we should not expect human wisdom to bring happiness or to satisfy our search for meaning (see 2:19, 21). How much harm is caused by our clinging to traditions that claim wisdom, but that do not apply to our lives. This is even more true in the rapidly changing modern world. A new situation demands new reflection. Sure, we have a lot to learn from the past, but we must learn to check it against the facts.

God

It is significant that ‘God’ is mentioned 40 times in Ecclesiastes; always אֱלֹהִים [‘Elōhîm]; never יְהוָה [YHWH]. The author wants his thought to stand independently of specifically Jewish considerations.

He is insistent that we cannot know God, and so we must not use God as a short cut to truth. In the words of Solomon:

YHWH has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.

– 1Kings 8:12

Basic to everything Qohelet says about God is that everything that happens is done by God:

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that human beings may not find out anything that will come after them.

– Ecclesiastes 7:14

I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

– Ecclesiastes 8:17

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Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

– Ecclesiastes 11:5

This does not mean that we should sit on our hands and wait for God to act. As the well-known poem of 3:1-11 says so eloquently: there is a time for doing everything (there is no time for doing nothing!). God does everything, but God chooses to do things through us. If we do nothing we cannot see what God is doing. We must act, so long as we do not expect that what we are doing will have results. We cannot be certain of God's will beforehand. We may be doing something that will have no good results, for God may not be acting through us. It is wisdom to learn from our mistakes. It is wisdom to be open to God's gift. It is wisdom to know that what God does is good and beautiful. It is wisdom to be on the lookout for what is good and beautiful. Above all we are to 'listen'. That way there is a chance that we may perform what Qohelet calls:

the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

– Ecclesiastes 3:10

We can learn from Qohelet's words not to be too confident in our ability to inquire into the divine. No matter how refined and tested our concepts are, and this applies especially to our concepts of God, they are only *our* concepts. There is no place for pride and arrogance. Let us pursue learning to the best of our ability, but let us hold our conclusions lightly, always ready to have them corrected or refined.

God is not a 'cause', such that creation is an 'effect' existing outside of God. God is the Transcendent One. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, God is the heart and the beyond of everything. The author of Ecclesiastes may not have used these words, but they are consistent with his thinking.

For Qohelet, God is, first and foremost, one who 'gives' (an expression she uses 15 times). In encouraging us to enjoy the simple things of life, she states:

It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

– Ecclesiastes 3:13 (see 2:24)

God for Qohelet is judge, in the sense that it is God who dispenses justice – God, not the instruments of the corrupt system that they are experiencing in Judah. We need God's judgment if we are to find justice.

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

Qohelet's key advice is for us to 'fear God':

Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

– Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 (see 5:7)

To 'fear God' is traditional language for approaching God with utter seriousness, knowing that God is the Transcendent Other on whom we completely depend. It is our relationship with the incomprehensible God that alone gives us reality and meaning. We are alive because God is breathing his life-breath into us. In the words of Genesis:

YHWH God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

– Genesis 2:7

The author of Ecclesiastes ends his work encouraging us to 'remember the Creator' before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 12:7-8

Sukkot

Finally, a comment on the appropriateness of the tradition of reading Ecclesiastes during the Festival of Sukkot. By living in makeshift shelters (sukkot), the people re-live the experience of their ancestors as they journeyed through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to the promised Land, protected only by God. There is no other security. There are no other solid foundations.

Ellul writes (page 46) of the essential link between Qohelet and Sukkot:

What book speaks more eloquently of this fragility, challenges everything, requires we examine our conscience, sweeps away all our rock-solid certainties? It leaves us alone with our precarious destiny, stripped bare to experience the only genuine security: the security offered by the sovereign Master of history.

Judah in 587BC



Judah in 539BC

