




# Kohelet's Escape: The Heart Freely Subordinated to Divine Navigation

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## Abstract

It is often claimed that Ecclesiastes constitutes an irremediable enigma which flies in the face of traditional Hebrew cosmology, making the author's intended meaning not much more than a bewildering speculative task. Biblical scholars disagree on just about every aspect of this ancient Hebraic work: authorship, date, structure, narrative framework, and even its connection to a Creator God. This essay utilizes Ballantine's strategic rhetorical perspective to introduce and wade through some of the central controversies and debates about the meaning of Ecclesiastes: Is earthly life meaningful or meaningless? Is there eternal meaning to earthly life or not? Is the earthly life of human beings pointless and futile or not? If the simple pleasures of earthly life are gifts from God, then how can earthly life itself be 'hevel'? and more. Somewhat surprisingly, it concludes that Ecclesiastes is anything but an enigma when viewed rhetorically, and certainly not in contravention of basic Hebraic and Christian biblical principles about the sovereign importance of believing in God and obeying the Commandments, even despite all the trials and tribulations offered by earthly life.

**Keywords:** Kohelet, futility, hevel, Ecclesiastes, rhetorical strategy, narrative framework.

## Introduction

For most people, students and scholars alike, it is fair to say that Kohelet of Ecclesiastes fame is perhaps an enigma. If he's not a mysterious character altogether, then he is certainly difficult to understand with absolute certainty. Is it simply a pessimistic tract on the tragedy of fleshly human existence? Is it a genuine philosophical exercise on the meaning of human existence? Is it an objection against a perceived divine determinism of the universe? Is it a polemic against the arrogance of human wisdom? Is it a deliberate attempt to counter the whole notion of a 'free will' and the deceptive wonder of human reason? Is it a concerted attempt to protect the moral and philosophical boundaries of one's own culture? Just exactly what is it? Surely, the steadfast ambiguity etched into the structure and content of Ecclesiastes opens up the real possibilities of all these questions (Ingram, 2006).

On the other hand, if the ambiguity is an intentional part of the author's rhetorical strategy or narrative frame in order to properly choreograph and legitimize a broader cosmological scheme, as Ballantine (2018) seems to argue, then we can probably speculate as to what would have been the intended purpose with some degree of confidence. Ambiguity built into the meaning of what is said or written may have been pursued for a variety of reasons, but still with specific goals in mind. For example, ambiguity may be planted in the meaning of writing just as much for political reasons of self-protection as for demonstration of philosophical



acumen. Historically speaking, and even in modern times, for example, it is not unheard of for an author to cloud identity for reasons of political safety and security<sup>1</sup>.

It is reasonable to surmise that perhaps there would have been more serious consequences resulting from more clear and overt expressions of intended meaning than what we actually find in Ecclesiastes. It is hard to know with any degree of certainty. Other intentions could have been at work, so the Ecclesiastes reader must be sensitive to this issue from the start in order to achieve a better grasp of the likely intended meaning. Ballentine's view of Ecclesiastes as a uniquely literary-rhetorical exercise is a case in point. In doing so, this perspective underscores the significance of several factors not commonly emphasized in the theological literature on biblical wisdom writings.

He breaks down Kohelet's writing into five primary sections sequentially ordered to reflect his own particular rhetorical view of the origin and nature of Ecclesiastes. The fact that he devotes more than 8 pages of text to the rhetorical strategy that he believes Kohelet consciously employs to convey central messages simply belies that fact. That is to say, Ballentine views Ecclesiastes as a kind of writing organized in form and content by literary tools of persuasion aimed at arriving at the kinds of truths that are created and tested by people in groups or communities, or what may be called social truths – perhaps a particular cultural group or cultural community.

Kohelet's strongly implied purpose for doing so is to promote the introduction and use of such truths within processes of social and political decision-making. In line with the oral traditions in vogue at that time, Kohelet is writing with the concerted political intent to persuade a specific audience about the validity of a specific message implying, of course, that this audience exhibited a perceived need to be persuaded. It also implies that Kohelet had to take great care within his writing not to offend his intended audience, or suffer the consequences of doing so. Ballentine's approach focuses on analysis and evaluation of that specific persuasive message and the literary tools employed to achieve it.

So, then, one of the central abiding questions to ask the author of Ecclesiastes is this: To what extent, if at all, was it written intentionally to influence social and political policy? If it was indeed written for such a purpose to any significant degree, then it was written to persuade powerful social groups who were evidently in a social position to respond publicly without fear and to convert it into policy. On the other hand, perhaps the audience needed to be persuaded for another reason such as, for example, politico-cultural concerns about the long-term indigenous cultural effects of acculturation.

Ballentine begins his introductory remarks by noting the core difference between Kohelet (together with Job) and the rest of the wisdom literature in the Bible. The latter sometimes take circuitous routes to arrive at primary messages, but inevitably come to the same conclusion regarding the meaning of life and the world. There are many things that human beings cannot fully understand nor explain, even given the highest knowledge and the widest experience. Presumably, that's why one has to stop complaining about it and just trust God to take care of it. That's the traditional perspective in the wisdom literature of all that happens in limited human experience regardless of advances in knowledge, technology, skill, experience, or wisdom. By contrast, Kohelet begs to disagree with this conventional view of wisdom, this 'let-God-take-care-of-it' wisdom. Many personal experiences of pain and other human afflictions are not even explicable in rational terms no matter how hard human beings may try with whatever tools at their disposal. For example: Why do the righteous often get wounded or punished for their goodness? Why do children die? Why do the innocent sometimes suffer a worse fate than the guilty? Why is there death? Why do we grow old? No reason nor rhyme, really; it's just a pointless, sickening tragedy called life (Eccl 6:2). No point, really?



Therefore, Kohelet concludes, given that life itself in nature is essentially sickening and tragic, the dead are much more fortunate than the living, and the never-existed are, in fact, happier than both. Setting aside for the moment the implicit creation-is-damned perspective inherent in such a view of earthly life, it represents a strange diversion from traditional Hebraic interpretations of not only the goodness of God and all of God's creation but, more importantly, the emphasis upon God's revelation to human beings. In fact, Kohelet appears to deny all of this by stating categorically God is unknowable through reason and logic.

Yes, reason is the primary means to knowledge, but knowledge itself is not wisdom. That's why terrible things happen under the sun (Eccl 4:2-3), Kohelet reminds us. But all of these words tend not to sound like the words coming out of the mouth of someone who fervently believes in the veracity of Hebrew cosmology. Arguably, it does not sound like the Hebraic conception of God's relationship to the Jewish people, to the world, and even to creation and the cosmos itself, much less from a royal Hebraic king – unless perhaps that king experienced a change of heart towards his own culture or religion or both somewhere along the tortuous path of life's 'futility'. At the very least, this is one credible interpretative option.

### **Authorship, Date, Structure**

This last point brings us to the serious problems involved with determining with certainty the authorship, date, setting, and form of the Ecclesiastes writing. If we are to believe it, the writing itself ascribes authorship to an assembly teacher with a king solely empowered to call forth such an assembly of citizens. But it is also well known that David did not have a son called Kohelet. So, then, from the start authorship of Ecclesiastes becomes a kind of literary fiction – so far as we know. Still, within the writing itself the reader is firmly encouraged to think that the writing is royal in nature and origin (Eccl 1:12-2:11), only to be largely abandoned later for talk or advice given on the basis of personal experience, not royal authority nor borrowed divine wisdom.

More interestingly, when we take a closer look at the form and content of the particular Hebraic language Kohelet utilizes, Ballentine points out that the first thing we might notice is the array of Aramaic and Persian loanwords<sup>2</sup>. It stands to reason that the use of such loanwords by Kohelet strongly suggests that Ecclesiastes was likely written at some point in the late Persian or even Ptolemaic period around 250 BCE, not circa the Solomonic period, although there can be no absolute certainty (Ptolemaic period = 332-330 BCE / Persian period = 550-330 BCE / Solomonic period = 970-931.) To be sure, this is not just a passing point which Ballentine underscores for readers. It does tie together logically with the organizational framework and central themes he discusses, especially the longest section on the central features of Kohelet's intellectual environment (13 pages).

Perhaps that's why there are still so many questions left unanswered about the authorship, date, and structure of Ecclesiastes. Does it have authentic royal or kingly authorship OR was it written by someone pretending to be royal? Is it a work of fiction OR is it based on real personal experiences? Was it written in Jerusalem OR somewhere else in the Arab or Persian world, as the loanwords might suggest? Is it one voice with one perspective speaking throughout OR is it actually different voices speaking from different and conflicting points of view (i.e. multiple authorship)? Many questions, so few certain answers.

### **The Framing Narrative**

Does the framing narrative really concern how to acquire genuine wisdom about the meaning of human life OR is it about how to resign one's self to the literal 'pointlessness' of human life on earth without reference to any source of, let's say, deeper meaning? As a fact of existence, are human beings forever caught between the poem of futility and the poem of death's inevitability in their worldly lives, as Kohelet's two poems might suggest, OR is the meaning of



human existence redeemed from pointlessness by the fear of the Lord or some other sort of divine interventional input? More to the point, is the fear of the Lord truly the beginning of wisdom to Kohelet, OR is that itself nothing more than a pointless or meaningless illusion, too, “chasing after the wind”, as Kohelet might say repeatedly?

What these points, issues, and questions appear to have in common is precious little in logical terms save perhaps profound doubt about the meaning of human existence. The expressions of pessimistic cosmological meaning contained in these questions are depressingly asserted and repeated matter-of-factly many times throughout Ecclesiastes very much like funerary refrains, forced solemn resignations, not freely expressed optimistic celebrations of life, sort of like an endless ‘Taps’ at an eternal funeral. In fact, they are anything but optimistic celebrations of life. It cannot be denied that Kohelet repeats negative meaning expressions over and over again as a dominant writing style interspersed with very little expressions of genuine heartfelt gladness or hopefulness. For Kohelet, just ‘being’ must have been very arduous.

After all, “everything is ... chasing after the wind”, he says many times (Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9). Kohelet constantly states “I don’t know” or “I can’t discover” or “I can’t find” or “I can’t grasp” or some other negative expression to that effect (Eccl 6:10; 7:14, 27; 8:7, 17; 9:1, 10; 10:14; 11:2, 5, 6). Clearly, Kohelet is exasperated with his search for life’s true meaning, if not with his own life. Maybe we should take him seriously at his words; maybe not. When he does arrive at some positive idea about the meaning of life and human existence, it is minimally positive and infused with technical or practical connotations based on personal experience and not a gladly celebrated divine reference point.

It’s difficult to argue that it is a broad, general, comprehensive statement of otherworldly cosmological significance, at least not initially. Rather, it appears to be thoroughly inner-worldly in nature and focus, steeped in the mud of inner worldliness, as it were. Eating, drinking (presumably wine), and experiencing raw pleasure in unending hard work is what Kohelet concludes life’s meaning is all about. The focus of human beings by necessity is limited or restricted by “under the heavens”, unrelated to participation in some divine architectural plan that might secure a place in some kind of ethereal realm.

So, then, logic dictates that when the human focus remains there, “under the heavens”, the meaning of human existence can only be located in eating, drinking, and enjoying hard work. To put it succinctly, it remains solidly ensconced within the bowels of material life. Presumably, that is why Kohelet’s refrain of “there’s nothing better for human beings than to ....” is repeated in varied styles at least seven times. This is much more central to the framing style of Kohelet’s narrative than most of the other dull and dreary pessimistic refrains. Is he actually deliberately trying to make his audience feel the full emotional impact of believing such a philosophy of life, or does he believe it himself? Perhaps readers of Ecclesiastes need to seriously ponder this possibility.

However, even when Kohelet’s refrains move away from relatively dim and dreary expressions containing conclusions about the meaninglessness and pointlessness of human life in all its multi-coloured forms and experiences, that particular meaningfulness is restricted or limited to the material physical world of the ‘here and now’, so to speak. It is not projected into some future angelic transcendental or spiritual state of being to be found somewhere in what might be called an ‘afterlife’.

To Kohelet, it’s the material physical pleasures of the here and now, raw animalistic physiological necessities of eating, drinking, and enjoyment of hard work that represent the meaning of human existence. In fact, later Kohelet adds another physiological pleasure required for propagation of the human species, presumably referring to the actual reproduction of the specifically Hebrew population. This is the point where Kohelet strongly advises



everyone to “cast your bread upon the waters .... for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth” (Eccl 11:1-2). Surely, here Kohelet does not talk for nothing about “the pregnant woman” and “sowing your seed in the morning and .... in the evening” and “follow .... the desires of your eyes” (Eccl 11:1-10).

It is evident that satisfaction of these raw physiological necessities is indeed what represents the meaning of pleasurable human existence according to Kohelet, or is that also a part of Kohelet’s rhetorical strategy? Still, everything else seems an exercise in futility, literally. Kohelet insists that all human endeavour is futile, stating this categorically multiple times in varied forms from the very beginning to the very end of Ecclesiastes. For example: “All is vanity” (Eccl 1:1-2); “all is vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl 1:14); “and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun” (Eccl 2:11); “because everything is futility and striving after wind” (Eccl 2:17); “I have laboured by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity” (Eccl 2:19); “there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity” (Eccl 3:19); “rivalry between a man and his neighbour. This too is vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl 4:4); “he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity” (Eccl 5:10); “what the soul desires. This too is futility and striving after wind” (Eccl 6:9); “I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility” (Eccl 7:15); “there is futility which is done on the earth” Eccl 8:14); “Everything that is to come will be futility” (Eccl 11:8); ‘says the Preacher, “all is vanity” (Eccl 12:8). Do we need greater clarity about the meaning of term futility? I think not.

Given that the term futility is explicitly employed and implicitly referenced in so many other ways throughout Ecclesiastes, perhaps it would be a good idea to provide some brief discussion here about this term’s ancient Hebraic meanings and usages in order to improve our understanding about Kohelet’s particular point of view. All these ceaseless repeated references by Kohelet in Ecclesiastes to concepts indicating or suggesting the meaninglessness of human existence like ‘vanity’, ‘chasing after the wind’, and especially ‘futility’ may all indicate something more than simply literary instruments of persuasion cleverly choreographed to fit a biblical style of writing in vogue at that time.

It should be noted that such references appear to fit very well with other biblical content, not just in form of presentation. These references appeal to more than just the form of Hebraic poetry practiced during biblical times. Interestingly, we find those kinds of references widespread throughout the entire Scripture (Phil 2:15-16; Isaiah 4:4; Eph 4:17; Rom 8:18-21; James 1:11; 4:14; Psalm 60:11; 127:2; 2 Kings 17:15; 1 Samuel 12:21; Jeremiah 16:19; 1 Peter 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:7 - among many explicit and implicit references that can be proffered.)

What all of these references to futility and related concepts appear to be referring to is the futility of worldly pursuits of any kind to provide for the meaning of human existence when such pursuits are not viewed from underneath the umbrella of divine purpose, that is, from outside of God’s umbrella of meaning. The purpose of human existence is much more than the worldly pursuits of human beings, whoever they made be, as individuals, groups, cultures, nations, or otherwise. The main point is this: Without a solid, unshakeable sense of divine purpose, life becomes simply an endurance test filled with endless days of turmoil, troubles, trials, and tribulations, followed inevitably by death.

Without the solid anchor of the Creator God the Father as expounded in Genesis, life becomes empty and meaningless, worthless and futile, aimless existence, existence going nowhere fast, as we might say in modern times. Indeed, Kohelet seems to insinuate that we are meaningless without God, and that is what humanity must face because God the Creator designed and ordained it that way. No choice in the matter, really. Apparently, there are good reasons for the meaning of human existence to have been ordained in this manner despite indifferent or antagonistic anthropomorphic sentiments about the matter. Deny or don’t deny God’s existence, as you wish, to your detriment and folly or to your benefit and wisdom.





Why? It boils down to the relationship of human beings to God the Creator. For Kohelet asks over and over again, how can humanity ever be receptive to God's message of hope through worldly pursuits? It is a highly pertinent foundational principle of authentic biblical Christianity that is just as profoundly significant to modern times as it was to the times in which Kohelet lived, if not more so. Why? The answer is available in Kindergarten Christianity 101: such worldly pursuits and credentials mean little to a sacred sovereign who is not material and fleshly but spiritual in nature, not bound by neither flesh nor time. The only solution is finding God and reaching completeness rather than the futility of life's partiality, exhorts Kohelet. It is not only humanity but indeed all creation that was subjected to futility by God in order to show that apart from God, there is no authentic meaning to creation, to life itself, any life.

### **Rhetorical Strategy**

Ballentine's focus on the rhetorical strategies or devices<sup>3</sup> Kohelet employs throughout Ecclesiastes also implies an underlying cosmological meaning that needs to be fleshed out if we are to adequately understand it. In particular, the term 'pointless' or 'hevel' occurs at least 38 times. In the Hebrew Bible, that represents about 60 % of total occurrences. That's significant, Ballentine suggests, more significant than a crisis of meaning for an individual or the proverbial 'mid-life crisis' in Western terms. It's more significant than a final utterance from an elderly person pessimistically facing death right around the proverbial corner.

That kind of thematic refrain begs a closer look at meaning beyond its surface layers: meaningless, futile, vain, absurd, vapor, chasing after the wind, breath. When something is irremediably 'hevel', it means that it is fleetingly present in the here-and-now moment, gone the next – like human breath, like hot vapor dissipating into the air, like wind blowing through the trees. This is human life, Kohelet insists, and there's nothing that can be done about it. This is the way God ordained it, and it cannot be changed from the beginning to the end of life unless God Himself desires to change it.

In this sense, human life is "a sickening tragedy" (Eccl 6:2), so there's no point (no pun intended) complaining about it. It is the fate of the virtuous and wise just as much as it is the destiny of the foolish and wicked. Therefore, supposedly, fate, chance, and accidental occurrence have just as much opportunity to influence life as does wisdom and rational choice. If death indeed awaits everyone without exception, then it therefore reduces everyone to the same fate indiscriminately.

So, then, if everything in human existence is 'perfectly pointless', as Kohelet asserts, why provide any kind of instructions whatsoever on how to enjoy life if only minimally? Why 'seize the day', as they say, and try to find minimal pleasure in eating, drinking, working hard, sex and reproduction, and youthhood? Even these minimal pleasures are fleeting moments in the trials, tribulations, and pains of human life that grinds relentlessly toward a death which cannot be altered or circumvented by human beings. If God has anything to do with this situation, the human situation of physical 'being', why does He bless them with fleeting moments of minimal joy interspersed here and there in a life afflicted with constant pain and daily bathroom toils? Clearly, there's something more profound than human wisdom to be learned here, Kohelet observes. But what is it? Quite the witty philosopher, this Kohelet.

### **The God Connection**

This is where the mystery of divine providence enters into consideration for understanding Kohelet's point of view beyond the superficial or surface level. For Kohelet, this concerns the doctrine of creation and the reasons why God created human beings and all of creation. It refers to God's initial acts of Creation and God's preservation of that creation. Moreover, this implies quite strongly God's cooperation with everything that happens in that creation as well as his guidance of the universe. Believe it or not, that cooperation includes cooperating with the existence of pleasure and pain, good and evil.



In sum total, divine providence represents the intervention of God in the universe through the acts of Creation. In doing so, God actively and continuously upholds all creaturely existence and the natural order of the universe despite questionable anthropomorphic behaviours to the contrary. To the Hebrew of biblical times, then, God is directing and even helping to recreate every minute detail of human existence and the created universe.

Indeed, how and why God does this is the veritable mystery of divine providence, and the fallen, imperfect nature of human beings makes them incapable of fully comprehending and appreciating this. So, then, what is the wisest and most honest thing to do when faced with the incapacity of human beings to comprehend divine wisdom? According to Kohelet, the best thing for human beings to do is to admit their imperfect status as physical fleshly beings created by God and then to bow in voluntary respectful submission fully entrusting their lives to the God who created them.

Easier said than done, surely. How do they express this respectful, reverential submission to the will of God? Should they spend all their time fighting injustices? In contemporary terms, should we all become merciless social justice warriors? Should they actively get involved in collective actions to pressure for social change? Should human beings do anything to try to correct the world that God created? Kohelet answers all of these and related questions with a deafening “No!!!”. Why? “God has made (it) crooked”, and what God has made crooked cannot be straightened. The good and the bad times have both been made by God (Eccl 7:13-14). Climate change alarmists beware!

Here one thing is sure, Kohelet is definitely not a Marxist theologian championing for a revolutionary overthrow of an imperfect economic system called capitalism, simply because there is no perfect economic system or any other kind of human-constructed institutional system. Kohelet’s view of the extreme limited nature of fallen, imperfect physical human beings would make these kinds of consciously planned human efforts at idealistic social change drastically misplaced and fated to add even more pain to human life.

Instead, Kohelet insists, human beings should be happy with the small ephemeral joys made available to them by God through active participation in Creation with a sense of reverential awe, appreciation, wonder, humility, and respect for created life. God made it that way, namely, “crooked”, so human misery and injustice, poverty and suffering, trials and tribulations, there will always be in God’s created world. Among other things, this fact certainly makes the serendipitous nature of luck or good fortune a possibility and, therefore, celebration of it by human beings also possible.

However, it’s also important to remember while walking along the various roads of life that God is not a dictator nor terrorist from Kohelet’s point of view. Human beings are not asked to comply with God’s will because getting the Creator dictator angry by not doing so invites hardship or terror into your life. God the Creator doesn’t dictate cowardly submission to divine malice and control. In Kohelet’s conception of the divine being, there is no bully divine God neither inside nor outside of biblical text.

God the Creator simply wants human beings to willingly participate in creation by accepting the few fleeting pleasures that are offered in hard work, eating, drinking, reproduction, and youth, nothing more because nothing more than this matters to God, and nothing much more than this has been ordained by God. Human beings are to reverentially accept participating in God’s created life without options or choices to do otherwise. Willingly submit to God’s rules of the game is what is required. To try to make sense of all this with our limited, imperfect human natures is not only futile, but invites disaster. It is bad business for a wise man to do, a most “grievous task” (1;13; 4:8).



Nobody can understand what God is doing or why, so it's pointedly futile even to try. For Kohelet, God appears to exist in some incomprehensible transcendental dimension where space, time, and the other aspects of physical fleshly material life do not operate. Therefore, trying to bridge the yawning gap between God and human existence is the first and most profound exercise in futility with nothing but painful consequences waiting for those who arrogantly and pridefully attempt to do so. Contrary to popular religious belief inside and outside of the Bible, God is not understandable since "God is in heaven, but you are on earth" (Eccl 5:2).

There is a huge chasm at the human-divine frontier, and that chasm requires reverential respect and humility. Why risk potential retaliation by God for saying the wrong word or offering the inadequate sacrifice or making the wrong prayer? "It's more acceptable to listen" when you go into "God's house", Kohelet cautions (Eccl 5:1). Don't try to understand or to "know" God because this cannot be grasped even by wise men, he keeps insisting. Self-professed wise men who try to do so are only deceiving themselves and others. What's worse, often the claim of 'knowing what God wants' or 'what God is thinking' is utilized for nefarious purposes by human beings seeking power, wealth, and influence.

It goes without saying, then, that this categorical commentary and advice by Kohelet has severe implications for our understanding of the traditional wisdom literature. In fact, Kohelet's point of view questions not only the entire wisdom enterprise in the Bible as being effectively misplaced. (It also functions to re-think our conventional understanding of mission in the Christian faith, which is another story altogether waiting to be told!) In any case, God has denied human beings this kind of understanding.

On the other hand, within our hearts God has written His signature in the form of a memory of our former spiritual nature and hence communion with divinity, just to remind us of the divine status we once held. However, this divinity we can only imagine or speculate about in our present state. Since we can only imagine the infinity of divinity, we can never really grasp that either because as soon as we do it dissipates into thin air like Kohelet's vapor of a breath, like the pursuit of all other human knowledge.

So, then, Kohelet's point of view seems to beg the question of God's specific rationale for creating human beings doomed to failure by their own limited capacities for knowledge and wisdom. Is God some kind of morbid Creator who takes great pleasure in torturing created beings with imperfect life? Is this what He intended to create? The Bible itself seems to take a different view.

The entire wisdom tradition in the Bible assumes that God created a stable, ordered universe operating according to divinely ordained rules, what Ballentine refers to as a moral system of order based on cause and effect. The cause-and-effect moral system also applies to human actions, not just the natural world and the created universe. This means that order in nature, in the universe, and in human life is maintained by divine rules of creation, not by humanly-devised laws or political systems. Like in nature and in the universe, human actions have ordained appropriate consequences.

Presumably, good human actions are supposed to have good results while bad human actions yield bad results. Within this cosmological framework everything is discernible and understandable. The cause of misfortune can be identified and corrected to restore the moral equilibrium or stable order ordained by God. In other words, undeniably human agency is moral agency by definition within this framework. But it seems that Kohelet begs to differ with this particular cosmological perspective. If what happens in life to everyone is not explainable by human reason or logic, and fate, logic, chance, and accident play a greater role than presumed or expected, then everything is 'perfectly pointless', asserts Kohelet.





Human beings cannot understand God and what He does, nor influence God by, for example, engaging in ethical behaviour. As mentioned earlier, the gap between God and human beings cannot be bridged. “Whatever God does, God does”, Kohelet asserts flatly (Eccl 3:14). According to Kohelet, then, human beings can have no moral agency. Whatever happened to the necessity of showing the humility of reverence when standing before God?

When Kohelet talks about God, it's not a loving and humble feeling of reverence that comes across but, rather, a forced-by-circumstances submission or fearful resignation before inscrutable divine authority that shines forth. Therefore, it makes penultimate sense for Ballentine to ask what kind of audience would have been receptive to this kind of dim cosmological message when compared with the stable unchanging moral order infused within the Bible and especially the wisdom tradition within it in general?

### **Some Cultural Sources of Kohelet's Paradigm**

Kohelet's radically dissonant perspective on God and human existence needs to be understood from a contextual point of view. In order to accomplish this feat, Ballentine argues that we must place the Ecclesiastes writings within an appropriate historical context. We must become intimately familiar with the cultural milieu within which they were written. The culture at that time was set into place by the policies of the Ptolemaic rulers that had succeeded Alexander the Great. These Ptolemaic rulers had constructed a vast bureaucracy through which they spread Greek values and traditions throughout the empire, including Judah. Combined with a commerce system that was fueled by officially minted coins, well-connected Jews could become very wealthy during these times. The smell of grand riches often sparks unexpected departures from traditional religious beliefs and cultural mores.

However, great economic opportunity to make lots of money also brings with it many risks, as in any other economy. The predictability of stable economic activities could lead to great uncertainties and instabilities especially if the trade practices that generate wealth and accumulation get interrupted by war, bureaucratic ineptness, or any other unpredictable factor. But this much is sure, Kohelet lived and wrote in a very prosperous Judah under Ptolemaic cultural policies at the time of writing, a Ptolemaic, highly materialistic mercantile world where everything was assessed and evaluated for its commodity values of costs and benefits, profit and loss. Conceivably, Kohelet is perhaps responding cosmologically to the perceived pointlessness of this hardcore Ptolemaic world of mercantilism and materialism, and accordingly sounding the cultural alarm bells to his brethren.

Kohelet's constant radical dissonant questioning of and epistemological struggling with established Hebraic cosmology and conventional wisdom traditions may also be reflective of heavy Ptolemaic importations and integration of Hellenistic philosophy into all aspects of Judah culture. Ballentine believes that he can perceive Socratic modes of questioning and expression all over Kohelet's discourse. Socratic inquiry, for example, typically takes the form of employing questions in order to stimulate thought about an issue. However, whereas Socrates suspended judgment until all the questions had been asked, Kohelet has already determined the answers before posing the question (“There's nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9; 3:15; 6:10), Kohelet has already concluded from the star.

Another component of Greek philosophy Kohelet apparently borrows is the form of dialogue that attempts to refute an idea, particularly dialogue with himself. In other words, Kohelet repeatedly talks to himself in the Ecclesiastes writings. The personal pronoun 'I' occurs 29 times and the word 'heart' 42 times. In particular, we must really pay attention when Kohelet combines these two terms while he is talking to himself, especially when he's talking to himself about wisdom and knowledge. His expression is quite telling, to say the least. He says, literally, that he spoke with his heart several times, often enough to suggest much more than just a



fictional diatribe against himself, as well as other similar references such as ‘my heart saw’, ‘gave my heart’, etc.

There’s always an internal clash of different ideas stemming from different paradigms or world views, always concluding in a stalemate in the search for understanding. For example: Pleasure is “madness”, but... (Eccl 2:10-11, 23); Wealth is good, but... (Eccl 5:9, 5:10-14; 6:8; 7:11); Wisdom is better than foolishness, but... (2:3; 7:11, 19; 9:16-18; 10:2-3); God judges the righteous and the wicked, but... (8:12-14; 9:2-3; 11:9); and several more examples could be proffered to demonstrate the cosmological stalemate referred to above.

In his discussion with Theaetetus about exploring the nature of knowledge, Socrates concludes that in the end the only choice one has is indecision, really nothing more than that. This sounds very much like Kohelet’s conclusion about the meaning of life that leaves him drowning in the deepest Greek epistemological waters, drowning in the indecisiveness of options that blur into each other. In fact, a life filled with rational choices simply consists of an endless series of ‘options’, pointless options, when viewed through the lens of Greek cosmology.

Kohelet appears to be struggling to maintain an inherited Hebraic cosmology within a cosmologically hostile cultural environment and doing it in such a politically correct way as to ensure safety and security both for himself and for his people. After all, the author of Ecclesiastes has to consider the likelihood that other Ptolemaic citizens and officials will no doubt read or hear about these writings, so it is likely that the political power factor plays a key role in shaping or influencing the so-called strange, dissonant literary form of Ecclesiastes.

Kohelet appears to borrow freely again (we hope) from Greek philosophy in all of his discussions about pleasure, according to Ballentine. Ostensibly, this is what he means when he repeats emphatically, “Eat, drink, and enjoy” (Eccl 3:13). In Greek philosophy, the purpose of pleasure is the good that it provides. For example, eating reduces hunger, drinking quenches thirst. In other words, pleasure eliminates or reduces discomfort or pain, and in doing so, it refines life and supposedly makes it more agreeable and meaningful.

However, for Kohelet, pleasure is not a benefit that enhances or enlarges life but, rather, it consists of scrap leftovers God has doled out upon humanity’s table after He has extracted just about everything else of value. For Kohelet, ephemeral experiences of fleeting pleasures in a meaningless life are all that’s available. After all, everything that happens is hevel, Kohelet states. The meaning of life is to be measured not by pleasure, as for the Greeks, but by hevel. Again, remember what Kohelet repeats: the search for wisdom is futility. It is reasonable to ask here whether Kohelet is perhaps worried that some of his Jewish brethren are abandoning essential Hebrew values and beliefs and through contact with Greek culture. Is Ecclesiastes really a philosophical debate against acculturation? Kohelet seems to have this concern.

### **Qohelet and the International Search for Wisdom**

Ballentine points out that Kohelet was very familiar with the underlying element of scepticism incorporated in Hellenistic philosophy. Socrates and the Greeks did not originate the search for wisdom, and neither did Kohelet. The international search for wisdom began more than 2,000 years earlier in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and then spread from there to other geographical regions such as India, China, and the Far East. Kohelet in his writings and musings was participating in that very long wisdom tradition comprised of several distinct cultural voices combined. These different voices within the international wisdom community could have easily led to chasms with the Hebrew cultural community which may have led to internal crisis of views about wisdom. Internal crises, if serious enough, can easily lead to cultural downfall.

Perhaps this is why older wisdom texts typically maintain a positive view of the moral order of the world and the role of God in sustaining it. Those who trust the Lord will keep quiet,



whatever the defects of human understanding, because God will take care of everything. It's not that human beings shouldn't care or don't care; the point is that their faith in God should be the penultimate concern, not the beneficence of human rulers nor human institutional systems.

Evidently, Kohelet finds this orthodox Hebraic view of the moral order established by God unsatisfying and inadequate in terms of what really happens in human life, namely, chaos, foolishness, madness ... in a word, hebel. Orthodoxy's claim to absolute truth is fractured by Kohelet's Greek skepticism and downright pessimism. Since this constant implicit questioning of the absolute truth in God's moral order was also happening in varied forms and styles in Mesopotamia and other regions around the world, perhaps Kohelet's point of view was not alone. Perhaps that's where the real target audience of Ecclesiastes is to be found. But then, perhaps not.

### **Conclusion: Kohelet's ... end of the matter**

It's somewhat revealing that the word 'all' occurs more than 90 times in Ecclesiastes. Now that 'all' has been said and 'all' has been heard, proclaims the epilogist, we have now come to 'the end of the matter'. However, when we look at the rhetorical strategy that is utilized at the conclusion, we find that the hebel motif (a.k.a. 'perfectly pointless') that dominated throughout Ecclesiastes suddenly recedes and gives way to three references to God attached with strict instructions for pious reverence.

These noticeable differences still go a bit further, making it rather plain that the author intentionally incorporated them when framing his narrative. The words 'hebel' and 'God' struggle for almost equivalent dominance of reference throughout Ecclesiastes, but in the final verses God wins out, so to speak. 'Pointless' human existence genuflects to the direction of divine purpose<sup>4</sup>. That's just the way that God made the world – crooked. Nothing you can do about it, so resign yourself to be happy with your life and the way things are (Wright, 2003, p. 108). Statistical frequency of words is no longer relevant. Life is no longer a set of options in a pointless or useless human existence. Goodbye to the Greek Socrates, hello to the Hebrew Yahweh.

It's left up to the reader to decide what Kohelet really feels about the meaning of life. After all, Kohelet is a master of ambiguity (Ingram, 2006), is he not? In this sense, it seems to be the rhetorical strategy of Ecclesiastes to raise more questions than what are answered. From Kohelet's point of view, the endless raising of questions itself is an exercise in futility. Is human life really pointless OR is its meaning hidden and secure in the hands of a righteous almighty Creator? Kohelet's answer seems to be yet another question: how can a person really know one way or the other? To Kohelet, this last question is more important than the first. He leaves us (intentionally) with two different views on this question, each relying on different sources.

The first perspective relies on autonomous epistemology<sup>5</sup> to arrive at an answer, better known as the autonomy of human reason within Greek philosophy. Rather than ancestral wisdom, Kohelet relies on personal experiences and observations, acquiring knowledge independently by observing with his own eyes and thinking his own thoughts. Even if he cannot find the answers he's looking for, he supposedly arrives at his conclusion autonomously or independently without any influence from external authority.

Of course, that's what it sounds like. But is that really what it is? Kohelet's solution is to remove the profound doubt and uncertainty that results from incessant Greek-based questioning that leads nowhere and accomplishes nothing. The truth is the imperative to worship God reverentially and to obey his commandments. In practice, that means emphatically that human beings must subordinate human wisdom and knowledge to divine wisdom. That is simply 'the end of the matter' in the well-choreographed cosmological courtroom drama of Ecclesiastes.



The lasting impression here is that some things just ought not to be questioned, and perhaps God is one of them.

Not to Kohelet any more than to any other believer in God, this doesn't mean that human beings ought to stop the exercise of human questioning immediately, if not sooner. He doesn't believe that too much is lost in the questioning process that should automatically necessitate abandoning it altogether. There is a Kohelet value placed on knowledge gained by utilizing a reasoning process not dependent on some kind of external authority because asking reasonable questions can lead to great discoveries. Kohelet does engage in the search for the infinite within the finite, and curiously ends up finding eternity as God's elusive, faint signature on the human heart, but there nonetheless – which is exactly what he said previously that he couldn't find at all. Still, the question remains: is this realization of God's faint signature also just a part of the framing narrative for rhetorical purposes, or is it genuinely believed?

The final issue which Kohelet's argument presumes is perhaps most relevant to the religious quandaries of contemporary times: Does the human act of questioning the meaning of human existence and the existence of God itself represent the placement of a solid wedge between God and humanity? Does such questioning create a tension or conflict or antagonism between God and human beings foreign to original divine design, foreign to the biblical worldview, as it were? At the very end, Kohelet steps forward with a proposition for relief.

As long as there is fear of the Lord, there will be a subordination of human knowledge and reason to almighty omnipotent divine wisdom recognized or not, and therefore that divine wisdom can perhaps be expected to guide it in the proper direction. In other words, this is what is meant by the humility of the human heart freely subordinated to divine navigation. In a manner of speaking, this is the only real, true escape from Kohelet's 'futility', if only partial. Everything else is smoke and mirrors, as they say.

## Endnotes

1 It goes without saying that authors of any published writings (books, newspaper articles, etc.) may choose to mask their true identity for a great variety of reasons. For example: what they are writing contains socially unacceptable or highly controversial views; they may receive threats of physical harm or be defamed; they may wish to hide their true identity from loved ones; they may wish to avoid fame altogether or deplore unwarranted association; they may want employers or colleagues from scrutinizing them; or they may hide their true identity for personal or technical reasons like they really cannot use their real name for legal reasons, they need a new start in life as another identity, or they want to protect their private lives. By no means do these reasons exhaust the motivations behind authors wanting to hide their true identity, and authors masking their literary productions was not just a characteristic of ancient times. Contemporary society is filled with multiple high-profile examples with up until current times with J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame who took on the pseudonym "Robert Galbraith" when she published a book for adults in 2013 called, "The Cuckoo's Calling" as well as several other writings. But she was not the only author of modern times to mask their identity. The famed Louisa May Alcott who wrote popular stories about love and suspense used the name, "A.M. Barnard"; the well-known Hebrew novelist, Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, who inspired "Fiddler on the Roof", used the pen name "Sholem Aleichem", meaning "peace be with you", for dozens of books; the celebrated Bronte sisters (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne) who wrote masterpieces of Victorian literature, chose to be known as "Currer", "Ellis", and "Acton" Bell in order to avoid perceived gender bias; Benjamin Franklin used the names "Silence Dogwood", "Polly Baker", and "Anthony Afterwit", among others, to publish controversial newspaper opinions, and also used "Richard Saunders" for 25 years to publish "Poor Richard's Almanac"; and even the real identity of "Jonathan Swift" of "Gulliver's Travels" fame is still not known with absolute certainty to this day (Milovanovic, 2022; Deutsch, 2014).

2 Loanwords are words borrowed from a foreign language (sometimes called the donor language) with little or no modification into another language (sometimes called the recipient language). They are usually transliterated between scripts, but not translated per se, and they are commonly adapted to the central structural characteristics of the recipient language (morphology, orthography, phonology, etc.). When this occurs, it is distinguished from the native words of the recipient language solely by its origin. It is often the case, however, that the adaptation to the recipient language is often incomplete and imprecise when viewed from the donor linguistic culture. Several common contemporary 'loanwords' can serve as examples although their meaning is rarely strictly understood from within the donor's perspective. One example that comes readily to mind is the English borrowing of 'Tofu' which is itself a loanword from Mandarin Chinese. Other well-known popular examples are the French loanword 'café' (coffee), the Persian loanword 'bazaar' (market, the German loanword 'kindergarten' (literally 'children's garden'), and the French loanword 'déjà vu' (saw before) (Poplack, 2017; Garland, 1999; Haugen, 1950).

3 In a general sense, rhetorical strategy is simply are simply words or phrase employed to impart meaning and to provoke some kind of response in listeners and readers. But Ballantine's rhetorical perspective adds a political dimension to the strategy by defining it as an attempt to communicate and elicit a specific response in line with the author's viewpoint of meaning whether of



human existence, God, or anything else. So, the element of political purpose and persuasion a key component of the rhetorical strategy applied within Ecclesiastes. It is not necessary for listeners and readers to actually be aware that they are intentionally being persuaded to accept the legitimacy and validity of a particular viewpoint on an issue or topic.

4 In this sense, the expression that God made it crooked can be interpreted as an ancient view of a divinely-designed universe in total conformity with a Hebrew or biblical worldview. There is a strong sense here that human life is pre-determined or designed to be what it is, so stop complaining (Rudman, 2001). If God made it crooked by design, then the implication is that free will is just another 'hevel', more smoke and mirrors, supposedly.

5 As Cunningham and Fitzgerald (1996) pointed out long ago, epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with what can be created as knowledge, where it can be found, and how it advances. Briefly speaking, therefore, autonomous epistemology simply refers to the assertion that in order for an individual to claim independent possession of knowledge, they must at the same time be in full possession of the epistemic materials out of which this knowledge developed (Dragos, 2019).

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