

## God and Man in Ecclesiastes\*

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### Is Ecclesiastes a Misfit?

Through the centuries many people have questioned whether the Book of Ecclesiastes belongs in the biblical canon, and especially in the wisdom corpus. Since it seems to underscore the futility and uselessness of work, the triumph of evil, the limitations of wisdom, and the impermanence of life, Ecclesiastes appears to be a misfit.

Because it apparently contradicts other portions of Scripture and presents a pessimistic outlook on life, in a mood of existential despair, many have viewed it as running counter to the rest of Scripture or have concluded that it presents only man's reasoning apart from divine revelation. Smith wrote, "There is no spiritual uplift embodied within these pages. ...Ecclesiastes. ..accomplishes only one thing, confusion. Reason is elevated throughout the whole work as the tool with which man may seek and find truth."<sup>1</sup> Scott affirms that the author of Ecclesiastes "is a rationalist, a skeptic, a pessimist, and a fatalist. ...In most respects his view runs counter to his religious fellow Jews."<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw speaks of the "oppressiveness" of Ecclesiastes, which conveys the view "that life is profitless; totally

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<sup>1</sup> L. Lowell Smith, "A Critical Evaluation of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 21 (April 1953): 105.

<sup>2</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 192.

absurd."<sup>3</sup> Since "virtue does not bring reward" and since God "stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death," this book, Crenshaw asserts, contrasts "radically with earlier teachings expressed in the book of Proverbs."<sup>4</sup> "Qoheleth discerns no moral order at all,"<sup>5</sup> for "life amounts to nothing."<sup>6</sup>

Elements in the book that supposedly suggest this outlook of secularist despair include (a) the repeated refrains, "everything is meaningless"<sup>7</sup> (1:2; 2:11, 17; 3:19; 12:8); "this too is meaningless" (2:15, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:10; 6:9; 7:6; 8:10);<sup>8</sup> "chasing after wind" (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9); and "under the sun," which occurs 29 times; (b) death's finality which removes any advantage or gain man may have acquired in life (2:14, 16, 18; 3:2, 19-20; 4:2; 5:15; 6:6, 12; 7:1; 8:8; 9:2-5, 10; 11:7; 12:7); (c) the fleeting, transitory nature of life (6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:10); (d) life's inequities, including the frustrating nature of work (2:11, 18, 20, 22-23; 4:4), the uselessness of pleasure (1:17; 2:1-2), the inadequacies of wisdom (1:17-18; 2:14-17; 8:16-17; 9:13-16); and uncorrected injustices (4:1, 6, 8, 15-16; 6:2; 7:15; 8:19; 9:2, 11; 10:6-9); and (e) the puzzle of life with its many enigmas of unknowable elements (3:11, 22; 6:12; 7:14-24; 8:7, 17; 9:1, 12; 10:14; 11:2, 5-6).

Is this the total picture of the message of Ecclesiastes? Is it true that the book presents "no discernible principle of order"<sup>9</sup> in life? How does this skeptical approach square with statements (a) that life is a gift from God (2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 8:15; 9:7, 9); (b) that life is to be enjoyed (2:24-25; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9); (c) that injustices *will* be corrected (3:17; 8:12-13; 11:9; 12:14); (d) that God is in control (3:14; 5:2; 7:14; 9:1); and (e) that man is challenged to please God (2:26), remember Him 12:1, 7), and fear Him (3:14; 5:7;

<sup>3</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> "Meaningless" is the NIV's translation of **הַבָּל**, literally "a vapor or breath." This suggests brevity or transience and emptiness of content. See *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), s.v. " **הַבָּל**," by K. Seybold, 3:313-20. Other Bible versions translate the word "vanity" or "futility." Ogden suggests that **הַבָּל** can best be translated "enigma" or "mystery" {Graham S. Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *The Bible Translator* 38 (July 1987): 301-7). All Scripture quotations in this article are from the NIV unless noted otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> "Meaningless" is also used in 2:1; 4:7; 5:7; 6:2, 4, 11-12; 7:15; 8:14; 9:9; 11:8, 10. More than half the Old Testament usage of this word **הַבָּל** are in Ecclesiastes—38 of its 73 occurrences!

<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, p. 28.

7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13)? Can one ignore these counterbalancing ideas? When Qohelet<sup>10</sup> *five times* enjoined his readers to fear God, does the Bible student do justice to the book's message to say that only man's reasoning is presented, that the book provides no answer to life's anomalies and enigmas? Is it adequate simply to view Ecclesiastes as presenting thoughts and counterthoughts that stand in unresolved tension,<sup>11</sup> or as stating contradictions without solving them so that life is viewed as absurd and irrational?<sup>12</sup> To conclude that Qohelet recommended enjoyment of life only to make existence endurable on one's "journey into nothingness"<sup>13</sup> fails to account for the positive side of the book.

Why then does Ecclesiastes paint a dark picture of life? Why does the writer present the gloom and doom of life? How can the seeming contradictory elements in the book be reconciled? Four answers may be given to these questions.

First, Qohelet was demonstrating that life without God has no meaning. He was demolishing confidence in man-based achievements and wisdom to show that earthly goals "*as ends in themselves lead to dissatisfaction and emptiness.*"<sup>14</sup> Solomon recorded the futility and emptiness of his own experiences to make his readers desperate for God, to show that their quest for happiness cannot be fulfilled by man himself. Qohelet "shocks us into seeing life and death strictly from ground level, and into reaching the only conclusions from that standpoint that honesty will allow."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Qohelet" transliterates the Hebrew word rendered "teacher" or "preacher" in I 1:1-2,12. Stemming from the verb קָהַל, "to call an assembly," the noun קוֹהֵלֵית suggests one who calls an assembly to address them. Some scholars argue that the anonymous author called himself "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1; cf. vv. 12, 16; 2:9) to give his book a ring of authority as having been written in the tradition of Solomonic wisdom. Others, however, including this writer, argue that the author is indeed Solomon. For a discussion of the arguments on each side of this issue see Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), pp. 975-76; Louis Goldberg, *Ecclesiastes, Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), pp.19-20; and Gleason L. Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12 (1969): 167-81.

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979); and idem, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p.144.

<sup>14</sup> Roy B. Laurin, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 585 (italics added).

<sup>15</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 94.

Second, Solomon was affirming that since much in life cannot be fully understood, we must live by faith, not by sight. Unexplained enigmas, unresolved anomalies, uncorrected injustices—life is full of much that man cannot comprehend nor control. Like the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes affirms both the finiteness of man and the fact that man must live with mystery. Life "under the sun," that is, down here on earth, "does not provide the key to life itself," for the world in itself "is bankrupt."<sup>16</sup> Man therefore must have more than a horizontal outlook; he must look upward to God, fearing and trusting Him. Enigmas and injustices must be left in His hands to resolve.

Third, Ecclesiastes and its realistic view of life counterbalances the unqualified optimism of traditional wisdom. According to Proverbs 13:4, "The desires of the diligent are fully satisfied," but Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 challenges whether this is always true. Proverbs 8:11 extols wisdom, whereas Ecclesiastes 2:15 questions its value. Proverbs 10:6 affirms that justice is meted to the righteous and the wicked, but Ecclesiastes 8:14 observes that this is not always the case.

Are these contradictions? No, because for one thing Proverbs usually looks at the opposites in life without noting exceptions. Ecclesiastes, however, points out that while a righteous order does exist, as affirmed in Proverbs, it is not always evident to man as he views life "under the sun" from his finite perspective. "God is in heaven and you are on earth" (Eccles. 5:2). Job and Ecclesiastes, both wisdom books, demonstrate exceptions to what Proverbs often states in black-and-white fashion. The books then are complementary, not contradictory. While the affirmations in Proverbs are normally true, exceptions, as observed in Job and Ecclesiastes, do exist. As Williams has well observed,

Proverbs affirms by *faith* (not by sight as is commonly assumed) that a righteous order exists in the world, but Qohelet contends that righteous order cannot be discerned by sight. This latter premise, that even the wise cannot explain the apparent lack of order in the world, is simply Qohelet's way of expounding on the limitations of wisdom. But these limitations were even admitted by the sages: "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov. 26:12). ...Ecclesiastes was intended to balance the optimism of faith with the realism of observation.<sup>17</sup>

Job and Ecclesiastes both present the frustrations and futilities of wise wealthy men. Both books demonstrate that wealth does not

<sup>16</sup> J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), p.142.

<sup>17</sup> Neal D. Williams, "A Biblical Theology of Ecclesiastes" (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), pp. 85-86 (italics his).

provide lasting satisfaction, that many people experience injustice, that death is inevitable, that man must live with the mystery of suffering.

Fourth, Ecclesiastes affirms that the only answer to the meaning of life is to fear God and enjoy one's lot in life. Qohelet showed that man, left to his own machinations, finds life empty, frustrating, and mysterious. The book, however, does not mean that life has no answer, that life is totally useless or meaningless. Meaning is found, he explained, in fearing God—a point that clearly justifies a place for Ecclesiastes in the Bible's wisdom literature—and in enjoying life. Accepting what God has given and rejoicing in those gifts brings substance to a life that otherwise would be viewed as one of hopelessness and despair. Frustrations can thus be replaced with contentment. While recognizing the vanity of empty human pursuits, Solomon went beyond them and affirmed that "there is a bigger truth to live by," that we should "set our hearts not on earthly vanities themselves but on our Creator."<sup>18</sup> True, life has its puzzles, but with God life is worth living. Life is fleeting and death is coming, but with God life can be accepted and enjoyed.

### The Doctrine of God in Ecclesiastes

Forty times Ecclesiastes uses the word Elohim, and no other name, in speaking of God. As the transcendent God ("God is in heaven," 5:2), He is the Creator (12:1), "the Maker of all things" (11:5). His created works include man, giving him life (8:15; 9:9) and a spirit (3:21; 12:7), making him upright (7:29), and setting eternity in his heart (3:11).<sup>19</sup> In His sovereignty God has planned the timing of all things (3:1-8), which timing is beautiful (v. 13), though incomprehensible (v. 11; 8:17; 11:5) and unalterable by man (3:14; 7:13). The events and activities God has under His control include positive elements of life such as birth, planting, healing, upbuilding, joy, searching, keeping, mending, speaking, loving, and enjoying peace-

<sup>18</sup> Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> That is, God has given man an awareness that he is an eternal creature. He has a God-given "longing to know the eternity of things. . .but, try as we will, we cannot see it. . .That eternal WHY hangs over our lives" (Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," p. 141). This is "a deep-seated, compulsive desire to know the character, composition, beauty, meaning, purpose, and destiny of all created things" (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Integrating Wisdom Theology into Old Testament Theology: Ecclesiastes 3:10-15," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood [Chicago: Moody Press, 1986], p. 205). Others say the word עוֹלָם rendered "eternity" means (a) the world, or (b) ignorance (emending the word to be read עוֹלָם), or (c) darkness (from a related Ugaritic root). "Eternity," however, is preferable, in light of the reference to forever (עוֹלָם) in 3:14 and its contrast to time (3:1-17).

and all their negative opposites (3:1-8). All of life is under divine appointment and timing. Qohelet was not approving man's killing, tearing, hating, or engaging in war; he was simply affirming that these things occur in human experience (because of man's sin, 7:29) and that man cannot alter what God has planned.

God in His sovereignty and providence controls the rising and setting of the sun, the cyclic movements of the wind, the flowing of rivers, and the evaporation of water (0:5-7). He is called the Shepherd, a term used only a few times of God in the Old Testament (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Pss. 23:1; 28:9; 80:1; Eccles. 12:11).

Ten times God is said to give and 10 times to do. Man's burden, because of God's finite wisdom, is given by God (1:13; 3:10). God gives I man opportunity to enjoy food and work (2:24; 3:13; 5:19-20; 9:7), He gives man wisdom, knowledge, and happiness (2:26), and wealth, possessions, and honor (5:19; 6:2). God's work, which man cannot fully understand (11:6), includes both good and bad times (7:14). What He does has endurance (3:14) and cannot be altered (7:13).

Other divine attributes evident in Ecclesiastes include God's personality (He hears, 5:2; He despises, 5:2; He can be pleased, 2:26; 7:26; or angered, 5:26), goodness (2:24-26; 3:13; 5:18-19; 6:2), holiness (5:1-2), and inscrutability (3:11; 8:17; 9:1; 11:5). In addition His justice will be exercised against wickedness. Even His judging the righteous and the wicked is included in God's control of the timing of events (3:17). Though the punishment of the wicked may seem delayed, it will occur (8:13). Young people, challenged to enjoy the energy of their youthful days, should also be sobered by the fact that they are accountable for their actions under the scrutiny of God's judgment (11:9). In fact every act, whether overt or hidden, good or evil, will be judged by God (12:14) and either rewarded or punished.

Though God cannot be fully understood, some motives for His actions are mentioned. These motives include seeking to get people to fear Him (3:14) and testing man to show him his finiteness (v. 18). All these truths about God are consistent with the rest of Scripture, thus affirming the validity of the place of Ecclesiastes in the Bible.

### **The Doctrine of Man in Ecclesiastes**

#### **MAN'S NATURE**

Man's finiteness is seen in the fact that he is created (01:5; 12:1), earthbound (5:2), and subject to death (3:19-20; 6:6; 7:2; 9:5). He is a rational creature, for he can be guided by his mind (2:3), he can evaluate (v: 1), understand (1:1.7), investigate (v. 13), observe. (v: 14; 2:12,24; 3:10; 5:13; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9-10; 9:11,13; 10:5, 7), reflect (1:16; 2:1, 12,15; 8:9; 12:9), and draw conclusions (2:14, 17; 5:18).

Human emotions, according to Ecclesiastes, include joy (2:10; 9:7, 9; 11:9), love (9:1, 6, 9), hatred (2:17-18; 9:1, 6), contentment (4:8), despair (2:20), grief (v. 23), envy (4:4), anger (7:9), and sadness (v. 4).

Qohelet referred to the material part of man by the word **בָּשָׂר**, normally translated "flesh" or "body." The body can experience "troubles" (11:10) and weariness (12:12). It can also be cheered, figuratively speaking (2:3), or ruined (4:5), that is, dissipated. The NIV translators thought of **בָּשָׂר** in 2:3 and 4:5 as a metonymy (a part for the whole), for they translated it "myself" and "himself" in these verses respectively.

The immaterial part of man includes his soul (**נַפְשׁוֹ**), spirit (**רוּחַ**), and heart (**לֵב**). The soul is the center of desires for fulfillment (6:2-3, 7, 9; see NASB), the seat of inner satisfaction (NIV's "find satisfaction in his work" in 2:24 is literally "causes his soul to see good in his labor") or joy ("depriving myself of enjoyment" in 4:8 is literally "depriving my soul of enjoyment"), or the seat of inner contemplation ("while I [lit. 'my soul'] was still searching," 7:28).

The spirit is used of mood or temperament ("patience" in 7:8 is literally "length of spirit," and "provoked in your spirit," 7:9, speaks of anger). "Spirit" also speaks of man's animating principle of life, which returns to God at death (3:19,21; 12:7).<sup>20</sup>

Man's "heart" is referred to in Ecclesiastes more often than his soul or spirit. Consistent with its usage elsewhere in the Old Testament, "heart" represents the inner part of man, either his intellect, his emotions, or his will. The intellect is suggested in 1:13, 16-17, in which the NIV translates the Hebrew "I said in my heart" by the words "I applied myself" or "I devoted myself." The idea in these verses is inner determination to complete an intellectual pursuit. The NIV renders "heart" by "mind" in 7:25; 8:9, 16-verses that suggest an intellectual exercise. "Take this to heart" (7:2), "you know in your heart" (v. 22), and "the wise heart will know" (8:5) all suggest the

<sup>20</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 affirms that all animate creation, including men and animals, face death. The bodies of each expire and disintegrate into the earth. The spirit (**רוּחַ**) is the life principle in both men and animals (Gen. 7:22). However, Ecclesiastes 3:21 indicates, by means of a question, that no one can observe what happens to the spirit of man, "which ascends upward" (NASB) and the spirit of animals "which descends downward" (NASB). The NIV rendering "who knows if the spirit of man. . ." casts doubt on whether man's spirit goes upward. It seems preferable to render the verse, "Who knows that the spirit of man goes upward," as suggested by Goldberg (Ecclesiastes, p. 69; cf. Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983], p. 87). Understood in this way, the verse is pointing up the difference in the destiny of men and beasts. Because they are different, man's spirit goes upward to God and the animal's spirit does not. Only in man's nostrils did God directly breathe the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), and only man was made in God's image (0:26-27). Therefore the breath or animating principle of men and animals has different destinies, but, as Ecclesiastes 3:21 indicates, no one can see or observe where their spirits go.

intellect.. "I reflected on all this" (9:1), another instance of the exercise of the mind, is literally "I have taken all this to heart."

"Heart" also speaks of the emotional side of the immaterial part of man, as seen in 5:2 ("do not be hasty in your heart"), 7:3 ("a sad face is good for the heart"), 7:4 ("The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure"), 9:7 ("a cheerful heart"), 11:9 ("Follow the ways of your heart"), and 11:10 ("banish anxiety from your heart").

The willful aspect of the heart is seen in these verses: 7:7 ("a bribe corrupts the heart"), 7:26 ("the woman. ..whose heart is a trap"), 8:11 ("their hearts. ..are filled with schemes to do wrong"), 9:3 ("the hearts of men. ..are full of evil"), and 10:2 ("the heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool inclines to the left").

### MAN'S SIN

Sin is universal (7:20) and inward (9:3, "full of evil"). Man's inner pull toward sin accelerates if he feels he, like others, can get away with sin without immediate punishment (8:11). The sinful nature shows itself in specific acts of sin. In Ecclesiastes these acts include oppression of the poor (4:1, 3; 5:8), envy (4:4), greed (v. 8; 5:10), insensitivity in worship (vv. 1-2), unfulfilled vows (vv. 4-5), uncontrolled talk (v. 6), a stranger benefiting from someone else's work (6:2), pride (7:8), anger (v. 9; 10:4), discontentment (7:10), sexual seduction and adultery (v. 26), and foolish talk (10:13). Man's injustice to others is decried several times (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 7:7; 8:9, 14).

Ecclesiastes repeatedly underscores human finiteness by pointing to man's ignorance. He does not know God's ways (3:11; 8:17; 11:5) nor does he know the future (6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 9:1,12; 10:14; 11:2,6).

Sin has its consequences. It holds sinners in its grasp (8:8), it brings them trouble (v. 13), it can undo much good (2:26; 9:18; 10:1), and it can even lead to an untimely death (7:17; 8:13). After man dies, God will punish his sin (3:13; 11:9; 12:14).

### MAN'S WORK

The word עָמַל ("labor, trouble, turmoil, work") occurs frequently in Ecclesiastes.<sup>21</sup> No lasting profit (יִתְרוֹן, "gain or advantage" 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:10-11) comes from one's labor or toil (1:3; 3:9). The fact that work brings pain (2:17, 23) is said to be הֶבֶל, that is, meaningless or enigmatic,<sup>22</sup> as is the fact that the results of one's labors must be left to someone else (2:19, 21, 26; 4:7-8). Many people find no end to the toils of life (2:22; 4:8; 8:16), sometimes because they

<sup>21</sup> The noun occurs 21 times, the verbal form 8 times, and the adjective 5 times.

<sup>22</sup> See notes 7 and 8.

are driven by envy of what others have (4:4). Though work may bring despair (2:20), it can be enjoyed (vv. 10, 24; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:9) when seen as a gift from God.

### MAN'S DEATH

Life is fleeting ("few days," 2:2; 6:12), and death is certain. All will die (2:14-16; 3:18-20; 6:6) including sinners (8:10, 12-13; 9:2-3). Since God has appointed the time of each person's death (3:2), man cannot influence when it will occur (8:8) or even know when it will occur (9:12). Nothing can be taken from this life when a person dies; his exit is like his entrance (5:15-16). The dead go to Sheol (9:10), that is, the grave,<sup>23</sup> where they have no more opportunity to participate in this life's activities (9:5-6). Death is final. To be dead is said to be preferable to a life of oppression (4:1-2) or to nonenjoyment of one's prosperity (6:3-5), and yet the living do have an advantage over the dead (9:4). The dead will eventually be forgotten (1:11; 2:16; 9:5). Old age brings physical problems (12:1-5)<sup>24</sup> and eventuates in death (vv. 6-7), in which a person's spirit goes to God (3:21; 12:7) and he enters eternal consciousness ("his eternal home," v. 7).

A number of truths about man in Ecclesiastes are consistent with truths elsewhere in Scripture, particularly the early chapters of Genesis. Man was originally created good (Gen. 1:31; Eccles. 7:29), but fell into sin (Gen. 3:1-19; Eccles. 3:16; 4:1; 7:29), with the consequence of toil (Gen. 3:14-19; Eccles. 1:3, 8, 18; 2:11, 17, 22) and death (Gen. 3:19,24; 4:5,8; Eccles. 2:14-16; 3:20; 4:2; 9:5; 12:6-7). Made from dust and breath (Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Eccles. 3:20; 12:7), man has limited knowledge (Gen. 2:17; Eccles. 8:7; 10:14; 11:5). He was created to live in companionship with others (Gen. 1:27; 2:21-25; Eccles. 4:9-12; 9:9).<sup>25</sup>

### MAN'S RESPONSIBILITIES

What responsibilities does man have in light of the futilities and mysteries of life? What actions did Qohelet say will aid man in his pursuit of life? At least six suggestions are given in the book.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Laird Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 4 (December 1961): 129-34.

<sup>24</sup> Views on this passage include these four: (a) the decreasing health of organs of the body, (b) old age depicted by a Palestinian winter or approaching storm (Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970], pp. 403-5, and Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* [1857; reprint, New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1970], p. 458), (c) old age depicted as the ruin of an estate (Robert Gordis, *Qoheleth-The Man and His World* [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], p. 329), or (d) a combination of these views.

<sup>25</sup> C. C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960): 256-63.

1. *Be wise.* While wisdom has its drawbacks (1:18), can be nullified by a little folly (10:1), is transitory (4:13-16; 9:13-16), and does not prevent death (2:12), it does have advantages. It is better to be wise than foolish (v. 13) or famous (4:13-16), for wisdom can help preserve life (7:11-12), gives strength (v. 19), causes one to reflect on the seriousness of life and death (v. 5), and can brighten a person's countenance (8:1). Mere human wisdom, wisdom acquired by intellectual pursuits, is inadequate, but divine wisdom enables man to rest in the sovereign ways of God and in His providential timing (8:5).

2. *Worship and please God.* Proper worship entails a sense of caution and apprehension in God's presence (5:1-2). Making a commitment to the Lord should be done thoughtfully and without haste, but once having made it the worshiper should follow through on his promise (vv. 4-6). Pleasing God should be man's deepest desire (2:26; 7:26).

3. *Remember God.* More than a mental exercise, this means to acknowledge His authority and respond with loyalty (12:1, 6) and obedience (v. 13, "keep His commandments").

4. *Fear God.* Fearing God stands at the heart of wisdom literature (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10).<sup>26</sup> Hence it is no surprise that in Ecclesiastes man is commanded five times to fear God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13), to recognize who He is and to respond accordingly in worship, awe, love, trust, and obedience.

5. *Be diligent.* Life with its many uncertainties (9:11-12) means man knows comparatively little. "You do not know" is stated three times in six verses (11:2, 5-6) along with the words "you do not understand" (v. 5) to point up man's ignorance of which disasters may come and when, where the wind will blow, how the human embryo develops in the womb, or which enterprise or investment will be successful. This ignorance need not paralyze man or stifle him into laziness. Instead one should forget trying to change things that cannot be changed (v. 3) or trying to predict what cannot be known (vv. 4, 6), and should be hard at work all day (v. 6), working wholeheartedly (9:10) and leaving the results to the Lord. Laziness results in increased problems (e.g., sagging rafters and leaking roofs, 10:18).

6. *Enjoy life.* The fact that Solomon admonished his readers not to look for the answer to life in the pleasures of life itself did not rule out his encouraging them to accept their lot (קִלְקִלָּה) in life and to

<sup>26</sup> In Job the verbal form for fearing God occurs in 1:1, 8-9; 2:3; 23:15; 37:24, and related nominal phrases occur in 6:14 and 31:23. Proverbs refers to the fear of the Lord in 1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:27; 15:16, 33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; and 23:17. The command to fear the Lord occurs in Proverbs 3:7 and 24:21, and four times the verbal form "fears the Lord" occurs (14:2, 16, 26; 31:30). Fearing the Lord is associated with wisdom six times (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 8:13; 15:33).

be glad for the simple pleasures of life including food, warmth, marriage, and doing good. This theme occurs seven times in the book: 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9. "These modest pleasures are not goals to live for, but bonuses or consolations to be gratefully accepted."<sup>27</sup> The fact that these pleasures are for man's joy and contentment rules out asceticism, and the fact that they are given by God rules out sinful hedonism.

Castellino well summarizes the message of Ecclesiastes: "Therefore: (a) set aside all anxious striving and labor (*'amal*); (b) avoid all speculations on God's ruling of the world and (c) be thankful to God for whatever satisfaction He gives you, valuing and measuring everything as a gift from Him and enjoying it, never forgetting that you shall have to render strict account to God Himself."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> George A. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 28.

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