Introduction

Ecclesiastes is a book that oftentimes sparks debate over whether it withholds a positive, pro-life stance or a negative, pessimistic tone that renders life meaningless. Themes such as vanity, the useless pursuit of wisdom, as well as the same ending of death for both the righteous and the wicked have left pastors hesitant to preach the book during Sunday worship services. In scholarly discussion, contemporary views on Ecclesiastes are mainly “divided as to whether Ecclesiastes is a deeply pessimistic book or one that affirms life and joy,” as suggested by Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O’Dowd.¹ Since it is a book deeply involved with contemplating human life in reality, namely chasing after the meaning of life, it counts as wisdom literature. According to Michael V. Fox, wisdom literature in the Bible “is the body of writings that offer advice on how to succeed in life as well as reflections on its meanings and problems.”² Canonical books include Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and wisdom Psalms while noncanonical books include Ben Sira (or Ecclesiastucus), Wisdom of Solomon, and some texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, unlike other books of wisdom in the Bible which promote wisdom as a way of understanding life, Ecclesiastes problematizes the very action of pursuing wisdom in order to live a better life. For Qoheleth—the assumed author that reveals himself in the book, he concludes that his chase after knowledge has all

been in vain, saying that “I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind” (1:17). In the Bible, Proverbs provide instructions about how to lead a life according to wisdom while Job poses a series of profound theological and philosophical questions toward God. While both of these books “placed enormous confidence in the human intellect,” Ecclesiastes has already surpassed this level of wisdom-thinking. Instead of using wisdom as an instrument to understand life, Qoheleth ponders the very essence of wisdom, madness, and folly, transgressing cosmic and ontological boundaries, but only to realize that the human intellect is no match with the cosmic cycle that all creations are caught within. That is, just as we are born entering this world, apparent death also awaits us, lurking someplace-sometime in the future to cancel out everything we have ever obtained and owned that gives meaning to our lives. Whether it is a joy or turmoil to exist in this world remains a hotly debated topic related to understanding Ecclesiastes.

Certainly, death that cancels all meanings of life resonates throughout the whole book, shattering all expectations that life is a journey of cause and effect. It seems that the theme of death accounts for the divided views on whether Qoheleth is optimistic or pessimistic towards life. As human intellect toils in vain according to Qoheleth, Crenshaw suggests

---


Qoheleth “lacked trust in either God or knowledge.”\(^5\) However, “such skepticism did not prevent Qoheleth from asking the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?”\(^6\) A brief but possible answer comes from one specific verse: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Both the righteous and the wicked will perish, and death is the end of all possible meanings. The fact that death itself is void and meaningless impels Qoheleth to frequently remind his audience that death is their destiny, regardless of their deeds. Yet, he urges people to do everything “with your might,” suggesting that work in life is still worth pursuing. The matter at stake for Qoheleth is seemingly expressed that “if not work, what else is to be worth pursuing in life then?” This leads to a somewhat optimistic view of our existence.

Fox suggests that “Ecclesiastes is the closest the Bible comes to philosophy, which is the intellectual, rational contemplation of fundamental human, issues, with no recourse to revelation or tradition.”\(^7\) Not only does Qoheleth ponder/question the meaning of existence, he also presents a distinct philosophy of life that differs from the righteous-seeking Judaic tradition: “It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both (righteousness and wickedness)” (7:18). The key in life is neither righteousness nor wickedness per se but to fear God. Choon-Leong Seow

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xi.
suggests that “the fearer of God is one who knows the place of humanity, both human potential and human limitations.”

He goes on to observe that Qoheleth would consider that “the fear of God is the recognition of human limitations and the acceptance of divine will.”

This unique teaching of humanity—inherniting both righteousness and wickedness—under the circumstance of submission towards God demonstrates a possible way which individuals may live their lives to the fullest. Hence, although the theme of vanity persists throughout the whole book, there are hints that Qoheleth remains faithful towards humanity and human existence in the face of death—the great denier of meaning.

Overall, there is a unique and profound relationship between the death of human life and the sovereignty of God, a relationship that is undeniably alien to the human intellect. No matter how hard one pursues knowledge and wisdom, it is impractical to access the wisdom of God as long as we are mortal beings. What, then, does death have to offer us? Even if death itself is meaningless, its existence plays a significant role in shaping Qoheleth’s thought. Therefore, through examining different scholarly commentaries on Ecclesiastes, I will attempt to draw an outline of discourses that sheds light on Qoheleth’s thinking and theology of human life. In chapter one, I will began by giving an overview of Ecclesiastes’ historical setting, authorship and its source material, and its literary forms. The purpose is to examine the world view of Ecclesiastes in order to understand how Qoheleth shapes his


9 Ibid.
philosophical thinking. In chapter two, I will survey and categorize commentaries by different scholars to understand how they view Ecclesiastes. Through close inspection I will try to locate their stance and reason for considering Qoheleth’s tone towards life as positive, negative, or mixed. This should contribute to a fuller understanding of certain themes analyzed by different scholars and how different positions differ from one another.

Finally, in chapter three, I will locate where death as a theme interacts with other major themes frequently discussed in commentaries, such as the term “vanity,” the cycle of God’s creation, and time within God’s hands. With this chapter, I seek to formulate a distinctive view that understands Qoheleth’s view of life through knowing that death is the inevitable fate that no individual can flee from. Since both the righteous and the wicked (and those that are both) are all subject to death, what matters predominantly is to make the most of one’s life. Time in God’s hand is merely an element of creation, and Qoheleth suggests that we exist within a creation where everything is already settled by God. Humans are aware of time, but are still incapability of perceiving beyond creation’s framework (Eccl. 3:11), and thus, this leads to the human fear towards death. With no living person having experienced death, we have no knowledge beyond life; hence, no knowledge/wisdom exists in death itself. Yet, this does not necessary mean that we are vulnerable in the face of death. Through knowing death, instead of dreading life as the uncontrollable—as most commentaries would say—I suggest that Qoheleth addresses directly the matter of death in order to ponder on the
meaning of life. Such a view may change how the general public views death: rather than feeling unpleasant about it, through Qoheleth’s understanding, death may become the major agent for pondering the meaning of human existence. Additionally, as human experience is limited to the time in life, life is the gift from God in His creation that renders our existence meaningful. Therefore, Ecclesiastes is the fundamental wisdom of life—of why we exist and why we toil through/though knowing that one day we shall perish. In other words, against the traditional pessimistic interpretation that life is left simply for pleasure, my view is that Qoheleth is actually promoting the importance of seizing each moment of life and making the most of it.
Chapter One

Overview of Ecclesiastes

Starting from the very beginning of Ecclesiastes, the author writes, “The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Then at 1:12-13 he reveals that “I, the Teacher (Qoheleth), when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” These two statements not only demonstrate the author’s identity but also pinpoints a time in biblical history. However, as these are self-revealing statements by the author himself, it is crucial to draw more attention to what evidences biblical scholars may provide to establish a more complete background of Ecclesiastes. One of the prominent figures of wisdom literature study, Gerhard von Rad identifies Ecclesiastes as follows:

The book which designates its author by that expression which has still not been satisfactorily explained, namely Koheleth (translated by Luther as “the preacher”), is, according to its outward form, an offshoot of a literary type which was cultivated particularly in ancient Egypt, namely the Royal Testament. It contains a number of fairly long didactic poems or short sentences which, expressed predominantly in the first person, purport to be a wise man’s personal experience of life.\(^\text{10}\)

The author of Ecclesiastes—named Qoheleth or Koheleth which is literally translated as “the preacher” by Luther—based his source materials in ancient Egypt wisdom. Although Qoheleth uses a first person narrative tone that is similar to that of Job, readers can sense a difference in his “quite dispassionate restrained solemnity and weight of his diction.” Von Rad in evaluating Ecclesiastes as wisdom literature suggests the following:

In the question that he asks, Koheleth stands firmly in the wisdom tradition. He is concerned to “investigate” events and happenings, and he asks himself what then is “good” for man. One difference from the old wisdom is interesting: he is less concerned with determining and discussing individual experiences than with life as a whole and with passing a definitive judgment on it. In this respect, then, Koheleth has become, from a theological point of view, much more ambitious. Koheleth, for his part, understands his admittedly very negative judgment of the whole as the end-result of many individual experiences.

In other words, Qoheleth is more involved with the universal experience of human beings instead of focusing on specific individuals or events. Although he identifies himself as a figure of the royal class, he emphasizes that his views of life are objective by stating he has experienced all. Von Rad’s overall evaluation gives us a glimpse about Ecclesiastes’ settings,

---

12 Ibid.
identity and concerns of Qoheleth, as well as the style of writing. In addition, he also suggests that Qoheleth shows a negative attitude towards human life. However, whether Qoheleth is viewed as optimistic or pessimistic by scholars will be discussed in the next chapter. This chapter will concentrate mainly on the background of Ecclesiastes.

I. Historical Setting and Source Material

Several scholars have reported two views on the time that Ecclesiastes was written, one traditional and one contemporary. The traditional view supported a tenth century B.C. date in the time of Solomon. This view solely relies on comparing the text with ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature in Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt. As Daniel J. Estes concludes, “the linguistic similarities to Aramaic are often used as indicators of a postexilic date for the book, but they also could reflect the close ties to Phoenicia and Syria that Solomon maintained during his reign (Harrison 1969: 1075; Archer 1974: 480-81).”\(^\text{13}\) In addition, he also presents Kaiser’s (1979: 28) view, which suggests “that the absence of Hebrew vowels suggests a date prior to the eighth century B.C., when final vowel letters first appeared in Hebrew.”\(^\text{14}\) However, this traditional view has been debunked by many contemporary scholars who focus strictly on the vocabulary usage in the text.

Contemporary scholars have generally reached a consensus that the book is written in the Persian period or later. Seow has determined that the book “does not permit a Solomonic


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
It is “in the royal autobiography that one finds a Persian loanword, *pardēsīm* ‘parks’ (2:5). This means that the book can be dated no earlier than the mid-fifth century B.C.E. since there are no clear examples of Persian loanwords in the Hebrew Bible prior to that time.”

Fox notes that “the high frequency of Aramaisms also points to a post-Exilic date, when Jews in Palestine increasingly used Aramaic, while still using Hebrew as the predominant literary language and even speaking it in some areas.” He also observes that the “mention of the ‘province’ (*medinah*) as the place where the reader lives (5:7) indicates that Jews were living in an empire, either Persian or Hellenistic.” Besides Persian loanwords and the use of Aramaic, Richard J. Clifford and Seow have the same view by seeing evidence in the verb *šlṯ*. This verb “in Qoheleth has the legal sense ‘to have right, power’ regarding inheritances and assets,” however after the Persian period “*šlṯ* loses its legal sense and means only ‘to rule, to have dominion.’” Therefore through linguistic evidence, Ecclesiastes is mostly seen to be dated between 450-350 B.C.E during the Persian Achaemenid Empire.

To be more specific about the cultural influences in Ecclesiastes, one of the more historical based analyses comes from Leo G. Perdue. Showing his concerns for the lack of thorough treatments of the social history of wisdom which hinders the study and articulation

---

16 Ibid.
17 Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xiv.
18 Ibid.
of wisdom theology, Perdue sees himself as a pioneer in locating the socio-historical
background of wisdom literature.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, on Qoheleth Perdue suggests that

Qoheleth engages two important traditions developing in the period in which
he lived and taught: late Egyptian wisdom and Hellenistic culture, which
extended its influence into Judah especially in the third century BCE during
the reign of the Ptolemies. Both of these cultural and religious expressions
provide a background to understanding the book of Qoheleth, and indeed play
a role in shaping both the somber mood of this sage and the content of his
teachings\textsuperscript{22}

The Egyptian Ptolemaic influences during the Hellenistic period are also supported by
Crenshaw as he states that “the meager political data that scholars have detected in the book
point to a period prior to the Maccabean revolt in 164 B.C.E., for the attitude toward foreign
rulers fits best the Ptolemaic period.”\textsuperscript{23} In Perdue’s research, since “the Ptolemaic Empire
began to lose its international prominence, beginning with the final years of the reign of
Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246-221) and continuing wish the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator
(221-205),”\textsuperscript{24} therefore:

Qoheleth is generally dated to either the late Persian or Ptolemaic period.

While evidence is only inferential, my preference is to place this book during

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{24} Perdue, \textit{Wisdom Literature}, 163.
the final quarter of the third century BCE. He may have taught during the precipitous decline of Ptolemaic power and status in Asia.\textsuperscript{25}

Instead of reinforcing the contemporary view that Ecclesiastes is located during the Persian age, Perdue’s view widens our knowledge about the power relations between empires during a later date through introducing Ptolemaic evidence. The Ptolemaic Empire was a period that followed the division of Alexander the Great’s army, after conquering Asia and the control of the Persian Empire’s. Egypt fell under the control of the Ptolemies, which “blended Greek culture and Egyptian religion in a state that possessed and developed significant resources, power, and intellectual faculties.”\textsuperscript{26}

Therefore, through comparing the traditional view, the contemporary view, as well as Perdue’s historical analysis, it is most likely that Qoheleth lived much later than the Persian Empire—no earlier than the third century B.C.E.—mainly during the downfall of the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt. This accounts for Qoheleth drawing heavy influence from Graeco-Hellenistic wisdom and Egyptian-Ptolemaic wisdom. The forces that shape the thinking in Ecclesiastes may very well be the result of the socioeconomic struggles during this time. According to Seow, “one of the most important features of the economy during the postexilic period is the prominent role of money.”\textsuperscript{27} Seow details the following through archaeological evidence:

\textsuperscript{25} Perdue, \textit{Wisdom Literature}, 163.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{27} Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 21.
The Achaemenid government instituted a highly efficient system of taxation throughout the empire, according to which imperial taxes were to be paid in precious metal. Moreover, to facilitate both trade and the payment of taxes, the government began minting coins and standardizing currency ... the introduction of coinage by the Persians democratized the usage of money and radically transformed the economy of the Levant. Not surprisingly, therefore, the epigraphic materials from this era show a great deal of concern with money ... Money was used in everyday business transactions both large and small, given as gifts and bribes, and hoarded. Money had become not just a convenient medium of exchange; it had become a commodity.²⁸

It is due to this factor that Qoheleth expresses his concerns, such as in 5:10 he says, “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.” The development and growth of the usage of money during this era may contribute to a specific socioeconomic context which Qoheleth calls into question. Such a growth in materialism may have shifted common life attention towards “the acquisition of wealth and luxury items,” causing “large economic differentials between the social classes,” as observed by Estes.²⁹ Estes also suggests that “the culture was dominated by a sense of economic uncertainty as people weighed financial risks, and their envy of others drove them to ever

²⁸ Seow, Ecclesiastes, 21.
more toil.”\textsuperscript{30} With this observation, Estes narrows the gap between what seems like a series of metaphysical questioning in Ecclesiastes with the real social problems during that time. Nonetheless, this “social problem” may only be a problem in the eyes of Qoheleth, for Clifford reminds us that while “scholars once assumed that the high taxes of the Persian Empire made for a stagnant economy, but new evidence suggests otherwise. The economy was healthy and afforded many opportunities for the alert entrepreneur.”\textsuperscript{31}

What, then, was the real social concern for Qoheleth? Even though evidence show that the Persian Empire had established an organized way of governing economics, “opportunity and credit were not available to all equally.”\textsuperscript{32} Clifford presents us with the details that may have been crucial to the micro spectrum of ordinary people’s lives:

Smallholders had to pay rents and taxes with what they had, and were liable to foreclosure. Thus there was opportunity for some and danger for others. Qoheleth paints a picture of a society in which people fear for their future, for tomorrow is uncertain. Economics becomes a metaphor for human life. Sudden gains and sudden losses symbolize the larger disjunction between an act and its consequence; arbitrary and unquestionable actions of the powerful and of officials mirror the inscrutability of divine governance; anxious

\textsuperscript{31} Clifford, \textit{The Wisdom Literature}, 101.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
planning and hard work do not earn people much compensation in the form of happiness.\textsuperscript{33} 

Such is the insecurity that lies within people’s lives. Cause and effect does not necessary balance out when leverage are pulled by many external forces. What is to be anticipated if everything in life is so uncertain? Perhaps this is the essential question that Qoheleth ponders about in the face of such an overpowering empire. Overall, the concern for Qoheleth may just be like what C. Robert Harrison concludes, “Qoheleth stands as a prominent example of someone trying valiantly to maintain faith in a crisis. Though his social world was reforming itself all about him, Qoheleth stubbornly refused to forswear a basic monotheistic theology, even if those circumstances forced him to circumscribe his convictions radically.”\textsuperscript{34}

II. Authorship

Ecclesiastes begins with a verse that seemingly introduces its author: “The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). A similar statement is then made in verse 12: “I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:12). Based on these two verses, Qoheleth was traditionally identified with Solomon, who was the only son of David to have ruled over Israel. However, as shown in the prior section concerning the historical setting of Ecclesiastes, it is unlikely that Solomon is the author since the time of writing is generally located after the late Persian Empire and drawing heavily from Ptolemaic

\textsuperscript{33} Clifford, \textit{The Wisdom Literature}, 101.
influences. Hence, critical scholarship has not regarded Solomon as the actual author since the nineteenth century. In fact, just drawing from the book’s epilogue (12:9) would provide the strongest counter statement to Solomon being the author. Fox, commenting on the epilogue (12:9) suggests that it “does not speak of Koheleth as king. Koheleth takes on the role of king only in 1:12-2:26. After that, he reveals the perspective of a nonroyal sage, a member of the class who may have contact with rulers and would have reason to fear their erratic anger.”35 In addition, “Koheleth blames the royal administrative apparatus for social injustices (5:7). This is something that Solomon, who founded the Judean royal administration, would not have been likely to do.”36 If so, why would the author present himself in a Solomon-like figure?

Though the scholarly consensus considers that Qoheleth was not Solomon in person, “almost all of them believe that the author wants us to make that identification.”37 Fox continues that “for purposes of the intellectual exercise that Koheleth undertakes, the author wants us to conceive of the persona’s wisdom, power, and prosperity as Solomonic in quantity and quality—at least in 1:2-2:26.”38 Indeed, the author has never once mentioned Solomon’s name, but has lured readers into such an identification. Bartholomew and O’Dowd suggest that “by adopting the persona of Solomon, Qohelet is not just conducting his search as a wise man but as the wisest king. We are to think of Qohelet as someone who knows the

35 Fox, Ecclesiastes, x.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
worldview of Israel intimately and who has all the power and resources for the quest he embarks on.”

The purpose of this design is perhaps based on the implication “that if a king cannot find meaning and purpose in life, who can? So, by adopting the ‘persona’ of a king the writer can explore major possible sources of meaning.”

If such were the case, then it would be easy to pinpoint Qoheleth as either a high status person of the royal court or at least one who wishes to imitate that figure. Yet, Qoheleth shows inconsistency while he evaluates the court. The fiction of kingship does not continue beyond the second chapter. Seow observes that

… it is clear from a number of passages that the author looks at kingship from a distance and not as an insider of the royal court (4:13-16); he gives advice on how to behave before the king, rather than how to be king (8:1-6; 10:16-20). It is also unlikely, given the understanding of kingship in the ancient Near East, that a king would point to injustice in the land (3:16; 4:1-2; 5:8) or to the prevailing social instability (10:4-7). The author seems to speak more as an observer and a critic of society than as a ruler.

This contradiction in courtly perspectives, as observed by Perdue, provides at least a split in Qoheleth’s personality: “while not explicitly named Solomon, the implication is that the primary voice belongs to this king, who in tradition was the royal patron of wisdom (cf. 1

---

The secondary voice of a later redactor was a conservative sage adding his warnings of judgment and offering his counsel to ‘fear God and keep his commandments.’”

Since the Solomonic authorship is barely evident throughout the book, we turn our attention to Qoheleth’s sage identity. In the epilogue, a new narrative voice emerges aside from Qoheleth’s own voice, praising Qoheleth’s teachings: “Besides being wise, the Teacher [Qoheleth] also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find pleasing words, and he wrote words of truth plainly” (12:9-10). The epilogue refers to the author not as a king but as a hāḵam “a sage” (12:9); also, he was among the hāḵamîm “sages” (12:11). Seow stresses that “we know practically nothing about the author personally. We can only speculate if being hāḵam “a sage” meant that he was a professional teacher in some sort of wisdom ‘school.’” Indeed, even the term “Qoheleth” poses a difficult translation problem for biblical scholars. Peter Enns dedicated a close inspection of the term just to arrive at merely one certain conclusion: “Qohelet is not someone’s name.”

The word is from the Hebrew root קהל/qhl. The verb means “to assemble or summon,” and the noun קהל/qahal denotes an “assembly or convocation.” Qohelet (קהלק qōhelet) is a Qal feminine participle, and may denote a speaker in an assembly. The Septuagint title reflects this understanding

---

43 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 37.
(ekklēsiastēs), “assembly” or “church,” and the Vulgate (*Liber Ecclesiastes*) and English titles follow suit. Such translations as “Preacher” (Martin Luther, *Prediger*) or “Teacher” (NIV) further reflect such an understanding of “Qoheleth.” Such attributions, however, are highly interpretive and cannot claim clear—or even likely—support from the Hebrew. That the word neither occurs outside Ecclesiastes nor is defined in Ecclesiastes renders any translation inconclusive. It is best to leave it untranslated, treating it as an alias, rather than assigning to it a conjectural etymology.45

Avoiding the danger of quick assumption by reaching a definitive meaning for “Qoheleth,” Enns concludes that “Qohelet is a character created by the author to make his theological point, that is, a nickname adopted by the writer to maintain a Solomonic connection for his character while also distancing his character from the actual person.”46 That is, the term “Qoheleth” may be just a narrative device that is used to direct readers to certain understandings while still keeping an ambiguous space for interpretations.

Provided this openness to interpretation, scholars attempt to search, locate, and shape the most legitimate figure for Qohelet according to biblical sources. For instance, Crenshaw focuses on the verb *qhl*, as it

---

45 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 16-17.
46 Ibid., 17.
… always appears in connection with an assembly of people. If it could also apply to the gathering of objects, then Qohelet might be a ‘collector of proverbs,’ as the epilogist remembers the teacher (12:9-11). Qohelet kept an ear in readiness to hear something worthwhile, he searched high and low for appropriate insights, and he grouped the resulting sayings in an understandable way.47

Otto Kaiser considers that Qoheleth

… clearly lived at a time when old beliefs were being questioned, and when the individual, no longer able to depend upon them, was forced to find his own way. Qoheleth therefore presents himself as a teacher in a time of change, who feels compelled to contrast tradition with situation, the traditional words of the wise with his own observations, and to draw his own conclusions.48

Both Crenshaw and Kaiser present us with the more common recognition of Qoheleth, which is the teacher of early wisdom who applies his knowledge to the social conditions of his time. Others such as Stuart Weeks propose several possibilities to the book’s authorship while at the same time questioning Qoheleth’s authenticity as the author himself. Weeks suggests four possibilities to its authorship:

---

47 Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 33-34.
1. The creator of the book of Ecclesiastes compiled from some source existing words of an earlier or contemporary individual, Qohelet, and presented them as a book.

2. Qohelet himself wrote a book, which an editor or series of editors subsequently supplemented, and perhaps changed in other ways.

3. Qohelet is a character created by the real author of Ecclesiastes, who also adopted the persona of a narrator or editor in the framework of the book, in order to comment on Qohelet’s words.

4. Qohelet was, or was considered to be, a historical character, and his identity has been borrowed by the author of Ecclesiastes for his protagonist.49

With all of these scholarly assumptions made to help readers understand the text better, it should not be overlooked that there is a final and more truthful consideration—that Ecclesiastes is a book written by a joint effort of authors. Evidence in the text suggests that Qoheleth jumps between the first person and the third person narrative. According to Bartholomew and O’Dowd, the trend to identify the main voices in Ecclesiastes and to explore their interrelationship began when “when Michael Fox proposed that we attend to

---

Ecclesiastes as a literary whole” in his 1977 article “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet.”\(^{50}\) From this viewpoint:

Qohelet’s voice is framed by that of a narrator, who introduces Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 and concludes the presentation of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 12:8-14. The only other place in which the narrator’s voice is heard is in Ecclesiastes 7:27. The main characters in Ecclesiastes are thus the narrator, who presents Qohelet’s journey for our instruction, and Qohelet himself, who undertakes the journey.\(^ {51}\)

According to this theory, there would be at least three voices in the text: Qoheleth, an implied author, and a narrator. Enns has also introduced the idea of a “frame narrator” who, according to him, is the true author of the book. Following his thought, “Qohelet may be (1) a fictional character created out of whole cloth, (2) the frame narrator’s own alter [e]go (the vehicle by which he recounts his own struggles), or (3) a literary product that in some sense had an ‘independent’ existence before its adaptation by the frame narrator.”\(^ {52}\) Since it is widely accepted that there is an epilogist who commented on the achievement of the teacher, Crenshaw demonstrates a similar concern: “did Qohelet write the complete book, or have several authors contributed to its present form?”\(^ {53}\) He goes on to state four possibilities that interpreters should have in mind: “(1) the author wrote the bulk of the book, but editorial

\(^{50}\) Bartholomew and O’Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 189.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 189-90.


\(^{53}\) Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.
glosses entered at a later time; (2) the author cites traditional wisdom and refutes it; (3) the author enters into dialogue with an interlocutor, real or imagined; and (4) the book reflects a single author’s changing viewpoints over the years, as well as life’s ambiguities."

Crenshaw’s notice will certainly help us overcome the trouble of distinguishing between one or multiple / real or imagined authors. The main concern would be to focus on the change of tone and persons to help readers interpret the text. In brief, drawing from Joseph Blenkinsopp’s words, “whatever the original form of the work, a later scribe and editor assigned it to the more familiar category of ‘sayings of the sages’ (12:9-11, cf. Prov. 1:6; 22:17, 23).” The author or authors, thus, belong truly to the ranks of the professional sages and teachers. In the remaining parts of the thesis, I will refer to the author as “Qoheleth” for convenience.

III. Literary Forms

In this final section, I would like to introduce the literary forms as observed by scholars. The purpose is to understand what literary elements or techniques Qoheleth uses to communicate to the audience. I will mainly use Fox’s and Katharine Dell’s classification as the foundation to draw in more critiques from other scholars. In the JPS Bible Commentary, Fox sets out four types of literary forms: maxims and proverbs, autobiography, royal

---

54 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 34.
testament, and narrative. In Katharine J. Dell’s ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’: An Introduction to Israel’s Wisdom Literature, she tracks down three main genres: proverb, instruction, and reflection, with three sub-genres under instruction: prohibition, moral tales, and poem.

First, on maxims and proverbs Fox suggests that “much of the book is a collection of (short) proverbs and (longer) maxims giving advice and encapsulating observations on the ways of the world.”56 For instance, Eccl. 4:17-5:6, 7:1-12, 16-21, 8:1b-8, 9:17-10:20, and 11:1-6. While Fox boldly notes that Qoheleth “was a wisdom teacher and proverb-maker (12:9),”57 Dell is not quite affirmative about “whether these proverbs were all pre-existent within the tradition or whether some were composed by Qoheleth with the purpose of refutation.”58 Eventually, drawing from R. N. Whybray’s (1981) analysis, Dell concludes that “the proverbs in which the author states his own view are likely to be his own compositions while the ones apparently quoted may be genuine quotations or at least restatements by the author of conventional ideas.”59

Second, Dell’s genre of reflection and instruction can both be seen as elements of Qoheleth’s autobiography. In Ecclesiastes, “Koheleth tells his own story. His discourse is in the tradition of the fictional autobiography, known from Mesopotamia. In these texts, a character, historical or otherwise, who is often a king, relates his experiences and draws

---

56 Fox, Ecclesiastes, xii-xiii.
57 Ibid., xiii.
59 Ibid., 54-55.
lessons from them, some of which are self-critical.\(^{60}\) Whereas Fox consider Qoheleth’s autobiography as mainly an imitation of Mesopotamia literature, more evidence show the similarity between his autobiography with Egyptian royal testament and grave biographies. For Fox, royal testament “is an Egyptian Wisdom genre in which the speaker, a king, relates his experiences to his son and gives advice applicable to him in particular.”\(^{61}\) However, this view is rejected by Roland E. Murphy, who revises that “the work is *sui generis* and lies somewhere between a treatise and a collection of sayings and thoughts. Sayings and admonitions alternate with lengthy reflections.”\(^{62}\) Although Murphy observes differently, he associated his observations with reflections, which through Dell’s perspective, falls back into Fox’s autobiographic form. For Dell, Qoheleth’s genre of reflection “both includes traditional wisdom elements and provides room for Qoheleth’s own remarks … The author may quote a proverb to back up an argument (e.g. Eccl. 10:18; 11:1-2) or he may use part of a proverb to support an argument, only citing the rest for the sake of completeness (e.g. Eccl. 5:1-2; 11:3-4).”\(^{63}\) Dell thus considers reflection as the most dominant genre in the book.

About the instruction form which includes prohibitions, moral tales, and comparable poems in Dell’s understanding, it can be seen as a major element in the unique genre argued by Perdue: Egyptian grave biographies. Unlike Fox who compares Qoheleth’s autobiography

---

\(^{60}\) Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xiii.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.


\(^{63}\) Dell, ‘*Get Wisdom, Get Insight*’, 56.
with Mesopotamia fictions, Perdue draws attention to Qoheleth’s Egyptian Ptolemaic influences. Perdue suggests that “even closer formal parallels to Qoheleth are provided by grave biographies.” Feature of the grave biographies are as follows:

Placed in the mouth of the deceased and spoken in the first person, these biographies were presented as posthumous speeches addressed to visitors to the tomb. These life stories normally contained three literary features: an autobiographical narrative, maxims of an ethical import, and instructions and exhortations to visitors to the tomb. The autobiography proper included the titles and accomplishments of the deceased, while the maxims offered were the same that guided the dead speaker through life. Important themes were faithful performance of duties to the gods and to rulers, responsibilities to the family and other members of Egyptian society, including particularly the poor, … Often found in grave inscriptions are affirmations of the importance of joy in living … In addition, the deceased often exhorted visitors to the tomb to reflect on their own death and requested them to offer grave offerings and sacrifices while remembering the name of the occupant of the tomb. Autobiographical narrative, maxims, instructions, and exhortations are all elements that we can identify in Qoheleth. Perdue suggests that Qoheleth parallels these Egyptian grave

---

biographies in all aspects, even in its pessimistic view on life as well as the emphasis on the celebration of instant enjoyment. For instance, in the later periods of Egyptian history:

… the growing doubt about the efficacy of mortuary religion, anxiety about death, and the dreadful state of the dead in this later literature find an even darker, more pessimistic expression in Qoheleth, who regards the grave as an eternal home where there is neither light nor knowledge nor passion nor activity (9:16). The stress on the total dependence of humans on the will of the sovereign deity in the later periods is also paralleled in Qoheleth.66

With its autobiographical form and through narration, Qoheleth demonstrates a life journey in search of wisdom, only to find the search fruitless. Setting this bleak life experience as a focal point for instructing others, Qoheleth resonates with themes from late Egyptian grave biographies. As we can see, narrative therefore covers a large proportion of Ecclesiastes through Qoheleth’s autobiography. Being one of the major narrative positions, “the epilogist looks back at Koheleth and praises his wisdom, but also reminds us that wisdom has its limits and is not a man’s primary concern.”67

Through a close examination of the historical context, authorship, and literary form in this chapter, I have attempted to collect and provide a thorough review of different

---

67 Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xiii.
approaches from contemporary scholars. Overall, we may use Fox’s short survey of Qoheleth’s narrative as the final evaluation of Ecclesiastes:

Koheleth’s discourse is reflexive. He looks at himself and reports what he planned, did, experienced, and thought. Some of his feelings and thoughts maybe temporary and transitional, left behind at a more mature stage in Koheleth’s development, as when he says that he had earlier come to loathe life (2:17; cf. 4:3). He bares his soul in all its twistings and turnings, ups and downs, taking his readers with him on a sometimes arduous journey to knowledge—a knowledge that turns out to be very incomplete. Thus his readers are not only to absorb Koheleth’s teaching, they are also to observe him as he walks a rocky and winding path toward understanding and acceptance of life’s frustrations and uncertainties. The journey itself is important.68

In addition, if not Qoheleth himself, in Norbert Lohfink’s words:

The actual author of the book makes no assertions of his own. He merely reports what another has thought and said. Even this other does not simply lay out his opinions. He again tells stories. He tells of his experiences, and shows how, through them, he came to see things in certain ways. Often he offers only

---

68 Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xiii.
questions. At great length he even pretends to be someone else, namely the famous King Solomon. All of these devices are literary techniques that free the readers to think their own thought and come to their own conclusions.69

Indeed, Ecclesiastes opens up a ground of theological/philosophical questioning about the meaning of life, but still maintains a certain degree of ambiguity where readers are invited to ponder similar questions of existence. Only through this dialogue between the text and the readers may the true value of wisdom surface.

---

Chapter Two

Scholarly Positions toward Qoheleth’s View of Life

Ecclesiastes has never been an easy book to understand, given its philosophical / theological nature that rethinks the value and purpose of human existence. The debate that exists among different opinions towards this book is reflected in the way Estes presents his scholarly overview on this book:

Ecclesiastes has long been regarded as the most enigmatic book in the Bible. Its refrain that “all is vanity under the sun” sounds more like twentieth-century existentialism than biblical faith. On the other hand, several times the book counsels its readers to grasp the joys of life as gifts from God. How these seemingly opposite themes are viewed leads to dramatically different understandings of the text.\(^70\)

In other words, analysis of the book can differ significantly not only through different approaches but in scholarly attitude towards it as well.

One of the major issues that spark debate is whether Qoheleth is standing at a pro-life position or an “existence is meaningless” stance. In Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth’s attitude towards life is obscure, sometimes leaning towards the positive while sometimes negative. For instance, when Qoheleth writes, “For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of

fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (2:16-17), he clearly expresses his distastes towards life—at least his own life. At other times, such as when he notes, “But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4), he is seen as an advocate of life, for hope exists only for the living. Sometimes Qoheleth even seems distant and alienated from this topic, such as: “I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by” (3:14-15); such are moments when Qoheleth take over God’s voice as if he is announcing the divine and universal law of God’s creation. Hence, when comparing these contradicting moments in the text, scholars respectively arrive at different opinions. In this chapter, I seek to categorize scholars into pessimistic, optimistic, or mixed views by examining how they understand Qoheleth’s attitude towards life.

I. Pessimistic Views

I would like to start off with the pessimistic views on life since some prominent figures in wisdom literature studies have leaned toward this position and have made a major impact on critical views on Ecclesiastes. Many of them take this position through the joint
analysis of Qoheleth’s “vanity” and existence. Thus, I will present the concerns of each scholar in this section.

A. Gerhard von Rad

In his *Wisdom in Israel*, von Rad has dedicated a full-length monograph to the once underestimated wisdom literatures in the Old Testament. In the section for Ecclesiastes, von Rad has suggested reasons for and called into question Qoheleth’s judgment of life:

Koheleth, for his part, understands his admittedly very negative judgment of the whole as the end-result of many individual experiences. But it is, meanwhile, clear that such an unequivocal judgment of the life and destiny of man cannot be based exclusively on experiences. Here, quite different factors come into play. . . . If we first let him speak for himself, there emerge three basic insights round which his thoughts continually circle: 1. A thorough, rational examination of life is unable to find any satisfactory meaning; everything is “vanity”. 2. God determines every event. 3. Man is unable to discern these decrees, the “works of God” in the world.71

Von Rad suggests three factors that govern Qoheleth’s reason of judgment, all focusing on the fact that human experience is overshadowed by God’s sovereignty. Later he continues to observe in Qoheleth that:

The worst of all is that man is incapable of controlling the future and that he stands unprotected at its mercy. He does not know what will happen, for who will tell him what is going to happen (8.7; 9.1; 10.14)? Behind the problem of the future, there lies for Koheleth the still more difficult question of death which casts its shadow over every meaningful interpretation of life. Whenever Koheleth speaks of fate (miqreh), death is always envisaged at the same time.\textsuperscript{72}

For Qoheleth, he sees not only does God have full power over human life, but death also chips away in the pursuit of meaning in life. What von Rad proposes at last is that “the most common view of the radical theses of Koheleth has been to see in them a counter-blow to older teachings which believed, too ‘optimistically’, or better, too realistically, that they could see God at work in experience.”\textsuperscript{73} Therefore, it is clear that von Rad stands with the pessimistic side in reviewing Qoheleth’s attitude.

\textbf{B. James L. Crenshaw}

From the opening of his introduction to Ecclesiastes, Crenshaw has strongly demonstrates his negative attitude towards Qoheleth’s view of life. He strongly emphasizes and highlights sections that bring out skepticism towards life in Ecclesiastes. Similar to von

\textsuperscript{72} Von Rad, \textit{Wisdom in Israel}, 228.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 229.
Rad, Crenshaw makes his personal comments on Qoheleth but still leaves a path open for discussion:

The author of Ecclesiastes lacked trust in either God or knowledge. For him nothing proved that God looked on creatures with favor, and the entire enterprise of wisdom had become bankrupt. The astonishing thing is that such skepticism did not prevent Qoheleth from asking the question of questions: Does life have any meaning at all?74

However, through a series of analysis of major themes in Ecclesiastes, Crenshaw lands at the following comment that rejects any possibility of a positive endeavor in life from Qoheleth’s perspective:

To sum up, Qoheleth’s positive counsel has little cause for exhilaration. The advice invariably occurs within contexts that emphasize life’s absurdity and attendant inequities, as well as those that stress God’s control over human ability to enjoy life. Qoheleth’s concept of divine gift is an expression for human limitation rather than an extolling of a generous God. The sources of pleasure—woman, wine, food, clothes, ointment, toil, and youth—are empty, like life itself. In the end none accompanies the dead to Sheol. In spite of the limited satisfaction such pleasure affords, it does amount to something. Like

breath that satisfaction such pleasure affords, it does amount to something. Like breath that cannot be seen but makes life possible, such enjoyment renders existence endurable. Still, that life-endowing breath returns to its source and leaves a corpse, and the pleasant moments disappear without a trace. Fleeting satisfaction may be conjured up through an active memory, but even that means of storing up youthful pleasure soars aloft when the death angel raises its wings and sets out with its reluctant burden on a journey into nothingness.75

Crenshaw’s pessimistic position towards Qoheleth is self-evident. For him, even when God is in control of human life, the major setback—no matter living a burdened or enjoyable life—is that death comes along and takes away everything. In brief, death reduces meaning to nothingness. However, even with such a grim view towards life, we begin to see a pattern in von Rad and Crenshaw that death is almost as unpredictable as God’s control. While human intellect is unable to grasp God’s transcendental wisdom, death creates a similar effect—directly causing the impossible existence of human intellect itself.

C. Katharine J. Dell

In her ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’, Dell presents a brief analysis of Ecclesiastes. Drawing from textual criticism and analysis from other scholars, she formulates her personal

75 Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 140.
opinion towards the book. While discussing the theological content and mood of the book, Dell gives the following account:

According to Qoheleth, there is an order in the universe but humans cannot comprehend it and so cannot achieve any security, either material or spiritual (e.g. Eccl. 11:5). Reason and observation demonstrate no sense in human life, and so his best advice is to enjoy life (e.g. Eccl. 11:9-10). This is a far cry from the optimism of the book of Proverbs. There is a God and a need to fear him, but God is ultimately unknowable. Furthermore, the wisdom exercise has its limitations; this wisdom, if it can be called wisdom, looks at the world but finds very different answers. It approaches reality with a realism that is frightening.

So the author of Ecclesiastes is generally seen as pessimistic in the extreme, having given up the possibility of a meaningful relationship with God and advocating a resigned cynicism about life …

Dell’s personal view of the worldview in Ecclesiastes is basically a reality that is seen harshly through the lens of wisdom. Not only is Qoheleth himself pessimistic towards life, even the meaningful relationship between human and God has been abandoned. It is clear that this view glooms life to the extreme, ripping away all possibilities of hope. Dell’s view during

---

76 Dell, ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’, 52.
this period is heavily influenced by other scholars such as Crenshaw, but while her pessimistic stance is especially expressed in ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’, in her later works her attitude would shift for a better understanding and interpretation of Qoheleth. I will discuss that in another section.

Overall, the opposing relationship between death and life’s meaning becomes the major issue for the pessimistic side for understanding Qoheleth’s universe. As in Dell’s words, Qoheleth urges his audience to enjoy life, but that is only after realizing “that all things are relativized by death, the great leveler (2:16-18; 5:15).” 77 Now we will turn our attention to the optimistic side of the discussion.

II. Optimistic Views

In this section, I will introduce scholars who suggest that Qoheleth promotes a hopeful attitude towards life even in the face of death and the loss of personal sovereignty.

A. R. N. Whybray

R. N. Whybray is an iconic figure who deemed Qoheleth positive. Although I do not have access to his journal article “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 78 he has been quoted and discussed in several commentaries for Ecclesiastes and wisdom literature. For instance, Crenshaw disagrees with Whybray’s view by saying that his article “fails to take seriously the

77 Dell, ‘Get Wisdom, Get Insight’, 54.
overwhelmingly pessimistic mood of the book.” Dell presents a summary of Whybray’s view in her book:

> Just because all is vanity, one might as well ‘eat, drink and be merry’ for tomorrow one may die. Furthermore, this enjoyment is seen as a gift of God—it is not a hedonism born of despair. He [Whybray] finds positive the fact that, despite an emphasis on God’s order which humans cannot comprehend, the author does not give up on practical advice to human beings for good living and so demonstrates a belief that God’s intentions might be influenced by human actions. He finds positive thoughts among the author’s seeming preoccupation with death; his view of death as a waste compels him to advocate valuing the gift of life now, not waiting until you are too old and grey to enjoy it.

As shown in this summary, Whybray counters the popular idea that humankind is vulnerable under God’s providence; instead, he believes that God’s control may somehow be manipulated by human actions. Moreover, unlike others who view death as a hideous canceller of meaning, Whybray merely views death as “a waste” which contrasts against the valuable present life that should be seized. Unlike Crenshaw who criticizes Whybray’s view, Dell carefully addresses his commentary and concludes that his “reading enables us to see

---

Ecclesiastes in closer relationship to the book of Proverbs in that the citation of traditional ideas is not only in the context of a negative refutation.”81

B. Norbert Lohfink

When Crenshaw referred to Ecclesiastes 5:20 that it “may allude to God’s way of reducing the troubled hearts of men and women, so that joy alone impresses itself upon the memory,”82 he was quoting from Lohfink’s article “Qoheleth 5:17-19—Revelation by Joy.”83 Crenshaw sees Lohfink’s article as a positive reading of Ecclesiastes similar to Ludger Schwienhorst-Shönberger’s. 84 Personally, Lohfink expresses—in his commentary on Qoheleth—that Qoheleth’s philosophy of life is as follows:

Qoheleth analyzes human existence as being in the time that is given only in the now that accompanies human living and that (for individuals) ends at death. It can be experienced as happiness. It is more than a falling into nothingness, because in its individually specific form it originates in the eternity of God, who transcends this world and yet is always at work in each event. His action is perfect. Even evil he sets aright. But humans cannot see through the activity of God, and so they find it inexplicable and amoral. We know, of course, that there is a meaning to it all, but we have no grasp of it—only God has that. We

82 Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 137.
84 Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 150.
can rely only on whatever, in each moment, comes to us from the hand of God.\footnote{Lohfink, \textit{Qoheleth}, 14-15.}

That is, as long as there is life, it entails that God’s perfection is within as well. It is the human eye that deceives us into thinking we are under burden while living, but if one goes beyond the notion of “being” (such as in Heidegger’s \textit{Dasein}), existence itself is pure happiness in comparison to the nothingness of not existing at all (for instance, death).

\section*{C. Roland E. Murphy}

According to Fox, Murphy suggests that “Koheleth recognizes the value of life, wealth, toil, and wisdom, but these prove inadequate when seen under the shadow of death … It is because Koheleth loves life and wisdom that he is grieved by death and by life’s vanity.”\footnote{Fox, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, xxix.} Dietrich Bonhoeffer once meditated in his time in the concentration camp: “It is only when one loves life and the world so much that without them everything would be gone, that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world.”\footnote{Dietrich Bonhoeffer, \textit{Letters and Papers from Prison}, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 157.} Inspired by Bonhoeffer’s view of life, Murphy draws comparison to Qoheleth:

\begin{quote}
Qoheleth loved life: “All that your hand finds to do, do with might, because there is no action, or answer, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (9:10). It was because of his appreciation of life and wisdom that he perceived the awfulness of death and the vanity of life itself. One may fail to
appreciate Qoheleth and his faith in God, if one makes comparisons too easily.\(^8\)

In short, Murphy suggests that the reason behind the outcry of Qoheleth, is simply because he valued life and its meanings so much that he would prefer that death and its meaningless don’t come.

**D. Choon-Leong Seow**

Seow’s reading of Ecclesiastes has “a fairly affirmative worldview,” as acknowledged by Fox.\(^8\) Being aware of the danger of systematizing an experiential thinker, Seow suggests that

In sum, Qohelet always begins his reflection with humanity and the human condition. He concludes at every turn that mortals are not in control of the things that happen in the world. They are not in control of their destiny. This is why Qohelet says that everything is *hebel*. He does not mean that everything is meaningless or insignificant, but that everything is beyond human apprehension and comprehension. But in thinking about humanity, Qohelet also speaks of God. People are caught in this situation where everything is *hebel*—in every sense of the word. God is transcendent and wholly other, but humanity is “on earth.” Yet related to humanity, and God has given humanity

\(^8\) Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (Dallas: Word, 1992), lxix.
\(^8\) Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xxix.
the possibilities of each moment. Hence people must accept what happens, whether good or bad. They must respond spontaneously to life, even in the midst of uncertainties, and accept both the possibilities and limitations of their being human.90

Indeed, in life humans face situations that go against their desire, but this does not render life meaningless. What human beings must understand is that by giving life God has already imposed meaning onto life itself. The real question, therefore, is whether human beings respect God’s power to control or not, but even this does not affect the meaningfulness of life.

E. Stuart Weeks

It is interesting that while Weeks titles his book Ecclesiastes and Skepticism, he arrives at a point where he questions whether Qoheleth is a skeptical sage at all. He notes that “Qohelet’s speech, to put it another way, does not seem first and foremost to be an expression of s[k]epticism about ideas which were commonly held, whatever else it may be.”91

Reconsidering Qoheleth’s skepticism, Weeks notes:

Perhaps a more profitable approach might lie in accepting what seems to be Qohelet’s own understanding of his position, as a rejection of delusion. The human motives which he rejects as hebel are not founded on intellectual positions, but on such emotions as greed, or on misperceptions of death and

90 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 59-60.
91 Weeks, Ecclesiastes and Scepticism, 168.
judgment arising from the invisibility of consequence. If we describe Qohelet’s objections as s[k]epticism, we turn these things by implication into beliefs, when in reality they are nothing so carefully thought out. 92

For Weeks, the controversy in Qoheleth’s outcry is not because of his doubt toward human existence, nor is he rejecting the notion of laboring during life. If we understand Qoheleth as such a believer of doubt, we fall into the trap of understanding his understanding of reality as a kind of belief, refusing to see clearly the problem at heart: the lack of thinking and experiencing thoroughly every moment of reality during our human lives. In other words, Qoheleth is not criticizing the experience of life as vanity but rather urging that humankind must pursue the meaning of everything s/he does, even when this pursuit oftentimes proves fruitless. Hence, Weeks rejects understanding Qoheleth as a skeptic of life:

It is not s[k]epticism or even pessimism that characterizes Qohelet’s ideas, then, so much as a sense that humans are missing the point, and he presents himself as a man seeking to steer others away from the false expectations and disappointment which he experienced himself, by opening their eyes to the reality of their situation. If his analysis is largely negative, that is because, in a world of illusion, there is value in disillusion. 93

92 Weeks, Ecclesiastes and Scepticism, 169.
93 Ibid.
Qoheleth uses harsh words to describe the world that he lives in, however, no matter how difficult life seems to him, his mission is to provide and teach the meaning of existence to his audience. His purpose is to promote the truthful way directed towards God to those who have already gone astray or went missing.

F. Leo G. Perdue

Finally, Perdue is the last in the list of scholars who support an optimistic interpretation of Qoheleth. Upon locating Qoheleth in the Hellenistic World, Perdue places him “in the cultural and philosophical tradition that comprised a mixture of things old and new that was appealing especially to the educated aristocracy in upper-class Jerusalem.”

By seeing Qoheleth as a Jewish sage “thinking that Judaism has failed to achieve a credible vision and commanding presence in the lives of people, particularly the intellectuals,” Perdue suggests that the mission of Qoheleth is to “sets about to reorient Judaism to a philosophical quest to determine the good in human existence, and, upon its discovery, to shape a new wisdom, grounded in humanism, that enables people through their conduct and thinking to experience that good.” In other words, Qoheleth is instructing the Jewish people to reform the thinking of their lives as well as traditional Judaic wisdom. As Perdue observes:

Qoheleth has numerous teachings that match Hellenistic philosophical understanding, including the one of fate and determinism: humans are born,

---

95 Ibid., 161.
are predestined to live a certain period of time, and then die at an appointed
time. The joy or happiness that comprises the central teaching of this book is
often found in Greek philosophy. The cautious and unrestrained attitude
toward cultic piety is perhaps influenced by Greek philosophical views critical
of religion.\textsuperscript{96}

Perdue, thus, approaches Qoheleth’s teaching through a different scope comparing to the
other scholars. His main focus, after all, is the historical evidences in Qoheleth’s background.

\section*{III. Mixed Views}

Having presented the pessimistic and optimistic views on Qoheleth’s understanding of
life, we must also provide ground for those others who stand between these polarized
standpoints.

\subsection*{A. Michael V. Fox}

Besides making short comments on other commentators, Fox has also presented his
view on this issue. The problem with Qoheleth is that he “is frustrated that life does not make
sense in this way, that the mass of disjointed deeds and events cannot be drawn together into
a coherent and significant picture;” hence, “Frustrated by such incoherence and irrationality,
Koheleth calls the world hevel—‘senseless’ or ‘absurd.’”\textsuperscript{97}

However, Fox argues the following:

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{96} Perdue, \textit{Wisdom Literature}, 178.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{97} Fox, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, xxx.}
Koheleth is not a nihilist. “Everything is absurd” is to be understood as expressing a general characterization of life, not as an absolute proposition negating all possible activities and values. As well as tearing down, Koheleth builds up, showing how we can recover and reconstruct meanings. He does not arrive at a grand logic (or theology) that makes sense of everything, but he does recommend modest and small-scale accommodations in our individual lives.98

Similar to Weeks, Fox reminds that Qoheleth is not a refuser of life but rather the lone thinker that is trying hard to decipher the code of life in order to create meaning for humankind’s existence. Although he fails to locate the ultimate and universal meaning which is in the hands of the Creator, he provides us with meanings to the little toils and labors of our ordinary lives:

Koheleth does find some things worthwhile: moderate work; temperate enjoyment of the pleasures that come to hand; love and friendship; gaining and using whatever wisdom is within our capacity; being reasonably righteous; fearing God; and hoping for divine justice. These are our portion and should be embraced, even if they do not constitute a “profit” (yitron) by Koheleth’s

---

98 Fox, Ecclesiastes, xxx.
rigorous standards, and even if they are contaminated by the absurdity that pervades our world.

These valuable things are brief, limited, and uncertain, but they are enough to make life worth living. Thus Koheleth comes to realize that despite all its unfairness and absurdity, life itself is good, to be grasped all the more eagerly for its brevity, given death’s finality (9:7-10; 11:7).  

For Fox, Qoheleth deconstructs and reconstructs; he does not simply problematize the foundations of human life but also relocates the goals to be achieved. In Clifford’s evaluation of Fox’s perspective, he notes that Fox “attempts to name the ‘contradictions’ of Qoheleth and examine them rather than explain them away. The main ‘contradictions’ are for him: toil is absurd and without profit, yet it provides the wealth that will provide joy; Qoheleth affirms and denies the possibility and the value of wisdom; life is unjust but God is just.”

B. Craig G. Bartholomew

Bartholomew refuses to jump too quickly into conclusion about what stance Qoheleth proposes. While scholars remain restless in debating between optimistic versus pessimistic, Bartholomew sees two tricky themes that lure commentaries into conflict: hebel and carpe diem. For him, being drawn into this polarized debate does no good in helping us understand

99 Fox, Ecclesiastes, xxxi.
100 Clifford, The Wisdom Literature, 113.
other important tensions in the text. Thus, as he careful draws out the reason of debate, he reminds readers to constantly rethink all possibilities:

Qohelet’s autonomous epistemology, depending on observation, experience, and reason alone, leads him continually to the hebel conclusion, which is juxtaposed again and again with his carpe diem confessions of the goodness of life. The book is about the struggle to live with and resolve the agonized tension between these two poles.\(^{101}\)

Bartholomew admits that Qoheleth is caught between the tensions between these two poles, but the vitality of the text lies exactly within this tug-of-war of understanding life.

C. William P. Brown

With his commentary about Ecclesiastes, Brown stands firm on the observer’s position, giving credit to what Qoheleth seeks to offer by himself instead of making assumptions for him. For him, Qoheleth takes on a lifelong journey in search for wisdom in order to seek out “the polarities and obscurities of human existence.”\(^{102}\) In his commentary, Brown writes:

Rooted in experience, wisdom for the sage [Qoheleth] weighs and assesses the vagaries of human existence as he attempts to make sense of his world “under the sun” ... In any case, the arrangement of Qoheleth’s ruminations is designed

\(^{101}\) Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 93.

more to provoke reflection—indeed dialogue—among readers, rather than to reach premature, self-assured conclusions. Experience is a harsh yet ultimately inconclusive assayer of doctrine, Qoheleth seems to suggest.  

Brown shows that while Qoheleth addresses the essence of existence through a personal reflection or narrative, he does not overly emphasize his experience as the universal answer to human life. What Qoheleth seeks to achieve is more like a personal meditation that is open to discussion among his audience. He stresses that nothing is clearly rigid in our existence, hence, the only concrete conscious that his audience may learn from him is merely that everything is indefinite in the face of God’s wisdom.

D. Katharine J. Dell

Previously, I have classified Dell under the pessimistic label on Qoheleth’s view of life. Yet, her recent studies seem to demonstrate a more neutral position concerning the same topic. In her 2013 work Interpreting Ecclesiastes: Readers Old and New, she draws attention to the word “vanity” and notes that:

Interpretations today tend to opt either negative or a positive evaluation of Qoheleth’s thought, but I shall suggest that, although on first sight the renunciation of the world seems a negative stance, it in fact went on to be interpreted more positively in a changing scholarly environment during the

---

103 Brown, Ecclesiastes, 18.
Middle Ages and up to the Reformation, and that in fact the term \( \text{hebel} \) holds the key to a more flexible meaning that helps us to escape from one-sided evaluations.\(^{104}\)

Clearly, Dell expresses the view that more should be considered upon critical analysis of the text itself. Perhaps this is also the way to withdraw from the psychological effect that the book has on its readers, and to open space to allow more literary and textual based analysis.

**IV. Preliminary Conclusion**

Overall, in this chapter I have classified scholarly view into three main stances: pessimistic, optimistic, and mixed views. Although each scholar has their unique style of approach, it is evident that there are two key factors that govern their decision in choosing sides: the way God’s sovereignty affects human lives and how death manipulates meanings in life. Many discourses have chosen to use the term *hebel* as the focal point of analysis. However, in the next chapter I would like to emphasize the importance of the role of death in Qoheleth’s thinking and how it is related to major themes in the book.

---

Chapter Three

Death as Agent for Reflecting on Life

In many commentaries on Ecclesiastes, death serves as a supplement to other themes or keyword analyses, but the term itself is seldom separately discussed. However, as one reads through the length of the book, the atmosphere of death is never far away from the content even when Qoheleth avoids using the term. Qoheleth does not begin this book by insisting on what Proverbs insist we must: the fear of God. In Bartholomew and O’Dowd’s observation, “By contrast, the great characteristic of Ecclesiastes is Qohelet’s continual use of the first-person pronoun ‘I,’ which indicates his dependence on himself rather than the Lord for an answer to the perplexing meaning of life.”

In other words, Qoheleth is a thinker, a sage that ponders the existence of humankind by himself. One can say that Qoheleth is the existentialist thinker in the Bible. Nonetheless, there are issues concerning the subjectivity of man that is unthinkable in terms of the human intellect. One of those is the topic concerning the death of the subject.

Qoheleth holds a very strange view towards death in the book. For instance, he writes, “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death, than the day of birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart” (7:1-2). Whereas common people think about

---

living, Qoheleth seems to encourage readers to ponder death. Death is better than birth, while the mourning is better than the feasting? If Qoheleth is a wisdom thinker, as he surely is, then what is the purpose of his thinking this way? Hence, in this chapter I will demonstrate how death may become the major theme for discussion in Ecclesiastes studies, and how other topics may be incorporated into this discussions.

I. **Death as in “Vanity”**

Lucas has stressed that “a major factor in Qoheleth’s conclusion that ‘all is vanity’ is his preoccupation with human mortality. In the ‘royal testament’ it is this which leads him to conclude that pleasure, possessions, fame, wisdom and wealth do not, either together or singly, provide the source of meaning for life.”

Indeed, if it were not the theme of death, why should Qoheleth stress vanity in human existence? This is proven by Murphy, as he suggests:

> The desperate claim of “vanity” is written up and down the entire book. There is not, Qoheleth avows, a single unspoiled value in this life. Riches, toil, wisdom, life itself—all these are examined and found wanting. His criteria are perhaps more extreme than those one might care to apply. Others might settle for less; he does not. The underlying and pervasive criterion for his judgment

---

is the fact of death; it casts a fatal shadow over all human existence. The wise
man dies as well as the fool (2:10)"¹⁰⁷

If we look closely to the poem in Eccl. 7:1-2, Qoheleth compares a good reputation
with fine oil, and concludes that presumably, “fine oil can spoil in some way whereas a
reputation lasts."¹⁰⁸ But in the following, he quickly compares reputation to death and oil to
the day of birth. The similarity lies in the fact that reputation, similar to death, can continue
on after death while oil and the birth of any creation is doomed to end one day. Could
Qoheleth possibly be playing on words: on the one hand, death as a symbol of unimaginable
eternity entitles that reputation can also remain forever, but on the other hand, while death is
meaningless, so is any long-lasting reputation? Continuing on to v. 2 where Qoheleth declares
that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, he explains
that “for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.” To go to the house of
mourning is to ponder death; could Qoheleth be encouraging us to remember the deeds of the
dead so that it casts a sense of reflection upon our still remaining lives?

What if a “good name” (7:1) for Qoheleth is no use at all? Evidence of this sense of
fallen reputation is seen as he laments, “So I turned and gave my heart up to despair
concerning all the toil of my labors 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

¹⁰⁷ Murphy, Ecclesiastes, lix.
¹⁰⁸ Enns, Ecclesiastes, 78.
toil for it” (2:20-21). With the entire legacy that is left, “the fruit and legacies of his labors” is eventually wasted and abused by the successive generations. How so, is it important to leave a good reputation for the later generations to admire and reflect upon? “This is also vanity and a great evil,” says Qoheleth (2:21b).

Therefore, the importance to know death is to understand that whatever legacy humankind tries to leave behind, all will perish one day. Although this sounds hopeless to the readers, the importance is in fact to seize the moment of now while living, and to build our reflections upon thinking about death. After all, Qoheleth ponders, “But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4). If reputation is so important and immortal to Qoheleth, isn’t it strange that he would value a living dog over a majestic but dead lion? At the end, it seems that hope remains only for those who are still living.

II. Death in the Cycle of Creation

Clifford observes in Qoheleth that “A mediating position—that no one knows whether the human spirit ascends, in contrast to a descending animal spirit—characterized the view of Qoheleth, whose preoccupation with death was nearly obsessive.” It is almost definite that

109 Brown, Ecclesiastes, 36.
Qoheleth fully rules out the possibility of an afterlife that is worth pursuing. If so, what is human life’s role in the perpetual cycle of creation?

The main text to be examined in this section is the “nothing new under the sun” poem in 1:4-11. This opening poem establishes the theological parameters for the entire narrative: “cosmology and anthropology.”

Perdue suggests that in this poem “The two traditions of creation are introduced, yet radically altered from their usual character. Strophe I [1:4-7] sets forth the nature of the cosmos. Unlike human generations, which are characterized by an endless succession of birth and death, the cosmos (hā ṣāres) is eternal (‘olām).” What Qoheleth is dealing with here is the comparison between the personal life and the macrostructure of creation. The stark difference emerges: human life is just ephemeral. At one time or another, human lives continue to perish while the cycle of creation rolls on.

In this poem, Perdue observes a cosmology where the traditional Israelite creation theology is absent:

Indeed, Qoheleth later speaks of God as creator, but in this introductory poem, there is a cosmology, but no cosmogony and theology—that is, there is no description of God creating or even sustaining the world. There is activity in the universe, but it is devoid of any observable divine providence or purpose … These traditional features of Israel’s creation theology are

---


112 Ibid.
transformed into a more modern understanding of nature’s seemingly operating according to its own inflexible laws, devoid of any divine involvement.113

If this cycle of nature is seemingly operating on its own, how isn’t the individual contributing to its operation? Instead, humankind is confused as it is objectified in this cycle, resulting in the uncontrollable fate that no one—not even the wise—can escape death. In the very opening of the Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth is attempting with this poem to unravel the traditional cosmology in Jewish wisdom, creating the effect that human life is vulnerable against this cycle. Humankind does not have the power over their own lives even with excessive knowledge, for all shall perish in this cycle—good or evil. The purpose, therefore, is to introduce the inevitable end of each and every human life in order to rethink our existence.

Kaiser observes, “To imagine that one is exempt from this basic, structural law, while understandable, is simply a symptom of the congenital short-sightedness which keeps humans from seeing the past, as well as the future. The rule observed in nature, Qoheleth believes, permits no exceptions, even for humans.”114 Through this insight of our vulnerability and lack of transcendental wisdom, we are able to humble ourselves in the face of creation.

III. Death in Time

114 Kaiser, “Qoheleth”; in Wisdom in Ancient Israel, 86.
The iconic passage in Ecclesiastes is the “A time for everything” poem in Eccl. 3:1-15. We begin by looking into Blenkinsopp’s comments:

The poem reflects the traditional teaching that there is an appropriate time for each human act—an important consideration since it is part of wisdom to do everything at the proper time. In his brief commentary (vv. 9-15) Qoheleth agrees with the traditional view on the importance of the timing of our actions—e.g. when to speak and keep quiet (Prov. 15: 23)—but adds that the ability to apply this principle is contingent on knowing the dispositions of God with respect to human existence. . . the human mind can arrive at the point of acknowledging that this is so, but this knowledge does not translate into the ability to act appropriately, to exercise control over one’s life.\(^\text{115}\)

According to Blenkinsopp, this timing is fully in God’s control. In fact, by looking at 3:14-15, we realize that everything has been predetermined; “nothing can be changed; the circle is closed. Time is God’s time, but we do not have the key to crack the code.”\(^\text{116}\)

When Qoheleth introduces this poem to the readers, the term “a time” was never intended for the human control; instead, this time is attributed to God. The theme of death once again resurfaces, “a time to be born, and a time to die” (3:2), purposefully highlighting our incapability to gain full control of our lives. As the clock ticks away, we cannot but

\(^{115}\) Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, 75.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
surrender under God’s sovereignty of time. No matter good or evil, wise or foolish, “in time” we are all equals as creations. The difference between us and God is that God is beyond time whereas we are located within the inescapable framework of time—or to be more specific—of our existence. However, this is not to weary our minds but to encourage us to look upon God, the true providence of our lives. At the end, death no longer terrorizes us; if we are in awe of God’s sovereignty, we learn to cherish our lives and to embrace death with serenity.
Conclusion
What Has Death to Offer Ecclesiastes?

In this thesis, I have presented a brief overview of Ecclesiastes’ background as well as diagnosed and classified different scholarly reviews into the pessimistic, the optimistic, or the mixed attitude towards Qoheleth’s understanding of life. Through these supporting commentaries I have tried to shed light on one of the underlying factors that govern Qoheleth’s discourse—mainly the subtheme of death. Why call it a subtheme? It is due to the fact that death has always been a supplement of other significant themes such as vanity, creation, and time, but rarely the opposite way around. However, through the course of this thesis, I have shown how death lurks near each topic or even how it takes the role of the invisible force at work.

Qoheleth’s view on death is in some way unique in comparison to the traditional standard biblical view. Murphy sees Qoheleth’s death as preferable to life in given situations, such as when “Qoheleth considered the dead as more fortunate than the living who are suffering; or better, the unborn who can never experience human evil (4:2-3).” However, in my view, death is preferable in shaping Qoheleth’s theology because its unique meaninglessness serves as a reflecting mirror that calls the living to purposefully construct their meaning of life. In terms of death, what does Qoheleth conclude? He concludes that

117 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, lxvii.
“everything lacks permanence when viewed coram morte (in death’s presence). The highly personal nature of the self-discourse arouses the suspicion that a single individual has earnestly considered all conceivable alternatives and has retained only that which commends itself to thoughtful persons.” 118 This is especially importance in order to teach an audience how to be humble in life. Furthermore, Crenshaw suggests that “death carries its victims on a journey from which none returns. Just as persons came into this world naked, so they return without anything that they accumulated in the intervening years. Both people and beasts share the same fate—they return to dust.” 119 Thinking of death is to be stripped naked of any burden, identity, or fame, which allows the effect to amplify what one has already obtained in life as a return.

This thesis serves as a preliminary beginning of a new way to embrace Ecclesiastes by taking away the fear factor in death. It has reached out to and attempted to make dialogue with difference theologians’ opinions and commentaries on this controversial book of wisdom. However, just by looking into secondary sources and making assumptions is perhaps not enough to dig out the real purpose of Qoheleth’s acknowledgement of death. To embark on this mission to open up a new horizon for Ecclesiastes studies, one must consult the original Hebrew text of Qoheleth as well as the Septuagint text. Original text commentaries such as the General Introduction and MEGILLOTH120 commentary may help researchers explore the

118 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 35.
119 Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 131.
120 Jan de Waard et al., General Introduction and Megilloth (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004).
in-depth meaning of the Hebrew vocabularies. These may help researchers to locate in what places does Qoheleth emphasize on death and how he expresses his feelings toward life. Therefore, it is crucial that further textual criticism be carried out to broaden what has been discussed in this thesis.

In the end, Enns opinion may serve as a conclusion to this thesis:

With Qohelet, we have the only OT author who openly questions death, at least with this sustained degree of intentionality. . . . Death is for him a fact of life that makes all human activities absurd. It brings to naught anything that looks, to the unwise eye, as if it might bring some sense to it all. . . . For Qohelet the problem is not that death comes too quickly or not quickly enough; it is not that it may come at the hands of an enemy; it is that death comes—period.121

The death factor in shaping Qoheleth’s thinking is not simply about the way we die or the time we die, but rather is about how we face life in the name of death. What deeds have we done? Who are to judge us? As we venture into the future, with a slight mind on death, we are able to reconsider carefully what steps we may take. Therefore, death is not a meaningless absence or nothingness that frightens us but rather a companion who is “not there”—the invisible wholly other—that helps us reflect on and self-monitor how we lead our lives.

121 Enns, Ecclesiastes, 130.
Works Cited

I. Biblical Texts


II. Commentaries


III. General Works and Studies


**IV. Journal Articles**
