

Ecclesiastes: Preacher of Surprising Joy

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Session 5/5

Landing the plane

- Introduction
- What is hebel?
- Good news of Qohelet – Joy
- Good news of Qohelet – Reverence
- **Qohelet and/or/versus? Christ**

What is the question?

- How we read/interpret/apply Ecclesiastes?
- In light of our Christian faith?
 - Revelation of God in Christ Jesus
 - New Testament
 - Christian tradition
 - “By recognizing the book’s canonical status one must concede that Ecclesiastes has something *integral* to say about faith seeking understanding” (William Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 122)

Why do we need to ask?

- New Testament as divinely inspired *midrash*
- Continuity and discontinuity
- Discontinuity
 - Many statements in Ecclesiastes are contradicted by New Testament?
 - apparent discontinuities
 - in tension or contradiction with New Testament?
 - “The temptation to treat Qohelet merely as a foil for the Gospel message is a deficient and dangerous perspective in need of rehabilitation” (Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 121)

Discontinuities with New Testament

- Eccl 3:19-21 – all go to the same place
- Eccl 9:1-2 – all share a common destiny
 - unclear what this is
- Eccl 9:10 – all go to the grave (Sheol)
 - no work planning or wisdom
- this life is (not) all we get
- (not) everyone goes to the same place
- “Death is real... and Qohelet reminds the church that its veracity is in no way undercut by the Resurrection” (Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 123)

Tensions within Ecclesiastes

- Eccl 11:19 – God will bring us to judgment
 - what? how? when?
- Eccl 12:11-14 – God will judge every deed
 - how? when?
- how did Israelite religion understand (a) life beyond death (b) judgment?
 - 450-350 BC? Persian period
 - 900 BC? Solomonic period
- Eccl 3:11-14 – cannot know or change what God does
 - intercessory prayer? lament? Revelation?

Small group work

- 1) Luke 12:13-21 – parable of rich fool
 - 1) Eccl 6:1-6
 - 2) Eccl 9:1-10, 12
- 2) Luke 22:23-34 – do not worry about material things
 - 1) Eccl 3:12-13
 - 2) Eccl 5:18-20
- 3) Matthew 6:25-34 – do not worry about material things
 - 1) Eccl 3:12-13
 - 2) Eccl 5:18-20
- 4) Matthew 5:33-37
 - 1) Eccl 5:2-6
- 5) Luke 16:1-13 – parable of dishonest manager
 - 1) Eccl 11:1-6

Questions to ask

- How does Jesus agree with Ecclesiastes?
- Does Jesus disagree with Ecclesiastes?
- Does Jesus add to or change what he borrows(?) from Ecclesiastes?
- (If Jesus echoes/repeats/borrows Ecclesiastes why no direct quotes?)

Just a sampling

- Sermon on the Mount
 - life in its bare essentials
- Temptation
 - life reduced to its bare essentials
 - but what about *food*?
 - “It is very possible that James and Paul, if not the Gospel writers and Jesus himself, were stepped in the language and ethos of this canonical misfit [Ecclesiastes]” (Brown, 136)
 - “Qohelet makes the move from misery to mystery without falling into the pit of despair” (137)

Christ *and* Qohelet

- Jesus did not speak in a vacuum
 - Old Testament background of what he says and does
 - affirm, confirm, fulfill, reinterpret, update, challenge, correct, transform
- Jesus = authoritative interpreter of Scripture
 - (re)interpreted by not abolished
 - God gave it to us for a reason
- Where the New has the Old in mind
 - we can understand the New Testament better
- Ben Witherington III, *Jesus The Sage*

What else in New Testament?

- Paul
 - content in all circumstances
 - faith = radical trust ~ *reverence*?
 - formation of *character* (Spirit) > rules and laws
 - who are are
 - “rejoice in the Lord always”
- Book of James
 - New Testament wisdom book

KWL

- What did we *learn*?
- Small group reflection
 - What in Ecclesiastes difficult to understand or accept?
 - What would be missing from Bible without Ecclesiastes?
 - What in Ecclesiastes most important to *you*?

William Brown

- Yes, that's a good question, and a central one canonically. I've always brought Ecclesiastes in connection with Romans 8:20 about creation "subjected to futility," since the Greek word for "futility" (mataiotes) carries with it the sense of hebel (it's what the LXX uses to translate it). So Paul begins his famous passage by acknowledging the kind of world Qoheleth finds himself, a transient, futile, absurd world, in short, hebel. But Paul sees beyond Qoheleth's world, one redeemed and consummated in Christ. But that hasn't happened yet. It exists in hope (end of v. 20). Paul moves from "futility" to "groaning" (v. 22), and insofar creation remains groaning, Qoheleth's message still pertains. Yes, in Christ, we have eternal life, but we also die, painfully so. We remain finite, and so this life remains vitally important as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

William Brown (cont)

- Perhaps I would put it at the other extreme: if we were indeed fully redeemed right now, then I would grant Qoheleth's overall message would be undermined or better made obsolete. But we are still works in progress in a world wracked by hebel; indeed, the world remains God's work in progress. In Christ, we have hope that hebel has been overcome; it is not the final word, not does it constitute the final world, but it still persists here and now. For me, Qoheleth's "ethic" to treasure the moment, to enjoy the simple gifts of food, drink, and companionship is itself a protest against hebel. Qoheleth's minimalist approach to life can be recast in an ethic of Christian hope that sees these moments, which come few and far between, as harbingers of the new creation, of resurrection, of the consummation of life. The "glory" of the moment points to the glory of the future, and the simple gifts of food and drink can become sacramental. Christian faith does not dispense with Qoheleth's message, it simply adds to it and thereby recasts it.

Juicy quotes (cont)

“Joy is not an otherworldly reality deferred until after death. Joy in Christ embraces joy within one’s life, created and sustained by God” (Brown, 127)

“It is precisely God’s nearness that Paul regards as the greatest gift. And it is precisely in the joy of the immanent that Qoheleth most fully discerns God’s gifted presence” (129)

“The secret for Qoheleth 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 without any self-driving expectation of the results” (130)