

Wisdom and Work: Perspectives on Human Labor from Ecclesiastes

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Because of its genre, attempting to interpret Ecclesiastes is difficult, as evidenced by a perusal of most biblical commentaries and the fact of its general neglect in standard teaching and preaching. By ignoring wisdom literature, we miss valuable insights into living, to our great peril, such as: the importance of virtue and moral formation, lessons from physical nature that bear upon human nature, the value of suffering, the reality of divine providence in light of life’s mystery, and an anatomy of stewardship. This essay explores what could be gained through a study of the theme of human labor in Ecclesiastes. It will be argued that two approaches to ultimate reality—one that fails to reckon with divine providence and inscrutability and one that humbly embraces them—are in “dialogue.” The former induces an outlook that is despairing and marked by resignation; the latter, however, receives life, with its fleeting moments, and everything in it—inclusive of human labor—as a “gift” of God. This alternative interpretation, rather than viewing Ecclesiastes as promoting despair and pessimism, understands the book to be teaching through its “indirect theology” that the God-fearer will experience levels of satisfaction and contentment, notably in the context of one’s work, and that this experience, not despair and resignation, is normative.

Wisdom Literature and the Wisdom Perspective

Ecclesiastes is part of a literary corpus called “wisdom literature.” Significantly, the wisdom perspective was common to wider ancient Near Eastern culture and not merely to Israel, even when Hebrew wisdom, canonized in the text of the Old Testament, has remained with us more than its ancient counterparts.¹ The earliest forms of wisdom literature are to be found in Egyptian culture, dating

as earlier as the third millennium BC.² Hence, Hebrew wisdom did not arise in a vacuum. It was part of a deposit that was universally accessible.³

The wisdom perspective concerns itself chiefly with how to live and thus is universal and enduring in its character, applicable to ancient as well as modern life.⁴ At the “macro” level, wisdom can be said to have framed all of creation⁵; hence, its beginning is the fear of the Lord⁶ and its value is supreme, surpassing that of gold or silver and all things deemed precious in the material world.⁷ To be wise is to possess the practical capacity for life’s responsibilities. In the Old Testament, in addition to counseling and instructing human beings along life’s journey,⁸ wisdom is depicted as the mark of a soldier,⁹ a quality that informs technical skill and craftsmanship,¹⁰ and the guide of leaders and kings.¹¹ Applied to Israel of old, it allowed the “chosen” to live as a nation whose God is the Lord.¹² Without wisdom, peoples and cultures are consigned to volatility and folly.¹³ In the grand scheme of things, then, wisdom may be rightly described as “the fundamental principle of the universe and the guide of human life.”¹⁴ It is the fruit of creation and providence, accessible to all, and may be understood theologically as a central aspect of “common grace.”¹⁵ To have wisdom is to walk in harmony with the Creator.¹⁶

Wisdom literature—and hence the wisdom perspective—is thus important for numerous reasons, but three in particular strike me as basic in our day. For one, we live in a foolish culture—a fact that applies to virtually all modern Western societies—so that to make claims in the public sphere that call for virtuous behavior, moral formation, or moral discernment frequently results in charges of being “hate-filled,” “bigoted,” and “intolerant.” To seek wisdom is decidedly out-of-step with the times. Second, most formal attempts in the twenty-first century to account for either virtue or vice tend to reduce (at least in Western culture) to biology, neuroscience, or related materialist constructions of the human person and the human brain.¹⁷ Third, and perhaps most importantly, standard Christian teaching and preaching tends to ignore wisdom literature with its invaluable perspectives¹⁸ and is often subservient to the cultural-ecclesial idols of “church growth,” “seeker-friendliness,” numerical assessments of “success,” and the like. We miss valuable insights into living—to *our great peril*—by ignoring wisdom literature. Among these insights are the importance of virtue and moral formation, lessons from physical nature that bear upon human nature, the “value” of suffering, the reality of divine providence in light of life’s mystery, and an anatomy of stewardship.

Wisdom literature can take multiple forms: for example, parable, allegory, riddle, proverb, didactic poetry, or philosophical treatise, with the book of Ecclesiastes fitting into the last category.¹⁹ And because of its genre, attempting to

interpret Ecclesiastes is difficult,²⁰ as evidenced by a perusal of most biblical commentaries and the fact of its general neglect in standard teaching and preaching. That works such as Job and Ecclesiastes are more speculative and less “practical” than, say, the book of Proverbs does not, however, detract from their essence as “wisdom literature.” Part of the wisdom perspective is to wrestle with the problem of suffering and life’s mystery, and to search for life’s meaning.²¹ Although from a human vantage point divine wisdom is impenetrable, wisdom as it enters the human experience nevertheless sheds partial light on the mystery of providence—light that will allow human beings to practice discernment, persist in the midst of suffering, put divine mystery and inscrutability in its proper perspective, and walk in harmony with their Creator.²²

Coming to terms with divine mystery through a serious reading of Ecclesiastes constitutes an important aspect of wisdom. As will be argued in the following section, two approaches to ultimate reality—one that fails to reckon with divine providence and inscrutability and one that humbly embraces them—are in “dialogue.” The former leads to an outlook that is despairing and marked by resignation; the latter receives life, with its fleeting moments, and everything in it—inclusive of human labor—as a “gift” of God. This essay, which diverges considerably from much commentary on Ecclesiastes, seeks to present an alternative viewpoint—one that recognizes a second theme in the book that is an alternative to “Meaningless, meaningless! Everything is meaningless!” This alternative interpretation, rather than viewing Ecclesiastes as promoting despair and pessimism, understands Ecclesiastes to be teaching through its “indirect theology” that the God-fearer will experience levels of satisfaction and contentment, notably in the context of one’s *work*, and that this experience, *not* despair and resignation, is normative.

Interpretive Strategy in Ecclesiastes

Two generations ago one Old Testament commentator offered this rather banal and understated observation: “The book of Ecclesiastes is not as well known as it should be.”²³ That state of affairs, vastly underestimated, has not changed. In fact, it is far worse today than it was in our grandparents’ generation. Rarely will one hear teaching or preaching from Old Testament wisdom texts (and this among churches that have a *high regard* for Scripture!).

Then or now, part of the problem is the character of this “strange and disquieting” book.²⁴ The major interpretive problem is this: understanding and explaining its apparent internal contradictions. For example, one contemporary scholar who summarizes commentary to the present day observes that “one is

tempted to despair when one realizes the extent to which scholars still disagree about it.”²⁵ Even biblical commentators who have devoted their entire lives to the study of the biblical text seem to despair over Ecclesiastes. The reason for this vexation is that the book presents “enigmas of every kind,”²⁶ leading one commentator to assert: “In fact, it [Ecclesiastes] denies some of the things on which the other [biblical] writers lay the greatest stress—notably that God has revealed himself and his will to man.”²⁷ And another laments: “Life is profitless ... totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible’s strangest book. Enjoy life if you can ... for old age will soon overtake you. And even as you enjoy, know that the world is meaningless. Virtue does not bring reward. The deity stands distant, abandoning humanity to chance and death.”²⁸ Another well-respected Old Testament scholar protests, “It is truly difficult to give an overall picture of the work. Qoheleth’s thought is tortuous.... The book provides no basis for relativizing the fundamental perception of ‘vanity.’”²⁹ Yet another commentator discounts the presence in Ecclesiastes of any “epistemological, ethical, or metaphysical” guidelines, being resigned to the book’s message of life’s “ultimate worthlessness”³⁰—a state of affairs leaving yet another commentator to complain that the teaching of Ecclesiastes is “incompatible” with the orthodoxy of the Hebrew Bible.³¹ By rendering the book of Ecclesiastes so problematic, Old Testament scholarship tragically has rendered it virtually *inaccessible* to the contemporary reader.³²

Complicating matters is the fact that many readers of this “strangest” of biblical books will not resist the temptation to read and interpret Ecclesiastes in twenty-first-century terms.³³ But it is intended to be neither narrative³⁴ nor sermonic; neither is it foremost a theological tract. It is rather a mixture of observations³⁵—contrasting observations—about life’s meaning and wisdom sayings, couched in an almost brooding skepticism, all of which together might seem at times to contradict and at other times to support earlier observations. Consistent with a standard technique found in wisdom literature, however, the wider strategy of the writer of Ecclesiastes³⁶ is to contrast and compare—that is, to juxtapose—and to repeat various insights.³⁷ That is, the writer moves back and forth throughout the treatise seamlessly without telling the reader along the way, “Now, pay attention: this is a contrast” or “Now a shift.” Not once, not twice, but continually this technique is employed, often to the consternation of the average reader, who is perhaps hoping for a clearer, “straight-line” approach to interpretation. A key in interpreting both the form and content of Ecclesiastes is to grasp the dialectical method underlying the entire work.³⁸ Contrast is the organizing principle. And in this contrast—this juxtaposition—the writer’s strategy is to keep despair in the foreground, with unblinking persistence hammering away

and utilizing periodic—and strategically placed—glimpses of the alternative. For in order for people to see clearly, they must have their false hopes pulverized.³⁹

Having observed dialectic in Ecclesiastes, we must sharpen this thesis a bit. Not only are two ways of thinking, two approaches to life, two views of ultimate reality being compared in the book, but they are also presented in sharpest relief. That is, they stand in diametric opposition. Let us call them antitheses. They are, quite simply, contradictions. The despair that arises in Ecclesiastes emanates from the writer-teacher's oft-repeated lament that in spite of *everything*, he fails to find *anything* of meaning.⁴⁰ However, if we allow the tensions and ambiguities in Ecclesiastes to stand, we may discover that there is interplay between two polarities of thought, between two contradictory perspectives. Contradiction does not cancel out coherence.⁴¹ Hence, what seem to amount to *blatant contradictions* in the human existence, alas, are reconcilable in the economy of God. Consider the reflections gathered in the passage beginning at verse 3:1—reflections that seem to bear out the reconciling of what are incongruities in human experience.⁴² There is a “time”⁴³ and “season”—and this “under heaven”—for “everything”; hence, seeming contradictions and absurdities, which encompass virtually everything in the human experience, have meaning and purpose *if* viewed according to a proper framework of reality. These opposites, presented in the form of fourteen pairs of poetic verse, include: (1) birth and death / planting and uprooting; (2) killing and healing / destroying and building; (3) weeping and laughing / mourning and dancing; (4) removing stones and gathering stones / embracing and withdrawing; (5) searching and giving up / retaining and throwing away; (6) tearing down and sewing / being silent and speaking; and (7) loving and hating / war and peace.⁴⁴

While the verses of this didactic poem are some of the most well-known (or at least oft-cited) verses from the Bible, precisely how they inform the overall message of Ecclesiastes is less well known. In fact, because they appear to be blatant contradictions,⁴⁵ they are routinely dismissed—when, that is, they are not misunderstood. Thoughtful meditation and reflection on what they suggest, from a wisdom perspective, and how they illuminate life's meaning and purpose are very much needed. While our natural reaction is to view many of the elements in these pairs as absurd, wretched, and scandalous, every one of them possesses meaning and purpose if interpreted by divine providence. (Whether human beings actually discern meaning and purpose therein is, of course, another matter.) Such a conclusion accords with the statement that follows: “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11). Hence, an important lesson of this didactic material is *discernment*—discernment of (a) the particular season that impacts our lives and (b) what action or actions would be appropriate, given that particular season. The context here is quite clear: any measure of discernment presupposes the recognition of divine omnipotence and providence.⁴⁶

As we look at Ecclesiastes as a whole, assisting the reader in the interpretive process is the writer's repeated use of catchwords ("meaningless," "meaninglessness"⁴⁷), catchphrases ("under the sun," "under heaven," "chasing after the wind," "what God has done," "the gift of God," "which God has given"), and recurring themes ("This, too, is meaningless"⁴⁸; "so that men will revere God"). Moreover, all aspects of human activity—that is, *everything* in human existence and human experience, whether accumulating knowledge, pursuing pleasures, seeking justice, toiling in one's work—are said to be "meaningless." At the same time, periodic shifts occur in the writer's thinking. These "shifts" in perspective usually attend reference to God or the Creator. Thus, at play in Ecclesiastes is a contrasting of two perspectives on life: one issues from what we might call "under-the-sun secularism," while the other might be termed "under-heaven theism." Two approaches to interpreting reality, two understandings as to what is meaningless or meaningful, two competing teleologies or ultimate ways of viewing human existence. Those things that appear meaningless when viewed "under the sun" alas have meaning if they are viewed in the light of the Creator whose providential ways are impenetrable.⁴⁹ In our interpretation, then, Qoheleth's musings might be viewed as an invitation to "listen in," as it were, on a dialogue between two contrasting positions that stand diametrically opposed.⁵⁰

What is the purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes? And what on earth—under the sun, so to speak—is this book doing in the Bible? In the words of one commentator whose view is not representative of most Old Testament scholarship, Ecclesiastes is a work of "apologetics"⁵¹—that is, a work that defends divine providence by underscoring "the grimness of the alternative."⁵² Qoheleth is using the general public whose view of human existence "is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity."⁵³ The world, thus perceived, is not so much a theater of the absurd as it is the arena of God's unfathomable glory.⁵⁴ If we let Ecclesiastes speak for itself and assume a literary unity (regardless of how difficult that unity may be to ascertain⁵⁵), three recurring and interconnecting elements comprise the writer's literary strategy: (1) a thorough, rational and despairing examination of the meaninglessness of everything in human existence; (2) God the creator and his providential work behind life's mysteries; and (3) human beings' inability to discern God's doings.⁵⁶ In spite of the writer's depressing observations, which are inclined without further context to induce despair, he is not arguing that events in the cosmos are random and without purpose. There is a "time" and "season" for *everything*, he insists, even when this remains veiled in the human experience.

One conspicuous recurring "shift" in the book concerns the value of human toil and work. So, for example, 1:2–2:23 catalogues the "meaninglessness" of varied

expressions of human activity, including human labor. This lament, however, is followed by a shift in perspective in 2:24–3:15. Whereas human toil and work were “meaningless” in the lament ending in 2:23, they are presented in a vastly different light in verses 2:24 and following, wherein the reader is told that the Creator “has made everything beautiful in its time” and “has put eternity in their [humans’] hearts” (3:11 NKJV).⁵⁷ The consequence of this is that “every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God” (3:13 NKJV). This conclusion is strengthened by the following observation: “So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot” (3:22 NIV).

Similar shifts regarding human activity and work occur again later in Ecclesiastes. One of these is the following rather remarkable observation: “When God gives any man wealth and possessions and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God ... because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart” (5:18–20). Notice the reasoning behind this statement: satisfaction in one’s work is “a gift of God” (a repetition, and thus underscoring, of an earlier statement). And if this is not enough, later on the writer reinforces this fact: “joy will accompany him [the believer] in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun” (8:15)—this despite humans’ inability to comprehend what God does.

What might we make of these statements and the context in which they are made? Again, we must keep the writer’s intent—that is, juxtaposition—in view. Either one finds statements scattered throughout Ecclesiastes that are blatantly self-contradictory in nature,⁵⁸ rendering any rational attempt at interpretation meaningless, or two points of view that are in conflict with one another are being compared.⁵⁹ In his portrayal of work within a theistic framework, the writer is not seeking to *idolize* work—or *any* human activity, for that matter. Neither is he writing in the manner that popular “self-help” gurus of our day utilize—promising personal happiness, “realization,” and “self-fulfillment.” The universe is *theo*-centric, not *ego*-centric.

Wisdom and the Work of God in Ecclesiastes

Given the well-known interpretive problems briefly outlined above and given the fact that theology in wisdom literature is not explicit, it is not at all surprising that little attention in the relevant literature has been devoted to the concept of God in Ecclesiastes. A fascinating and little-examined element in the book is the number of references to God that occur throughout the work. It is possible to identify as many as 40 texts that speak of God—this in a total of 222 verses.⁶⁰

Surely the fact of so many divine references in this relatively brief treatise is significant. In the words of one commentator, “Clearly if you remove everything about God in this book, thinking to produce a text on secular wisdom, you utterly dismember it.”⁶¹ And indeed this appears to be the case. Moreover, in Ecclesiastes the writer always uses the term *Elohim*, which designates “God” in general and which is used in the Genesis creation narrative, and not *Yahweh*, the God who reveals himself to his people. But creation, if viewed ontologically, is not a “neutral” object, without meaning or reference. It is, rather, an object of supreme significance, both physically and morally: everything was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). That is, the God of all creation gives life, and that life is “good,” in the very likeness of the Creator himself. Given this depiction of God as Creator, it is thus very plausible that the writer uses *Elohim* to eliminate any sense of Hebrew particularity, not unlike the apostle Paul in his Athenian discourse (Acts 17:16–34), who begins with the “unknown God” to whom his listeners can best relate before offering fuller revelation of the God who has made himself known.⁶² The argument being set forth in Ecclesiastes, thus, is of a universal character: life’s limitations, impenetrability, and seeming absurdities apply to all, leading to despair apart from the mystery of divine providence.⁶³ And while Christians confess that this God is in fact knowable, Ecclesiastes constitutes a necessary reminder that God cannot be calculated, manipulated, localized, or humanly understood.⁶⁴ “What God does”—a catchphrase in Ecclesiastes—is unknowable and impenetrable, and hence “hidden.”⁶⁵ While from a human vantage point this God strikes us as arbitrary,⁶⁶ his inscrutability and mystery have the effect of exploding any human pretensions, religious or secular in nature.⁶⁷ Human beings simply cannot claim to be God’s equal. Fallibility and depravity firmly establish humans’ distance from their Maker.⁶⁸

What the writer *does* tell his readers about this Creator God is significant and worthy of consideration, aiding us in locating an interpretive strategy by which to understand the book. Ecclesiastes presents God in essentially three roles: as creator, as inscrutable and impenetrable sovereign, and as judge.⁶⁹ Consider some of what we know about God from the writer’s argument and how these specific elements, in some form or fashion, express creation, inscrutability, and judging:

- 1:13—God gives a burden that is heavy to bear (cf. 3:10) ·
- 2:24–26—God grants satisfaction, enjoyment, wisdom, and happiness
- 2:26—There exist some people who please God
- 3:9—God assigns

- 3:11—God has made everything beautiful in its time; he has placed a sense of the eternal in human hearts
- 3:13—God gives gifts, one of which is satisfaction in human labor
- 3:14–15—God makes everything; nothing can be added or subtracted from this reality
- 3:15–17—God will judge all, the wicked and the righteous, and that judgment will be according to our deeds
- 3:18—God tests human beings
- 5:1–7—God is to be approached, worshipped, and served
- 5:2—God is in the heavens whereas human beings live on earth, which is to say, he is incommensurate and “other”
- 5:7—God is to be revered
- 5:18—God gives life
- 5:19–20—God gives gifts such as wealth, satisfaction in work, and gladness of heart
- 6:2—God gives wealth, possessions, and honor
- 7:13–14—God orders things; what God has done is to be pondered
- 7:18—God is to be feared
- 7:29—God created the human person upright
- 8:12–13—God is to be feared and revered
- 8:15—God gives life and joy in human labor
- 8:16–17—What God has done is unsearchable
- 9:1—The righteous and wise are in God’s hands
- 9:7—What we do in the moment is what pleases God
- 9:9—God grants life
- 11:5—God has made everything, which is to say, he guides things—even human evil—toward an ultimate purpose which he alone knows
- 11:9—God will call human beings to account and judge
- 12:1—God the Creator is to be remembered in our youth
- 12:6–7—God is to be remembered before we grow old and near death

- 12:13—God is to be feared and his commandments to be kept
- 12:14—God will bring every deed—good and evil, hidden and open—into judgment

“Qoheleth’s God is a hard ruler,” writes one commentator, a ruler who “must be feared, not cherished. . . . This is an uncomfortable theology, and one need not accept it as valid—the other Biblical authors *wouldn’t have*—but this is Qoheleth’s teaching.”⁷⁰ With this pronouncement we are witnesses to the interpreter confusing inscrutability for harshness and hence missing the mark theologically. Another commentator similarly misses the mark by speaking of “Qoheleth’s harsh criticisms of God” and asserting that the writer “blames” God.⁷¹ In truth, however, nowhere in Ecclesiastes are there found “harsh criticisms” of God. The perceived “harshness,” from a human perspective, issues from the fact that God’s ways and works are *impenetrable*. But this is *as it should be*; otherwise, we construct God *in man’s image*.⁷² The sort of aforementioned commentary that assumes divine harshness and distance in Ecclesiastes—and representative examples from Old Testament scholarship could be multiplied—errs at three basic levels. It fails to recognize that Ecclesiastes concerns itself, in a detached manner, with life’s totality and not *theology proper*. In addition, it fails to discern the literary strategy at work in the treatise. And correlatively, it misses or ignores *inter alia* the recurring admonition in the book concerning life’s “enjoyment” and God’s “gifts,” which actually constitute “theological statements of faith in a just and loving God.”⁷³ In fact, we must insist, with one perceptive interpreter, that fear of God and joy coexist in Ecclesiastes.⁷⁴ And in the end we must insist, against most of the literature, that Ecclesiastes does not mirror a theological or theocentric deficiency. In truth, its theology squares with that of the New Testament: “Consider therefore the *kindness and severity* of God” (Rom. 11:22, emphasis added). Human response to the divine, according to Ecclesiastes, requires reverence, silence, acceptance, and awe.⁷⁵ Such response, alas, is not “deficient”; rather, it is what is properly *due*.

Of the words describing God’s work in Ecclesiastes, the one that occurs most frequently is the verb to “give,” which appears twelve times. God *gives* life, wisdom, joy, wealth and possessions, a sense of the eternal, as well as an awareness of limitations; and he “assigns” human beings their “lot” or “portion.” Significantly, joy or life is the divine “gift” in eight of those twelve references.⁷⁶

Can “meaninglessness” or “absurdity” and joy be reconciled in Ecclesiastes? If so, how? Standard responses by biblical commentators tend to be variations of a “no” answer. But if we view the writer’s argument from the standpoint of

the wisdom technique of contrast or juxtaposition, even contradiction, and if we observe the “back and forth” of that argument as the juxtaposing of a despairing “under-the-sun secularism” and an acknowledging of the Creator whose ways are unfathomable, we are permitted to see a pattern or general “movement” of thought throughout. This shifting from despair to divine mystery, moreover, entails even moments of celebration and human gratitude. In this light, considering several key passages throughout Ecclesiastes that serve as a counterpoint to the book’s pessimism and nihilism is an illuminating next step. It is to these passages that we now turn.

Wisdom and Human Labor in Ecclesiastes: A Closer Look

Although “meaninglessness” is applied to all human activity “under the sun”—that is, to wealth and possessions, health, sensual pleasures, honor and prestige, pursuing justice, acquiring earthly wisdom and knowledge,⁷⁷ and human labor—and although this state of affairs, as manifest in all spheres of human existence, is reiterated throughout the treatise, “meaninglessness” is *not* applied to human work *categorically*. It applies, rather, to anything that stands outside of or apart from a theocentric outlook on life. The ongoing contrast in Ecclesiastes—a “dialogue” of sorts—is between “under-the-sun secularism” and what might be called an “under-heaven theism.” And in the latter description, work is portrayed as an aspect of satisfaction and enjoyment that constitutes a “gift” from God.

A common misperception about the book is that “enjoyment” only appears at the work’s conclusion, or that when and where it does appear in the text it is a “lowest-common-denominator” approach to enjoyment (“Get what you can, the little that you can”), given the reality of surrounding despair.⁷⁸ On closer inspection, quite the opposite is, in fact, the case. Admonitions toward “enjoyment” of life are laced throughout the book,⁷⁹ representing what one commentator even describes as “climactic moments” in the book.⁸⁰ Moreover, the frequency of the term “meaningless”/“vanity” (Heb., *hebel*)—appearing over thirty times—would lend the impression that the writer believed nothing in the temporal life could be called “good.” But in fact the Hebrew *tôb* (“good”) occurs even more frequently than *hebel* in the book—roughly fifty times.⁸¹ The writer also employs the verb *sāmah* (“to enjoy”) and the noun form *simhāh* (“enjoyment,” “joy”) in the passages that are treated below (2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–19; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; and 11:8–9). At the same time, he makes a clear distinction between authentic joy as a “gift” of God and the mindless frivolity of the fool.⁸² Together these indicators suggest a picture that departs radically from conventional thinking

about Ecclesiastes: there *is indeed* meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life, *if* life—from a metaphysical standpoint—is viewed properly.

Because much commentary is broadly unified in the assumption that the writer has a fatalistic, despairing view of life, interpretive honesty requires that we acknowledge the presence of a cluster of statements spread throughout Ecclesiastes in which a full-throated recognition of enjoyment and satisfaction in this temporal life is acknowledged.⁸³ The presence of this material presents the interpreter with a serious obstacle—if, that is, the message of Ecclesiastes is despair and the God depicted therein is “harsh.” Taken together, these statements—eight in number—blatantly contradict the “meaninglessness” thesis that is expressed throughout. Moreover, they are clearly more than mere “marginal notes” on the part of the writer; rather, by the manner in which they punctuate the entire treatise they constitute something of a *Leitmotif* or recurring theme and therefore must be taken seriously as part of the writer’s interpretive strategy.⁸⁴

What is more, the next-to-last of these passages noted below (9:7–10) is the most forceful of the writer’s admonitions toward enjoyment—emphatic advice to the young to *make the most* out of life while they can—and may properly be viewed as part of a bridge leading into the book’s concluding section. Finding enjoyment, alas, is an important counterpoint and subtheme,⁸⁵ even when it is not to be confused with “pleasure-seeking” (cf. 7:1–6). Additionally, and significant for our present purposes, in five of these statements an explicit connection is made between *work* (Heb. *’āmāl*)⁸⁶ and enjoyment—a state of affairs that does *not* exist in a secularist-materialist account of human life. Because of the trademark of repetition in wisdom literature, the reader may be assured that the recurring accent being placed on *contentment through human labor* is not a minor point. Moreover, eight times in Ecclesiastes the writer speaks of a human being’s “lot” or “portion” (2:10, 21; 3:22; 4:9; 5:18; 9:6, 9; and 11:2) that has been “assigned” by heaven; several of these appear in a positive context of one’s delight or contentment through work.

The eight passages that speak of enjoyment—we may call them “refrains”—may be understood as corresponding to eight intervals in the writer’s argument.⁸⁷ At each interval, joy and contentment⁸⁸ are reaffirmed in contradistinction to the absurdities that characterize “secular” existence. The implication in each of these “interval” statements, moreover, is that temporal enjoyment should not be dissociated from the *source* of contentment, since it is a “gift” of God. And far from being a “distant” God, as much commentary mistakenly asserts, “God answereth him [i.e., the human being] in the joy of his heart” (5:20 KJV).⁸⁹

1. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and *find enjoyment in his toil*. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. (2:24–26, emphasis added)

These statements serve as a counterpoint—and hence a contradiction—to the futility, pain, and grief of toil and endless effort poured into labor done “under the sun” (2:17–23). They are in response to the failure of all attempts—philosophical (1:12–18), sensual (2:1–2), commercial (2:3–11), intellectual (2:12–17), and work-related (2:18–23)—to find meaning in human existence. They also answer the question concerning “good” posed earlier (2:1). Wisdom, knowledge, and joy—a joy that includes satisfaction in one’s work—are gifts from “the hand of God” (also in 9:1) given to those who “please” him. Verse 24 contains the first of four “there is nothing better” rhetorical devices applied to work in the book.

2. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and *take pleasure in all his toil*—this is God’s gift to man. (3:12–13, emphasis added)

These statements follow on the heels of the poem on “seasons”: everything, including enjoyment, has its place, its purpose, and its time. They also serve as a counterpoint to human inability to fathom what God has done and will do “from the beginning to the end” (3:10–15). Divine inscrutability is not vexing for the believer, only the secularist. The humble and wise can accept human limitation. Eating and drinking and working symbolize the joy of being human and thus have theological significance. Verse 12 contains the second of four rhetorical devices applying to work in the book.

3. So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should *rejoice in his work*, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him? (3:22, emphasis added)

This statement serves as a counterpoint to the finality of death and divine judgment (3:16–22). That judgment, of both the wicked and the righteous, encompasses “every activity” and “every deed” done in this present life (3:17)—it is a judgment according to *works*. Verse 22 contains the third of four “there is nothing better” rhetorical devices applied to work.

4. Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and *find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils* under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and *rejoice in his toil*—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart. (5:18–20, emphasis added)

These statements, which once more signal a conspicuous shift both in tone and in reference to God, serve as a counterpoint to greed and discontentment (5:8–17 and 6:1–11). They underscore not merely the “relatively good” but the genuine “good”—something that has been emphasized earlier (in 2:24; 3:12; and 3:22). Moreover, this is said to be a “gift of God,” a reiterating of what was claimed earlier (3:13) and an underscoring of its redemptive quality. These verses contain one of the densest concentrations of allusion to God in the book, along with 3:10–15. Significantly, they make the explicit connection between one’s relationship to God and joy in the heart, as evidenced by the language of God “occupying” the God-fearer.

5. In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. (7:14)

This paradoxical statement serves as a counterpoint to potential disillusionment that arises from a lack of wisdom (7:1–8:1). It also harkens back to the earlier argument that humans cannot fathom what God does (3:1–22). Here the writer is not arguing that God is the author of evil—a point missed by almost all commentary.⁹⁰ These words are important in light of the human tendency to doubt God’s omnipotence, his providence, and his goodness. The fear of God allows us to accept what we cannot control. Mystery should produce reverence.

6. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for *this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him* under the sun. (8:15, emphasis added)

This statement, a strengthened commendation of joy, serves as a counterpoint to life’s “unfairness,” life’s “injustice” (8:11–15), based on divine inscrutability. It also contains the fourth of four “there is nothing better” rhetorical devices applied to work. And it suggests that in finding satisfaction in our work, we recognize work’s purpose and source.

7. Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because *that is your portion in life and in your toil* at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, *do it with your might*, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. (9:7–10, emphasis added)

These statements, which as a refrain reach a crescendo by employing multiple imperatives couched in festive imagery, serve as a remarkable counterpoint to death as the universal destiny of all human beings (9:2–6). They also constitute a powerful witness to human moral agency and responsibility with their “seize the day” imperative, which find its expansion in the later admonitions to give and sow seed (11:1–6). They are a reminder that the present represents a theater of opportunity.⁹¹

8. Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth. (11:7–12:1)

These statements represent a “dramatic culmination”⁹² of the treatise and serve as a radical counterpoint to the inevitability and finality of death in old age (11:8–12:7). Youth is portrayed here as a divine gift and opportunity—unbounded potential that is to be used creatively yet soberly. “Rejoice” and “remember” are the two admonitions receiving emphasis. Life, though brief, is not meaningless; it can be utterly absorbing.⁹³ These statements together call to mind the sort of disposition undergirding the Augustinian maxim: “Love God, and do what you will.”

Enjoyment—by which the writer is signifying contentment or satisfaction and which is symbolized by eating and drinking (i.e., shared fellowship around the table) and working—is a divine “gift” as depicted in Ecclesiastes. Gifts are to be received. The fact that enjoyment and gifts are to be received and not pursued illustrates the two clashing worldviews on display in the book. In point of fact, as noted above the writer has used the rhetorical device “nothing is better”

four times throughout the treatise to emphasize the matter of life's enjoyment and the truth that it is a "gift" of God (2:24; 3:12, 22; and 8:15).⁹⁴ God's gifts, moreover, are declared "good" in six of these intervals (3:12; 5:17; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7; and 11:9). Together, these markers underscore not the Creator's *harshness* but his *benevolence*, not a bitter resignation but a humility before the Creator.

In granting satisfaction in our labor, God sanctifies, as it were, the ordinary. In the words of one observer, "The momentous and the mundane are wedded under God's providential work."⁹⁵ Correlatively, the Judeo-Christian tradition knows no split or dichotomy between manual and mental labor, in contradistinction to the Greco-Roman tradition.⁹⁶ The reason for this is quite simply that we are created in God's likeness (Gen. 1:26–27). Furthermore, the enjoyment of our labor is not merely some momentary phenomenon—here one minute and then gone the next. Rather, it has a residual effect in the believer's life: "for this [i.e., satisfaction] can accompany him in his labor throughout the days of life that God has given him" (8:15). This satisfaction, moreover, is an intrinsic, qualitative good to be savored, not some "pain killer" or anesthetic to "distract" us from the evil around us.⁹⁷ Against much Ecclesiastes commentary, there *is* lasting profit in our endeavors and our labor; such is a "gift" of God to those who humbly acknowledge his providence and inscrutable ways.⁹⁸ Ecclesiastes depicts work in a way that is utterly relevant to our contemporary world, just as it always has been. Not only is work part of Ecclesiastes' taxonomy of joy, it is part of the Christian's as well. Hence, it remains an important part of Christian ethical reflection, lodged at the very center of Christian vocation, which—properly understood—transforms our understanding of work. We are *created* for work, and as vice-regents of all of creation we *co-create* with the living God. This endowment and propensity are part of the *imago Dei*.⁹⁹

Concluding Thoughts on "the End of the Matter"

Following what is basically a "call to decision"¹⁰⁰ (11:1–12:8), and after all has been considered in Ecclesiastes (12:9–14), the writer's argument concludes: the "end of the matter" is that humankind is to *revere God*. The secret of human existence, then, is to acknowledge human limitations and be receptive to God and his works. Transcendence and divine inscrutability should, in the end, induce the fear of God in human beings. Where, however, human openness to the divine is absent, God's ways and God's work end up alienating us, rendering us cynical and skeptical.¹⁰¹ If any wisdom is to be found among human beings, it will lead a person away from the absurdity of "secularism" and to the acknowledgement of the mystery of divine providence. The "fear of God," in the end, is the final

word (12:13–14).¹⁰² It is, in the words of the Psalmist, to “be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). This theme, it needs emphasizing, has occurred six times throughout Ecclesiastes—in 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13 (twice); and 12:13.¹⁰³ Thus, in the message of Ecclesiastes we clearly have no “Chicken Soup for the Soul” approach to positive thinking or spirituality, by any stretch of the imagination.¹⁰⁴

In addition, in his treatise the writer addresses everything that constitutes normative human activity, inclusive of human labor. The writer does not despise or devalue work; rather, he recasts it.¹⁰⁵ Specifically within a theocentric context, work is portrayed not as “meaningless toil” but rather as (a) satisfying and (b) a gift from God (2:24; 3:13; 5:18–20; 8:15; and 9:10 [implied]). Work as both a sign of contentment and a divine gift is part of the writer’s broader theme of enjoyment, as we have attempted to argue. Moreover, the dual admonition central to the message of Ecclesiastes—fear God and enjoy the life he gives you—accords with the command given to Israel by Israel’s God: “so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live . . . and so that you may enjoy long life” (Deut. 6:2, NIV). In fact, Ecclesiastes is the source of the *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) adage familiar to many readers: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might!” (9:10).¹⁰⁶ Neither is this the language of divine determinism, nor is it a portrait of drudgery and toil, nor does it mirror a “harsh” and “distant” God, as many would suppose. It is, rather, a challenge to make the most of our gifts and abilities as well as our opportunities—a challenge which, unlike the rest of life, knows no (known) limits.

While most people are familiar with Ecclesiastes’ emphasis on the “meaninglessness” of life, little attention in standard commentary has been given to these intermittent “wisdom” observations about work as a “satisfying gift” or means of “seizing the day.” What’s more, this perspective on work from Ecclesiastes is wholly absent from teaching and preaching found in the church.¹⁰⁷ The writer’s observations, it should be remembered, agree with another wisdom saying: “In all toil there is profit” (Prov. 14:23a)—a “profit” that is measured not foremost in economic terms but in *contentment*.

In the final analysis, I am not arguing that pain and pessimism or toil and drudgery are absent from Ecclesiastes (and hence from the human experience); my argument is only that pessimism is (a) one voice and (b) not the writer’s conclusion.¹⁰⁸ If pessimism and despair were in fact *the* message of Ecclesiastes (“Everything is meaningless. Period.”), then it would be reasonable to assume—and to argue—that death would be portrayed as a *release* from the absurdity of human existence and the book *per se* would have ultimately been excluded from the canon of Scripture. Neither, however, is the case. Internal evidence reveals in Ecclesiastes the presence of a “dialogue”—a dialogue between two

competing frameworks for interpreting reality.¹⁰⁹ It is true that the reader is easily swayed—by means of the writer’s comprehensive “All is meaningless” language, not only at beginning (1:2) and end (12:8) but intermittently throughout—to bypass a competing voice (“under heaven”) that is intermittent yet, in my view, potent.¹¹⁰ The text of Ecclesiastes itself, as it turns out, supplies its own rebuttal to the voice of “meaninglessness.” And in this dialogue, we should note the final piece of advice given, in 11:9: *pursue a joy that is tempered with sobriety*.¹¹¹ On that note, the dialogue in Ecclesiastes ends.

There is a tendency among Old Testament commentators to treat the writer of Ecclesiastes as a sort of foil for the Christian gospel, as if in Qoheleth we are witnesses to a deficient person who is “in dire need of rehabilitation”¹¹² or as if Qoheleth were confused, despairing, and resigned to life’s misfortunes—a state or condition which is “resolved” in the New Covenant through Christ. But such a reading errs at several levels. Most significantly, it fails to recognize the universality and enduring nature of wisdom literature and the wisdom perspective. When, for example, proverbs entreat us to eschew sloth and be diligent or seek wisdom or act justly or be good stewards or rescue the perishing, this is not some unique “Christian” insight that is only relevant to the “New Covenant”; it is a *human* insight, based on creation and applying to all people everywhere at all times. The wisdom perspective, *perennially* true and necessary for life, speaks to our humanity and our limitations, whether we are Christian or non-Christian, “before Christ” or “after Christ.” The reality of divine providence, the goodness of creation, divine inscrutability, the fear of God, and the need for wisdom are *every bit as true* and valuable in the New Covenant era as they were prior. Alas, Ecclesiastes serves, in an *abiding* way, as an effective “apologetic.” It presents a dialectic that *continually* informs people of faith.¹¹³

Perhaps Ecclesiastes is consigned to neglect—in the past and in our day—because it confronts us with what we fear the most. It is withering in its exposure of life’s absurdity and nakedness when human existence has been bleached of an acknowledgement of God whose ways are inscrutable. At bottom, in its own unique way Ecclesiastes is a guide—an invaluable one at that—to living faithfully in a world or culture that at best is agnostic and at worst is hostile to the One who is creator, sustainer, and judge of all things. Perhaps, then, it is high time that Western societies be exposed for what they are. From the wisdom perspective, a “fool” is not merely some imbecile; rather, he is one who resists the witness of truth as it is on display in creation, in human nature, and in human activity.¹¹⁴

While a secularist-materialist perspective strips life and life’s vocation of its inherently religious meaning, “vocation” properly understood infuses mundane secular life—the “ordinary”—with meaning and significance. Such renewed

understanding of the “ordinary” occurred in significant ways five hundred years ago in Western history. One of the breakthroughs of early sixteenth-century Protestant reform was to recover a deeper understanding of the notion of *vocation*, given the Reformers’ conviction that more than a millennium of the Church’s devaluing of human work aside from a “calling” to the priesthood and the monastery was at stake.

In Martin Luther’s reaction to this devaluation, it is utterly fascinating to find that the book of Ecclesiastes played no small role in helping shape his thinking on human labor and *vocatio*. In *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, Luther offers the following reflection:

No less noxious for a proper understanding of this book [Ecclesiastes] has been the influence of many of the saintly and illustrious theologians in the church, who thought that in this book Solomon was teaching what they call “the contempt for the world” [*contemptus mundi*].¹¹⁵

Here Luther is citing Jerome as an example, who encourages fourth-century-monastic life in the preface of his *Commentarius in Ecclesiastia*¹¹⁶ and whose “contempt for the world” interpretation would be standard for most of the church for over a millennium.¹¹⁷ For Luther, this meant that Christians should “forsake the household, the political order . . . [and more] to flee to the desert, to isolate oneself from human society, to live in stillness and silence; for it was [deemed] impossible to serve God in the world.”¹¹⁸ Luther is at pains to counter the long-standing tradition of ascetic monasticism and isolation from the world. In his view, this was counter to a proper understanding—and acknowledgement—of creation’s essential *goodness* (Gen. 1:31). Monks, however, were *disengaged*, which caused Luther to polemicize against the world-fleeing monastic tendency. In reading Ecclesiastes, Luther laments that “it is almost a bigger job to purify and defend the author” from mistaken ideas “smuggled in by the church.”¹¹⁹ “Some foolish men,” Luther observes,

have not understood this [i.e., what Ecclesiastes condemns] and have therefore taught absurd ideas about contempt for the world and flight from it, and they themselves have also done many absurd things. . . . The proper contempt of the world is not that of the man who lives in solitude away from human society, nor is the proper contempt of gold that of the man who throws it away and who abstains from money, as the Franciscans do, but that of the man who lives his life *in the midst* of these things and yet is not carried away by his affection for them. This is the first thing that should be considered by those reading Ecclesiastes.¹²⁰

Two priorities, he concludes, are obscured: the author's purpose and the author's unique style. The author's aim, then, is clarified by Luther: "to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present."¹²¹ In the end, Luther asserts, what Ecclesiastes condemns is not "creation or the created order" but rather "depraved affections" and a "lack of contentment."¹²² The natural order is and remains "good." Misuse of the "good," however, is what leads to *vanitas*.

On occasion throughout its history, as in the sixteenth century, the Christian Church is permitted to gain renewed insight into its "apologetic" mission in the world. Part of that mission entails rediscovering the meaning and purpose of neglected domains of social life—for example, in the arts or sciences, in language and linguistics, or in the study of history, philosophy, and culture. Not infrequently, those breakthroughs—as they did in the early sixteenth century—adjust our views of the marketplace as we grasp a deeper understanding of the concept of "vocation," and hence, our work. And during those seasons of "breakthrough," whether culturally or personally, we find God *sanctifying the mundane*, the ordinary, the daily. Yes, he sanctifies our efforts *in the workplace*, giving us a sense of meaning, purpose, and satisfaction *in and through* our work. And he reminds us, as he did Luther and the reformers, of the high calling to be butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers; nurses and doctors and drivers of hearses; psychologists and businessmen and information technologists. In short, he collapses—once *again*—the "sacred-versus-secular" dichotomy that we (both Catholics and Protestant evangelicals) are all too fond of continually erecting.¹²³

Vocation properly understood has the effect of "recalibrating" our sense of duties and obligations within the larger ethical framework of God's providential care and purpose. Work, alas, is perhaps the most significant element of the believer's vocational calling, even when it does not represent the totality of that calling. Thus, when Ecclesiastes commends work as a "satisfying gift" and yet the believer's day-to-day experience at work is *neither* satisfying *nor* viewed as a gracious gift, theological recalibration is in order. Anything less is to fail to live in harmony with our Creator.

For what purpose, then, do our lives exist here "under the sun"?

Notes

Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

1. On the presence of wisdom literature in ancient Mesopotamian, Greek, and Egyptian cultures, see Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), xli–xlv. In the words of Gordis, Hebrew *hokmah* was part of the prevailing “culture-pattern” that enveloped Egypt, Babylon, Syria, and Palestine during the second and first millennium BC; see Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1955), 9. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament includes the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, with a number of Psalms—for example, 1, 37, 49, 73, 78, 91, and 126—falling into this category. Apart from the Protestant Old Testament canon, the wisdom of Ben Sirach, frequently under the title of Ecclesiasticus, is another well-known exemplar.
2. Old Testament texts such as 1 Kings 4:30–31; Job 1:1; Prov. 30:1–31:9; and Jer. 49:7 suggest that ancient Near Eastern sources of wisdom were well established in Israel’s day. This, in turn, suggests the importance of wisdom as a form of general revelation.
3. To Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Hebrew sources we might even add Canaanite and Phoenician influences. Hereon see Mitchell J. Dahood, “Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth,” *Biblica* 33 (1952): 30–52; and W. F. Albright, “Canaanite-Phoenician Sources of Hebrew Wisdom,” in *Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, SVT, ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 1–15. Perhaps the most concise and helpful summary of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature as it bears upon Ecclesiastes is found in Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Leicester, UK; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 28–36.
4. While the question of what precisely constitutes “wisdom literature” is the subject of lively—and in some ways interminable—debate among Old Testament scholars, as evidenced by the volume *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Studies*, ed. Mark R. Sneed (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), several features are peculiar to the wisdom genre—among these: a peculiar literary form, a didactic character, an emphasis on practical life experience, a particular language and vocabulary, a quest for understanding the human condition, epistemological concerns, an indirect theological orientation that is anchored in creation and natural theology, human destiny, and a contrast of justice and injustice or wisdom and folly.
5. Prov. 8:22–31; cf. Col. 1:17; 2:3; and Heb. 1:2.
6. Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; and 9:10.

7. Prov. 2:4; 3:14–15; and 8:10.
8. Prov. 1:1–9:18 and 14:1–35.
9. Prov. 21:22 and Eccl. 9:18.
10. Ex. 28:3; 35:6; 1 Kings 7:14; and Isa. 40:20.
11. Gen. 41:33, 39 and Prov. 8:15–16. In fact, the importance of wisdom and counselors in supporting kingship is on display frequently in the Old Testament—for example, in 2 Sam. 15:12; 16:20; 17:14; Est. 1:13; Isa. 3:3; 16:3; Jer. 50:35; 51:57; Dan. 5:7–16; and Obad. 8.
12. Deut. 6:1–5.
13. Isa. 33:6 and the bulk of sayings in the book of Proverbs.
14. See John Paterson, *The Book That Is Alive* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 80. Indeed, the context of wisdom is to be found in the streets and the marketplace (cf. Prov. 1:20; 8:1–4; and 9:3).
15. In Calvinist theological terms, “common grace” is distinct from “particular” grace. By the former, all of creation is maintained and preserved through God’s providential care; by the latter, that is, what we call special revelation, we enter into communion with God through Christ by means of cleansing from sin and walking in newness of spiritual life.
16. To depict “wisdom” as “our awareness of the inherent tension between the inner ‘I’ and the outer world,” as one materialist philosopher posits (Stephen S. Hall, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010], 9), is insufficient, even when it is a starting point. Wisdom entails more—not merely an awareness of this tension but taking practical steps, based on a theistic framework, to live in harmony with others, with the surrounding world, and (most importantly) with the Creator.
17. Thus, Hall, *Wisdom*, 16, writes, “[A] lot of recent research in neuroeconomics and (in a broader sense) social neuroscience—including related fields like cognitive neuroscience, behavioral psychology, moral philosophy, and the like—strikes me as an immensely fertile area to till for fresh new insights into the nature of wisdom.” For Hall, the vocabulary of human virtue reduces to “the eight neural pillars of wisdom” (19, 59). Hall, of course, is merely representative of the great mass of “science” writers and social philosophers today for whom ethics and virtue reduce to a study of neurology and brain science.
18. In all fairness, even the devoted reader of the Bible who jumps from the Old Testament’s historical or prophetic books encounters a vastly different world in wisdom literature, where there is little (if any) discourse about God’s character, covenant, a chosen people, the Temple cult, the law, priesthood, and the like. The

emphasis appears to be anthropological rather than theological, with a focus on human behavior or human experience and with its tendency to draw from both reason and revelation.

19. The abundance of proverbs in Ecclesiastes, however, makes it clear that the writer was “rooted in the rich soil of common Israelite wisdom” (see Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples*, trans. J. Daryl Charles [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995]), 99–100.
20. Useful summaries of the contents of Ecclesiastes can be found in G. S. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. D. Guthrie et al. (Leicester, UK; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 570–71; O. S. Rankin, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible—Vol. V* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*; Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985); James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987); Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Choon-Leon Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York; London: Doubleday, 1997); Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, Analecta Biblica 139 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998); idem, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIBC (Peabody; Cumbria, UK: Hendrickson and Paternoster, 1999); William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000); Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); and Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), even when these commentators differ greatly—at times, wildly—in terms of their interpretation of the book.
21. Wisdom literature—whether Mesopotamian, Egyptian or Hebrew—is of two general varieties: prudential admonitions and reflective essays that not infrequently are dialogical and pessimistic in nature. Hereon see J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 1–46; and Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (1972; repr., Nashville; New York: Abingdon Press, 1984), 24–50.
22. Ecclesiastes, then, is necessary as an antidote to shallow self-righteousness and un-reflective belief.
23. Paterson, *The Book That Is Alive*, 129.
24. See Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), ix. For a brief overview of modern interpretation of Ecclesiastes as well as relatively recent proposals for reading the book, see Craig Bartholomew, “Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation

- of Ecclesiastes,” *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 4–20. Cf. as well idem, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutic Theory*, Analecta Biblica 139 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998).
25. Bartholomew, “Qoheleth in the Canon?” 13.
 26. R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament*, BZAW 135 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 67.
 27. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 191. Moreover, Scott writes, “In Ecclesiastes God is not only unknown to man through revelation; he is unknowable through reason, the only means by which the author believes knowledge is attainable”; the book constitutes “a philosophy of resignation.”
 28. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23.
 29. Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (Dallas: Word, 1992), lviii–lix.
 30. Jaco W. Gericke, “Axiological Assumptions in Qohelet: A Historical-Philosophical Clarification,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33, no. 1 (2012): 6.
 31. Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 1, 6, 135.
 32. While this is my own view, I am somewhat encouraged to find support for it elsewhere. Literary critic Leland Ryken is one of the few who would seem to concur; see his essay, “Ecclesiastes,” which is chapter 19 of *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. L. Ryken and T. Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 268–80. Strangely, in contrast to this rather unfortunate state of affairs, the amount of literature on Ecclesiastes published particularly in the last three decades is extensive, most of which is devoted to matters of form rather than content. Whatever we make of this, treatment of Ecclesiastes in the literature is clearly disproportionate to its understanding and place in the life of the Church.
 33. Perhaps the more ideologically minded among us will approach the text with an “ecological” reading or a “feminist” reading or a “liberationist”/“post-colonial” reading or even an “animal theology” reading. In fact, one commentator does us the “service” of summarizing these very hermeneutical perspectives of the present day as they relate to Ecclesiastes; see Katherine J. Dell, *Interpreting Ecclesiastes: Readers Old and New* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 59–94. Not surprisingly, contemporary “postmodern” readings of the book are inclined to praise the writer’s “heterodoxy,” as if it is some necessary corrective to a dogmatic Christian theology in our day. While indeed Ecclesiastes may serve as a corrective to shallow belief, the sort of “postmodern” readings that are fashionable today tend to be flawed at several levels. In addition to importing meaning and inferences that are foreign to

the text, they tend to be evasive, failing to wrestle with (and discern) the author's literary-rhetorical strategy at work. Jaco W. Gericke, "Qohelet's Concept of Deity: A Comparative-Philosophical Perspective," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 1 (2013): 1–8, is one of the few who make this observation. Gericke specifically—and properly, in my view—takes to task Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 400ff.; and Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM, 1983) for their romanticizing of the writer's supposed deconstruction of religious dogma. Gericke's counsel to such commentators is straightforward: theologically, Ecclesiastes contains "too much that just does not enter into the consumer culture of postmodern God-talk" (2) and that needs an accounting. Whatever one thinks of the broadly "reader-response" approach to reading texts that has been dominant in our generation, it needs emphasizing that the newer interpretations are *no more authoritative or superior* than the "precritical" interpretations against which they are reacting. Simply said, texts cannot mean whatever we wish them to say.

34. That is, Ecclesiastes does not represent events (whether real or fictive) in a time sequence, even when it is true that the book at time reads like a story. I derive this definition of narrative from Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 1. Holding an opposing view are Michael V. Fox, "Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977): 83–106; and Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSS 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
35. Much commentary views these observations as unrelated or disjointed. Representative are Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 17 (1955): 184–94; and Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1968): 313–34.
36. I will simply assume *Qoheleth*, the Hebrew form of the word translated "Preacher" or "Teacher" (1:1, 2), to be the writer; being implied here is one who teaches publicly. However, this essay does not concern itself with questions of authorship, dating, canonicity, literary genre or language—matters that are sufficiently addressed in standard critical commentaries. It attempts, rather, in a very limited fashion to assess the value of wisdom as it informs an important sub-theme in the treatise—that is, the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of human labor—which in particular requires an accounting since *all human activity* is thought to be "meaningless." The significance—indeed, the greatness—of a work such as Ecclesiastes arises less from its form—over which scholars disagree greatly—than its *content*. However, I reject Kreeft's view that "[t]he form of Ecclesiastes is simple, direct, and artless" (Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989], 15). On all three counts Kreeft is mistaken. The writer utilizes reflective narrative, proverbs, comparative sayings, rhetorical questions, autobiographical material and more—not

- to mention techniques such as alliteration, repetition, satire, didactic poetry, and parallelism. In short, the writer is a literary master. Hereon see, for example, John F. Hobbins, "The Poetry of the Book of Qohelet," in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goads: Engaging Ecclesiastes in the 21st Century*, ed. M. J. Boda et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 163–93.
37. In fact, juxtaposition and repetition are two trademarks of Ecclesiastes. Repetition occurs in terms of both vocabulary and phraseology. One means of discerning the message of Ecclesiastes—indeed, of any literary work—is to observe whether any statements recur as a sort of refrain. Indeed, as this essay argues below, this is in fact the case. J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Evangelical Quarterly* 18 (1946): 18–34, which is reproduced in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., ed., *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 133–50, discerns a pattern of refrain in Ecclesiastes but does not develop this sufficiently. Moreover, he says nothing about satisfaction in work, which is a key element in this refrain.
 38. See Ryken, "Ecclesiastes," 269.
 39. Hendry, "Ecclesiastes," 570–71; and Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, 93–94, are among the few commentators to grasp this rhetorical strategy in Ecclesiastes. Otherwise, Scott's famous remark, that "all this sounds like an argument for suicide" (R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs-Ecclesiastes*, 203), is true only if we fail to get the message right.
 40. But if the writer were a real pessimist to the bone, he would have struck a different note throughout the treatise. He would, it seems, have assumed an attitude of disgust, with death serving as *release* from this absurd and cruel world. But such represents neither the tone nor the rhetorical strategy at work.
 41. Thus, for James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth*, BZAW 152 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), internal coherence of Ecclesiastes entails recognition of polarities or "polar structures." Douglas B. Miller, "What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2000): 224–32, describes contradiction or antithesis in the book in terms of "destabilizing" and "restabilizing" the intended audience's belief system. The latter is understood by Miller to be a reconstruction of a world- or life-view as evidenced by the writer's admonitions, most of which appear progressively.
 42. William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014), 150, describes human life, as mirrored in 3:1ff., as something of "a swinging pendulum" based on life's "cycles."

43. The proper way in which to understand “time” here accords with “season”; thus, it should be rendered “occasion” or “appropriate time” (see von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 138–43). The sense of these verses, then, has to do not with a mechanistic or deterministic predestination but rather with human discernment.
44. The writer is here employing the language of proverbs. Every one of these statements, in its form, could appear in the book of Proverbs. The writer comprehends the temporality of human existence in terms of polarity, in the same way as proverbial wisdom does.
45. In the words of one commentator, not only are these pairs contradictory in nature but also they strike us as virtually “paralyzing” (Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 238).
46. Omnipotence and providence are conveyed not only in 3:11 but also in 3:14–15 as well. Past and present are open to God the Sovereign, who stands outside of time.
47. Some commentary translations render the Hebrew *hebel* (lit., “smoke,” “vapor,” or “breath”) as “vanity,” “futility,” or “absurdity,” while other commentators translate it “transience,” “enigmatic,” “incomprehensible,” even “ironic.” Contra Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, ITC (Grand Rapids; Edinburgh: Eerdmans and Handsel Press, 1991), 142, I would argue that the ambiguity and flexibility of the term *hebel* are *not* a chief reason for Ecclesiastes generating such divergent interpretations. Even when the term allows a wide range of inflections, these possibilities are close enough.
48. The book begins and ends with the refrain “Meaningless, meaningless . . . everything is meaningless!” (1:2 and 12:8).
49. To fail to discern this comparative strategy is to lapse into an interpretation—typical of many commentators—that Ecclesiastes is mirroring “a loss of trust in the goodness of God” who, in the end, is “unknowable” (James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, rev. ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998]), 116–17; similarly, Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 283, describes Ecclesiastes as “rigorously hopeless.” Just as extreme are the positions of Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 58, for whom faith as depicted in Ecclesiastes cannot be squared with “the faith of the other biblical writers”; and James A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*, trans. J. Vriend, Text and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 14, who proceeds on the assumption of the book’s “total abandonment of the traditional religious concepts of the Jewish people” and “unvarnished declaration that religious actions, worship, and morality are ultimately irrelevant.” In addition, a failure to discern this strategy also forces upon the interpreter a sort of literary schizophrenia, inasmuch as statements that stand in *blatant*, diametric

opposition are forced to stand side-by-side, only to be resolved by a multiauthored (i.e., multiedited), patchwork explanation, of which Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 255, are merely representative: “the message of the book is not the message of Qoheleth’s speech; it is rather the simple instruction in the last few verses.... What he [Qoheleth] did not have was hope.” Accordingly, Longman unhelpfully is left to posit two theologies in Ecclesiastes: that of Qoheleth and that of the book as a whole (Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 30–32). In a similar vein, Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxxv, declares that the book’s epilogue “is an oversimplification of the book’s message.” The multiauthor/multieditor supposition offered by most commentators is not persuasive. If, for example, several editorial hands were needed to make Ecclesiastes palatable, then Qoheleth was not wise enough in the first place—a conclusion that mirrors among commentators a flawed view of inspiration. A more likely explanation is that the book was written by a wise person who was able to reflect seriously on life’s seeming contradictions (on which, see below). At bottom, the essence of much contemporary literary analysis is to explain away literary and theological dissonance; after all, dissonance creates embarrassment for the reader, and Ecclesiastes is the most embarrassing of literary texts. One very simple literary prerequisite remains on the “endangered list,” as one astute observer has noted, and that is “the naïve and linear or sequential reading of the text itself” (Theodore A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993], xii).

50. Contra much standard commentary on Ecclesiastes, the writer is not “debating with himself” or on some sort of philosophical “journey.”
51. The writer’s argument or “defense,” however, is directed not so much against other religions or against “religious pluralism” as it is against a wider outlook on life that, to be sure, is religious, theological, and philosophical in its assumptions about ultimate reality.
52. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44. Eaton’s interpretation finds support from Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” 570, who observes—correctly, in my view—that “Qoheleth writes from concealed premises” and that Ecclesiastes is in reality a work of “apologetic theology.”
53. Hendry, “Ecclesiastes,” 570.
54. See Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 15, and Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 19–24, 159–80.
55. Complicating the reader’s task, as T. M. Moore has well noted, is the fact that the writer’s literary arsenal includes irony, diatribe, and *reductio ad absurdum* (*Ecclesiastes: Ancient Wisdom When All Else Fails* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 12).
56. Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 227–37, is one of the few commentators both to acknowledge a literary unity in Ecclesiastes and recognize the interplay of these three themes.

57. The sense of the “eternal” that God has placed within the human heart may be understood in two fundamental, corresponding ways: first, as basic knowledge of the creator, of self, and of moral accountability—that is, that which accords with the natural law, the law “written on their hearts” (Rom. 2:14–15)—and, second, as a certain awareness of or yearning after meaning and purpose. Both aspects are anchored in our having been created in the image of God.
58. For example, on the one hand Ecclesiastes insists that wisdom is meaningless, like chasing the wind, and on the other hand extols wisdom in a number of places. Both of these viewpoints, at face value, cannot be correct—unless, that is, they are part of a literary strategy at work. In Ecclesiastes, “conventional” wisdom and wisdom as a gift of God are being juxtaposed.
59. Hence, we must reject the conclusion of Jerome T. Walsh, “Despair as a Theological Virtue in the Spirituality of Ecclesiastes,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982): 46–49, whose mistaken interpretation—an interpretation that is representative, to be sure—fails to discern juxtaposition at work and ignores the progressively building admonitions in the book toward enjoyment. According to Walsh, the writer’s “world-weary cynicism” and “near agnosticism” mirror an “acceptance” of despair’s “permanence.”
60. So, for example, Daniel Lys, *L’Ecclésiaste ou Que vaut la vie? Traduction; Introduction générale; Commentaire de 1/1 à 4/3* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1977), 78; and Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 57.
61. Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 214.
62. While this is my own view, I discover that Eaton (*Ecclesiastes*, 47) and Rylaarsdam (*Revelation*, 18–46) stand in fundamental agreement.
63. Suffering and human limitation, such as one finds in Job and Ecclesiastes, are part of the wisdom perspective, even when they are not the *whole* of it. Mystery and divine inscrutability remain at the end of both books.
64. Again, as noted earlier we may assume the position that theology is *implicit* in Ecclesiastes rather than explicit. This accords with Old Testament wisdom literature in general. Theology in the strictest sense is not the focus of wisdom literature, and where it does speak of God it is no specifically theological discourse; here God’s depiction stereotypically stands in contrast to human beings—Creator and the creature. On theology’s implicit character in wisdom literature, see Westermann’s remarks on “Wisdom and Theology” in *Roots of Wisdom*, 131.
65. To say that God is “hidden” is not to argue that God is “in hiding” or utterly unknowable, contra Walsh, “Despair as a Theological Virtue,” 47. Historic Christian belief affirms that it *is* possible to confess—and experience—that God is in part knowable, even when he seems “hidden” and his works are inscrutable. Even in the Old

Covenant, the psalmist's confession can be understood as normative: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). This "knowing," though veiled, to be sure, is a mark of the New Covenant (John 17:3; 1 John 2:3).

66. Ecclesiastes reminds us that God seems "arbitrary" when we have preconceived notions of what he is like or what he should do.
67. Notice that suffering and evil are not the main thrust of lament in Ecclesiastes, as is widely thought to animate Job; rather, it is God's incommensurability and the meaninglessness of all things apart from providence. In the same vein, the book of Ecclesiastes cannot be claimed to be a "determinist" treatise which undermines "free will"; that is not the argument at hand, contra D. Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSS 316 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). Divine inscrutability in no way negates the glorious realm of human freedom.
68. On this grounds, we can reject the position of Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt* (London: SCM, 1983), 201, who asserts that Ecclesiastes "rejects much that lies close to the beating heart of Israel's faith."
69. Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 15–17 is one of the few who understands Ecclesiastes to depict God in essentially three ways. I diverge in collapsing Kidner's second and third divine features—sovereignty and inscrutability—into one (my second) while adding judgment as a third. See as well Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 95–79.
70. Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999), 136–38, emphasis added.
71. Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2011), 116, 210.
72. In the words of Packer, "the inscrutable God of providence is the wise and gracious God of creation and redemption" (J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, rev. ed. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993], 107).
73. Graham S. Ogden, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.
74. Eunhy P. Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric*, BZAW 353 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).
75. Indeed, these responses are what we find most often in the Psalms.
76. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 129, even describes joy in Ecclesiastes as "God's categorical imperative for man." The God of Qoheleth and the Allah of Mohammed are *not* at all closely related, contra Paterson, *The Book That Is Alive*, 145.

77. Ecclesiastes distinguishes between a wisdom that emanates from the fear of God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; and 12:13) and an autonomous or self-sufficient wisdom “under the sun” which, in the end, is futile (1:12–16).
78. Contra Longman, for example, who writes that “it is hard to disagree with the majority of scholars who detect resignation, sadness and frustration in these [enjoyment] passages. In other words, the gist of Qohelet’s thinking is that since life is difficult and then comes death, we should eke out of life whatever we can” (Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017], 35).
79. Ryken, “Ecclesiastes,” 269–70, identifies fifteen negative sections of material in the book and thirteen positive sections, even when greater length is devoted to the former. Thus, we are justified in calling “enjoyment” a prominent theme in terms of literary strategy.
80. Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *The Bible Translator* 38, no. 3 (1987): 301–6.
81. R. N. Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 186. In addition to Whybray, see also Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes* (New York: United Bible Society, 1997), 4, who identify “good” as a catchword in Ecclesiastes.
82. On this important distinction, see Whybray, *The Good Life*, 204–5.
83. Contra *inter alia* Walsh, “Despair as a Theological Virtue,” 46, who writes that the writer “perceives no correlation between moral goodness and prosperity” and that “there is no goodness in life.”
84. This fundamental assumption undergirds R. N. Whybray’s commentary *Ecclesiastes*, OTG (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), and his essay “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 87–98.
85. As a theological theme, joy in Ecclesiastes has received relatively little attention in the literature. Exceptions to this are Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy”; Whybray, *The Good Life*; Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 3–9, 123–39; and Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 14, 22.
86. In Ecclesiastes, the noun form occurs twenty times and the verb form fourteen times; altogether, the fact of thirty-four occurrences is significant.
87. Whereas Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 64, and idem, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 87–98, points to seven allusions to enjoyment in the book, Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*, identifies eight. I follow Lee in terms of structure.

88. The Hebrew noun *simhāh* is perhaps best rendered “contentment” in the rabbinic sense of being “happy with one’s lot” (cf. 5:19); see Perry, *Dialogues with Ecclesiastes*, 31.
89. One cannot have it both ways in one’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes; either God “teases, taunts, and tortures” humans as a “distant” and “harsh” God, or he gives the “gifts” of life, wisdom, and contentment.
90. In fact, Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 236, argues that Qoheleth indeed “ascribes evil to God,” “accuses God,” and “questions God’s justice.”
91. It is standard in most commentaries on Ecclesiastes to compare verses 7–10 with the Epic of Gilgamesh, two millennia earlier. However, absent from various ancient Near Eastern parallels is the commendation of work. Ancient cultures as well as classical Greco-Roman culture did not view work in this way. Such a portrait of human labor is peculiarly Judeo-Christian.
92. Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 72.
93. Thus Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 59.
94. See Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the ‘Nothing Is Better’ Form,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 3 (1979): 339–50; and idem, “Qoheleth’s Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *Vetus Testamentum* 34, no. 1 (1984): 27–38.
95. Brown, *Wisdom’s Wonder*, 169.
96. Hereon see William. P. Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do: Qoheleth’s Work Ethic,” *Interpretation* 55, no. 3 (2000): 273.
97. Remarkably, this negative interpretation and misreading of the text is typical of standard Ecclesiastes commentary. Representative is Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 106–10, 123, 168–69, 221, and 230–31.
98. The secret of work as portrayed in Ecclesiastes lies in “recognizing that one works not for self-gain but for the thrill of applying one’s gifts and talents for the sake of another” (Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 130). And, we may add, to please the heart of God.
99. Thus, Ecclesiastes has not “lost something that was characteristic of Hebrew thought and piety in an earlier period,” contra Paterson, *The Book That Is Alive*, 143. Nor is the enjoyment found in Ecclesiastes the standard utilitarian “living for the moment” or a state located somewhere between zeal and resignation (“Enjoy yourself if possible”).
100. See Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 139.
101. Thus, for example, Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 39) describes inscrutability in terms of “desperate trickery.” Inscrutability, it needs emphasizing, is not *injustice*. To fail to grasp God’s works and God’s purposes does *not* mean that God is harsh or malevolent.

102. Hence, the message of Ecclesiastes is not merely about “seeking,” important as that is. Such a conclusion, while containing a partial truth, is deficient.
103. Cf. Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; and 15:33. The fear of God, in any event, as a theme is at home in the wisdom tradition, as indicated by the Old Testament book of Proverbs (e.g., 1:7; 9:10; 14:26, 27; 15:33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17; and 28:14).
104. See, properly, Ryan P. O’Dowd, “Epistemology in Ecclesiastes,” in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, ed. M. J. Boda et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 216.
105. Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do,” 279.
106. Most people will perhaps recognize this expression from the 1938 poem of the same name by Robert Frost, if not from the first-century BC Roman poet Horace.
107. Even at a more basic level, one typically will not hear sermons and teaching that attempt to reconcile the realities of joy and the fear of God. One can only explain this phenomenon on the basis of theological illiteracy that inhabits the pulpit and the church’s leadership.
108. Moreover, my interpretation assumes a difference between despair or resignation and hardship or suffering.
109. On this interpretation, Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*, 13–48, gets it right.
110. Not many commentators seem prepared to wrestle adequately with this tension; those who do include, to some degree, Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*, as well as Whybray, Ogden, and Lee.
111. After all, hedonists, gluttons, and workaholics tend not to reflect on God’s wisdom and his good gifts.
112. See Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 121.
113. Hereon see Iain W. Provan, “Fresh Perspectives on Ecclesiastes: ‘Qohelet for Today,’” and Daniel C. Fredericks, “Preaching Qohelet,” in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goads: Engaging Ecclesiastes in the 21st Century*, ed. M. J. Boda et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 401–16 and 417–42 respectively.
114. Particularly in our day, science tends to replace the human need for wisdom. But science is incapable of producing wisdom. Wisdom cannot be manufactured; rather, it must *grow*. In the end, wisdom makes us aware of our limits.
115. Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes; Lectures on the Song of Solomon; Treatise on the Last Words of David*, in *Luther’s Works, Volume 15* [hereafter *LW*], ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 4.

116. See *Patrologia Series Latina*, vol. 23, 1009–12. For an English translation, thereof, see St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, ACW (New York and Mahwah: Newman Press, 2012).
117. The creation order for Jerome is not “good” in an ontological sense or in the sense that Reformed theologians would understand creation; rather, it is “vanity,” based on Eccl. 1:2 and 12:8. According to E. Kallas, *Ecclesiastes: Traditum et fides evangelica. The Ecclesiastes Commentaries of Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and Johannes Brenz Considered within the History of Interpretation* (PhD Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1979), whose definitive study explores Ecclesiastes interpretation from Jerome down to the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers, no medieval exegete challenged Jerome’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes.
118. Luther, *LW* 15:4.
119. Luther, *LW* 15:4.
120. Luther, *LW* 15:9, emphasis added.
121. Luther, *LW* 15:7.
122. Luther, *LW* 15:8. Discontentment, according to Luther, is “always looking for something that is lacking” (11).
123. Hereon see John C. Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012). While an examination of the reason for Christians’ and churches’ false dichotomizing of the “sacred” and the “secular” goes beyond the scope of this essay, much of the blame for this split-thinking resides with pastors and Christian leaders, and hence, pastoral and priestly training institutions (namely, divinity schools and seminaries). Most pastors and priests are either indifferent to or intimidated by the fact that their congregants need to be equipped for the *workplace*. For example, in evangelically minded churches, the chief emphasis of most teaching and preaching is *private*—as opposed to *public*—faith, that is, what God does *in* me rather than what God wishes to do *through* me. And the fact of the matter is that most pastors have never spent a significant season of their lives working in the marketplace; hence an inability to empathize, and therefore, the absence of regular teaching and preaching that would equip 99 percent of their congregations for the challenges of the workplace.