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A TEXT-DRIVEN METHODOLOGY FOR PREACHING ECCLESIASTES

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Abstract: In the recent past, homileticians have demanded that good biblical preaching should be expository—preachers open the Scriptures and let the Scriptures speak so that the sermon communicates to the audience the meaning of the text and why it matters. In this sense, expository goes beyond just a type of preaching as older preaching textbooks taught; it becomes a philosophy that guides the preachers. However, practically, some preachers maintained expository preaching as a type—characterized by finding three points or more from a pericope of Scripture and preaching that. The challenge with this understanding of expository is that books of the Bible, such as Proverbs and portions of Ecclesiastes, are not easily breakable into pericopes and do not necessarily lend themselves to three or four points. This misunderstanding of expository as a philosophy led some homileticians to coin the term "text-driven preaching." In this case, the sermon does not force a structure on the text; instead, the sermon is a re-presentation of the text based on its structure, substance and spirit. Preaching thus will vary the sermon as the text of the Scriptures was written with different genres. This article explore some of the complexities of Ecclesiastes, and suggest a text-driven methodology for preaching from the book of Ecclesiastes.

Keywords: *Expository preaching, pericope, Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth*

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Introduction

Scholars have engaged in endless discussions on the relevance and meaning of the Hebrew wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes, and the purpose of its inclusion in the biblical canon. Tanhum, an ancient rabbi, commented that not only does the wisdom of Qoheleth,[1] the Teacher, contradicts classical wisdom; but also Qoheleth contradicts himself.[2] The seeming contradiction within the book has attracted endless discussions. Recent scholars have commented on the repeated reference of הֶבֶל, *hevel*, vanity, meaningless, enigma, or transient and have argued that Ecclesiastes expresses skepticism, pessimism, and absurdity.[3] Even more recently, Ellen Davis, in consonance with older scholars, observes that perhaps the greatest of the surprises which Ecclesiastes poses is its inclusion in the Bible despite its seeming contradiction to the rest of the teaching of the Bible.[4]

This research does not attempt to solve the riddle and contradiction which Ecclesiastes poses. Commentators and authors have poured on the peculiarity of Ecclesiastes, its dating, authorship, language, contradictions, its cynicism, its relevance among other issues.[5] Instead, this paper attempts a methodology for preaching Ecclesiastes.

[1] This paper will use the Hebrew term קֹהֶלֶת, *Qoheleth* to refer to the major character within Ecclesiastes. The word could mean Teacher, Preacher, Leader of the Assembly, Speaker of the Assembly. Variations in interpretations are the reason why this paper has chosen to maintain the transliterated form of the Hebrew term.

[2] Rabbi Tanhum, *Mishnah Shabbat*, cited in Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 27.

[3] R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965), 192; James L. Crenshaaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 23.

[4] Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 159.

[5] Antoon Schoors has some 66 pages dedicated to bibliography on Ecclesiastes alone. See Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Lueven, Belgium: 2013), xxi-lxvi.

Traditionally, Ecclesiastes has been attributed to Solomonic authorship. However, recent scholarship have rejected Solomonic authorship on the following grounds. Scholars have argued for a second century dating; raised linguistic and concept objections, noting that some of the laments in the book does not befit a king but a commoner; hence, it could not have been Solomon. However, some scholars still defend Solomonic authorship. Gordis notes that had Ecclesiastes been second century, it probably would not be canonized. Based on Solomon's reputation for wisdom, Wright posits that the possibility of a wisdom court where Solomon listened, collected, and added a God-fearing perspective to the literature of other wise men from

This paper argues that preaching through Ecclesiastes while not jettisoning its contradictory nuances requires that the preacher approach the book as narrative wisdom.[6] The question this paper seeks to answer is how the preacher can exegete the apparent pessimism within the text while not abandoning the overarching theological truth it seeks to convey. The paper will employ a text-driven approach to provide a methodology for preaching through Ecclesiastes.[7] Hence, the following sections will consider the overarching message of Ecclesiastes, the substance of Ecclesiastes, attempt a possible structure for the book, and highlight critical issues for preaching Ecclesiastes.

The Message of Ecclesiastes

This section will attempt to identify the central theme(s) of Ecclesiastes, as this will inform how the preacher approaches the rest of the book. Like other puzzles within Ecclesiastes, determining its central theme has attracted endless discussions. Commentators have suggested from pessimism on one end and joy on the other. Moses Stuart posits the "vanity and nothingness of all earthly efforts, pursuits, and objects" as the great and appropriate theme of the book.[8] While הֶבֶל, *hevel,* appears to be the predominant theme, Qoheleth raises other issues within his exploration that do not necessarily align with הֶבֶל as a central theme. H.L. Ginsberg shares a similar opinion that הֶבֶל, *hevel,* is Qoheleth's message; however, he adds that taking such this position leaves the idea of יִתְרוֹן, *yitron,* "profit" to deal with.[9]

Other scholars having bifurcated the voices within Ecclesiastes have argued that the message of Qoheleth is different from the message of the narrator. Michael V. Fox coined the term "frame narrator" for the voice, which introduces Qoheleth.[10] Tremper Longman III argues that the message of Qoheleth is that life is meaningless because death is inevitable; injustice rules the world, time, and chance happens to everyone. Thus, since life is pointless, people should simply enjoy life.[11] On the other hand, Longman notes that the narrator speaks the message of the fear of God-given Qoheleth's findings.[12] Whereas Fox's succinctly distinguishes between the frame narrator and Qoheleth, Tremper's idea of a separate message which approaches Qoheleth's conclusion as unorthodox, and the frame narrator as orthodox is unwarranted. Although Qoheleth's journey and outcomes seem unusual, Qoheleth already includes in his discourse and exploration the concept of the fear of God (3:14; 5:7); hence, that concept cannot be solely attributed to the frame narrator.[13]

Others have given up the desire to provide a central message for the book and have suggested themes that characterize the book. Thomas Krüger, in his commentary, *Qoheleth*, notes that Ecclesiastes has various levels of contradictions so much so that it becomes difficult for the reader to note a sequential progression of thought. He offers nine themes identifiable within the book, including eating, drinking, and pleasure as the highest good, God and human beings, futility and fleetingness, time and chance, gain and portion, work and toil, wealth and poverty, power and dominion, and wisdom and folly.[14] Text-driven preachers would then have the challenge of scrambling for text within the book that teaches each theme if they follow this approach.

Craig Bartholomew observes that choosing either a הֶבֶל, *hevel,* pole or a *carpe diem*—an affirmation of joy pole, which

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other nations cannot be overruled. Wright concludes in favor of Solomonic authorship on the note that no passages rule out the possibility of Solomonic authorship and commentators who suggest a later date cannot on the criteria for dating. See Robert Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 39-42; J. Stafford Wright, "Introduction to Ecclesiastes" in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes,* ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1994), 159-73.

[6] Like every other concept related to Ecclesiastes, identifying the genre by which scholars can describe it has not been without its own problems. Lohfink argues that Ecclesiastes is a book from the world of education that combines two separate genres: diatribe and palistrophe. Fox argues that Ecclesiastes has a variety of literary forms: proverbs and maxims, autobiography, royal testament, and narrative. Bartholomew examines a variety of scholarly analysis of Ecclesiastes genre and suggests a broader view to the genre of Ecclesiastes which include: first person narrative, royal fiction, pessimistic element in Ecclesiastes, death as a dominant feature, the dialogical dimension in Ecclesiastes, and a frame narrative which borders the book. See Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth* A Continental Commentary. Trans. Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 7-13; Michael V. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes.* (Dulles: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), xii-xiii; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes.* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 73-4. Labeling Ecclesiastes narrative wisdom does not necessarily satisfy all the literary features present in the book. This paper has chosen this to label Ecclesiastes as such because a narrative includes other concept such as the frame narrator, the royal story within the narrative, an autobiography, proverbs and wisdom, and the ranges of emotions which Ecclesiastes include. These concepts are all possible within a narrative, and in this case, this narrative reads as wisdom.

[7] In the recent past, almost every preaching that has three points and is in some way propositional have been labeled expository. In view of that, David Allen and others have coined the term "text-driven" to describe what they mean when they say expository preaching. Text-driven preaching is the interpretation and communication of a biblical text in a sermon that represents the substance, structure, and the spirit of the text. For further discussion on text-driven preaching as a concept see Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Scripture* (Nashville: B&H, 2015) and Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, & Ned L. Mathews, ed. *Text-Driven Preaching* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

[8] Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1864), 21.

[9] H. Louis Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth*, Text and Studies Vol. XVII. (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America: 1950), 1-2.

[10] Michael V. Fox, "Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth," *Hebrew Union College Annual 48* (1977), 83-10.

[11] Temper Longman III, "Preaching Wisdom" in *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* ed. Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, and Laurence A. Turner (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010), 110.

[12] Ibid.

[13] The concept of the frame narrator and Qoheleth will be later discussed within this paper.

[14] Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth*. Trans. O.C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1-5.

scholars have repeatedly done, entraps the reader/scholar in leveling or over-simplifying the message of the book. He further contends that Qoheleth's independent search for knowledge based on what he observed, experienced, and reasoned continually leads him to a *hevel*, meanwhile, Qoheleth frequently juxtaposes this *hevel* conclusion with his *carpe diem* confessions of the goodness of life. In Bartholomew's words, Ecclesiastes "is about the struggles to live with and resolve the agonized tension between these two poles" of *hevel* and *carpe diem*.[15] Murphy shares a similar opinion with Bartholomew that "Ecclesiastes has suffered from excessive summarizing;" however, rather than seeks to find a balance among the seemingly contrasting ideas, like Krüger, Murphy provides a list of ten themes to pursue in Ecclesiastes.[16]

Two authors perhaps come the closest to finding the balance between *hevel* and *carpe diem,* of which Bartholomew speaks and thus provided what seems to be a central idea for the book. Rami Shapiro, a Jewish rabbi, attempts to touch the heart of the book when he notes that Ecclesiastes "is a clear-eyed book about reasonable and modest hope in the face of the indisputable fact that the world and everything in it is always—*always*—passing away."[17] Michael Fox states it more clearly and seems to grasp the balance which Ecclesiastes required when he observed that in Ecclesiastes, the reader finds that "Everything in life is vanity. There is no point in striving too hard for anything, whether wealth or wisdom. It is best simply to enjoy what you have when you have it and to fear God."[18] This paper praises Fox's attempt to tame the hydra-headed concept of a central message for Ecclesiastes and thus accepts and proposes this central theme for preaching through Ecclesiastes.

This section has attempted to crystalize the message of Ecclesiastes. Combining both Qoheleth and the frame narrator's words, Ecclesiastes admonishes its readers that because of the transience and futility of life, they should both enjoy life as a gift of God and fear Him. The next section would consider specific words within the book that form the substance of the book.

Substance of Ecclesiastes

The substance of Ecclesiastes revolves around a variety of words and phrases which Qoheleth employs as he makes his explorative journey. He uses these words repeatedly sometimes as conclusions to his observation or as a refrain to his discourse. Indeed, these words characterize Ecclesiastes and appear in the book more than anywhere else in the Old Testament. Some of these words appear in Ecclesiastes more than they appear anywhere else in Hebrew literature.[19] Commentators have also wrestled with these words in commenting on Ecclesiastes.

Fox lists nine words that Qoheleth uses, which occur more frequently than anywhere else in the Old Testament. These words listed alphabetically are עָמָל, *'amal*, "anxiety," עשׂה, *'asah*, "work," חֵלֶק, *ḥelek*, "portion, possession," הֶבֶל, *hevel*,[20] חָכְמָה, *ḥokmah*, "wisdom," רַעְוּת רוּחַ, *re'ut ruaḥ*, "chasing of wind," שָׂמַח, *samaḥ*, (שִׂמְחָה, *simḥah*), "joy, enjoy" טוֹב, *tov*, "good" and יִתְרוֹן, *yitron* "profit."[21] Shapiro has a similar list with the inclusion of three other phrases: הָאֱלֹהִים, *HaElohim*, "the God" תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ, *taḥat hashemesh*, "under the sun," הָאֱלֹהִים יְרָא, *HaElohim Yira'* "fear the God."[22] This paper will proceed to further expatiate a few of these words briefly as their meaning influence the reading of Ecclesiastes.עָמָל**,** *'amal*

The word *'amal* could mean "trouble" (Eccl. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18); "acquisition, care or anxiety or burdened with care or anxiety" (Eccl. 1.3; 2.10, 18-22; 4.6,8ff; 5.14, 17; 6.7; 8.15; 9.9; 10.15). Sometimes it could mean "a need which someone is" or "has caused others to be in." It could also mean "profit from toil."[23]

Krüger views *'amal* both positively or negatively, depending on the worker's motive for works or toils. Qoheleth seems to employ *'amal* from a broad spectrum. He expresses a negative wearisome toil informed by envy, greed, and "chasing after the wind. (cf. 4.4-8). He refers to labor based on a common interest (cf. 4.9-12). Qoheleth also uses *'amal* in connection with satisfaction one derives from one's toil (cf. 5.17-19).[24] Fox adds that Qoheleth uses *'amal* so broadly that the entirety of life's experiences is "toil:" walking to the city is toil (cf. 10.15), intellectual exertions (2.22; 8.17) life is synonymous to toil (8.15; 9.9).[25]עשׂה*'asah*

This verb means "to do, to make;" its nominal cognate could mean "work, achievement, labor, works, and deeds of God."[26] In Ecclesiastes *'asah* can mean "to cause to happen" (cf. 3:11, 14a, 14b). The noun *ma'aseh* in Ecclesiastes occurs as (1) "work" or "deed" (3:11b; 8:17; 9:10); (2) "event" or "what happens" especially concerning what God makes happen—*ma'aseh ha'elohim* (7:13; 8:17; 11:5).

While Qoheleth uses this verb and its nominal cognate in a variety of ways which the reader must decipher by context, a significant understanding which must undergird the understanding of the usage of *'asah* is Qoheleth's deterministic worldview that God governs the world.[27]שִׂמְחָה *Simḥah*

The word *simḥah* could mean "joy," "pleasure," (the feeling as well as the display of it).[28] Qoheleth repeatedly urges his readers to enjoy or get pleasure, especially having examined the *hevel* of life. He suggests that given life's *hevel*, his readers can only choose to enjoy life as it comes in the hope of some happiness or at least a diversion.[29] Some have concluded based on Qoheleth's pleasure

[15] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes.* Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 93.

[16] Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1992), lviii-lxix.

[17] Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Ecclesiastes* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2010), viii.

[18] Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* Bible and Literature Series. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 9.

[19] Michael V. Fox, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes.* (Dulles: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), xviii

[20] This paper will leave *hevel* untranslated almost throughout because of the divergence of opinion on its meaning.

[21] Fox, 19-22.

[22] Shapiro, xxvii-xxxix.

[23] *HALOT*, s.v. "עָמָל".

[24] Krüger, 4.

[25] Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xviii.

[26] *HALOT*, s.v. "עשׂה".

[27] Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xviii-xvix.

[28] *HALOT*, s.v. "שִׂמְחָה".

[29] Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xxi.

appeal that he is a preacher of joy.[30] However, in one of the instances of the usage of *simḥah*, Qoheleth's pleasure did not necessarily result in joy (cf. 2.10, 11). The preacher needs to balance the tensions in Qoheleth's appeal, whether to engage in pleasure/joy in thankfulness of God's gift or to engage in self-indulgence. הֶבֶל *Hevel*

Translations of the word *hevel* abound to the extent that more confusion arises as to what it means in Ecclesiastes or even if it means the same thing throughout the book. The following translations (YLT, Wycliff, WEB, Webster, RSV, NRSV, KJV) translate *hevel* as "vanity;" NLT and NIV render "meaningless," Goodnews and NCV render "useless," MSG renders "smoke," GW, "pointless," and CSB, "futility." These interpretive decisions complicate the preacher's job as he attempts to preach through Ecclesiastes. Interestingly, commentators do not agree either as they contemplate more interpretive choices than the ones already listed.

Craig Bartholomew translates *hevel* as "enigmatic" because Qoheleth usually pairs *hevel* with *re'ut ruaḥ*, chasing/striving after the wind. Hence, *hevel* does not indicate the absence of meaning; it only refers to Qoheleth's inability to grasp the meaning.[31] Shapiro accuses evangelicals of reading meaning into *hevel*. He notes that the word literally means "breath" or "vapor;" hence he argues that Qoheleth refers to the transience of life; thus, "impermanence."[32]

Fox also has his translation, but first, he analyzes the implication of each interpretive decision before proffering his interpretation of *hevel*. Fox's summarizes thus:

1. Vanity – Those who translate *hevel* as "vanity" confer piety on Qoheleth since by condemning worldly pursuit as vain, he rebukes those who pursue it anyway.
2. Futile – This translation focuses on human effort and action and judges them fruitless.
3. Ephemeral/Impermanence – Rendering *hevel* as impermanent focuses on the brevity of life.
4. Incomprehensible/Enigmatic – This translation implies the limitation of human reason.

Having analyzed previous translations, Fox renders *hevel* as "absurd" or "senseless," arguing that *hevel* should not be understood as "foolish" or "unreasonable" as absurdity may suggest, but as counter rational.[33]

Russell Meek traces the interpretation of *hevel* from the earliest times and notes that the Jewish interpreters considered *hevel* "breath," "vapor," and understood the word metaphorically. Early Christians before Jerome, such as Gregory of Nyssa considered *hevel* as futility: ephemeral and purposelessness, and then Jerome's Vulgate rendered *hevel* as "*vanitas*" which became the standard Christian interpretation until the rejection of that interpretation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Meek concludes that modern scholarship has only created more confusion without having a final word to the meaning of *hevel*.[34]

Kimmo Huovila and Dan Lioy circle back to Gregory's conclusion of futility in their article about a year ago and interpret *hevel* as "futility." They considered the suggested interpretations of *hevel* mentioned above and subjected each suggestion to four criteria: usage outside of Ecclesiastes, possible semantic extensions, contextual fit, and authorial cues to the reader. They interpret *hevel* as "futility" without implying "worthlessness."[35] Whatever translation preachers choose, they must be ready to wrestle with the implications of their choice.

This section has highlighted keywords that recur in Ecclesiastes, expanded some due to their importance to preaching through Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth emphasizes *hevel* "vanity," "impermanence," or "futility" throughout the book; he does the same *simḥah* "joy," and *yira'* "fear." Preaching Ecclesiastes would become an impossible task without decoding the sense of these words as used within the context of the book. Identifying these words does not suggest that the preacher seeks out these words and preach them as topics but to understand how Qoholeth uses them within each context of the book and compared with their usage in other Old Testament passages. An exegetical analysis of these words would enrich a preacher's discourse when preaching through Ecclesiastes. The next section would consider the possibility of the plan and structure of Ecclesiastes for preaching purposes.

Structure and Plan of Ecclesiastes

Finding a contradiction-free structure for Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most difficult task in engaging the book. A surface read through Ecclesiastes suggests a random flow of topics. Sometimes the discourse even seems contradictory. However, scholars have strived to identify the pattern/flow of the book. Both Addison G. Wright and Craig Bartholomew have separately attempted structuring Ecclesiastes, albeit inconclusively.[36] Wright's structure argues for an organic sense and flow of the book, Bartholomew correctly argued that an organic patterning cannot cater to Qoheleth's constant dialectic. In his exploration, Qoheleth moves from subject to subject, emphasizing, disagreeing with earlier intuitions, re-emphasizing previous themes.[37]

Rather than attempting to write a novel structure for Ecclesiastes, preachers must consider the following factors to preach through Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes as a Narration about and from Qoheleth

A narrative voice introduces Ecclesiastes and describes Qoheleth as a wise man and summarizes the wise man's word: *hevel hevalim*. The same voice resurfaces during Qoheleth's journey (7:27), and at the end, to conclude the matter. Since structure influences meaning, some have bifurcated between the

[30] Roger N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament.* 23 (1982): 87-98.

[31] Bartholomew, 93-4.

[32] Shapiro, xvi-xvii.

[33] Fox, *Ecclesiastes,* xix.

[34] Russell Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Readings of Hebel in Ecclesiastes." *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 3 (June 2016): 279–97. doi:10.1177/1476993X15586039.

[35] Kimmo Huovila, and Dan Lioy. "The Meaning of Hebel in Ecclesiastes." *Conspectus* 27 (March 2019): 35–49.

[36] Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx" in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes,* ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1994), 56-7; Bartholomew, 83-4.

[37] Wright, 56-7; Bartholomew, 82-3.

message of the narrator and that of Qoheleth. For example, Tremper Longman has argued that Ecclesiastes should be interpreted based on the narrator's conclusion, further arguing that Ecclesiastes serves as a foil to the rest of the Bible.[38]

Though the reader finds two voices within the book, the frame narrator and Qoheleth, bifurcating the message of the two and analyzing the former as conservative and the latter unorthodox is unwarranted. Fox gives a proper understanding of relating to both voices. He observes that though a narrator introduces Qoheleth, scholars cannot conclude that these are different people due to the unavailability of further information. The narrator could have as well chosen to express his wisdom in the voice of another: Qoheleth.[39] Moreover, discounting Qoheleth's wisdom as unorthodox would be contrary to the narrator's perception of him since the narrator considers Qoheleth as a wise king.

Understood as narration, however, Qoheleth becomes the major character in Ecclesiastes, and his exploration becomes the story which preacher should retell. Sometimes he tells stories about himself (2.1-26); sometimes, he muses (3.1-22; 5.1-20; 7, 11); sometimes, Qoheleth tells stories of another in terms of what he observes (4, 6, 9:13-18). Whether his explorations, what he claims to observe, or his musings, Qoheleth makes his conclusions.[40]

Identifying Qoheleth's Explorative and Evaluative Markers

The reader/preacher will find as he reads through Ecclesiastes that Qoheleth takes a performative and an evaluative approach as his method of teaching wisdom. Hence, while scholars may never agree on a structure, the preacher can observe Qoheleth's plan throughout most parts of the book. Chapter 1.1-11 introduces Qoheleth and the entire book. From 1.12, Qoheleth's discussion resumes. He marks his explorations either at the beginning or at the end with phrases such as, "I said to myself, I will test… (cf. 2.1); "then I turned to wisdom… (2.12), among other phrases serving as a performative and the commencement of an inquiry. In some cases, Qoheleth concludes his inquiry with the refrain "*hevel* and a chasing of the wind." In other cases, he concludes with, "And I said… (cf. 9.16); "here is what I have seen to be good…" (5.18); "I have tested all…" (cf. 7.23, 24).

Furthermore, Qoheleth marks the timing of the actions within these phrases. His inquiries begin with verbal usage that reflects imperfective actions: "I will test, I turned;" while he concludes using perfective type verbs: "I have tested" (cf. 7.23), "I have seen" (5.18), "I have discovered" (7.29). However, these phrases are not readily discernible in some chapters. For example, chapter 3.1-16 does not begin or end with any of these phrases, yet it marks a unit of its own with a conclusion about God's activities on time and eternity.

This section has highlighted possible structures within Ecclesiastes, which scholars have suggested and has attempted to proffer a plan identifying Qoheleth's performatives and the conclusions of his inquiries. The fact that Ecclesiastes is wisdom worded as a narration cannot be overemphasized. An attempt to flatten Qoheleth's narrative curves and dialectic would tamper with the overall idea of the book. Preachers should strive to present Qoheleth's exploration and be mindful of his explorative markers as they do so. These explorations, both autobiographical and anecdotal, constitute the medium through which Qoheleth renders his message. The next section would consider how to preach Ecclesiastes.

Preaching through Ecclesiastes

Steven Smith counsels that to preach the flow of Ecclesiastes, preachers should preach the entire book in one sermon so that the listeners see the overall picture of the book. He further notices that preaching Ecclesiastes as a series poses the challenge of "teasing out the implication of the vanity of life, yet giving hope without giving the full picture away."[41] Smith adds that preachers should explore the poetry in Ecclesiastes and not just principalize them, and should also explore the work theme in Ecclesiastes.[42]

Smith poses a two-pronged challenge for the preacher who intends to preach Ecclesiastes as a series. The preacher faces a challenge of how to preach Ecclesiastes for a few weeks while sounding pessimistic because the preacher has not reached "the end of the matter." Furthermore, the preacher faces the challenge of drawing implications of the sermon and not bore the congregation with a repeated "fear God" end.

To deal with this problem, the preacher may choose to make linguistic connections to other wisdom texts and the law. More importantly, preachers need to make a connection to Christ in their sermons anyway. Hence, as the preacher moves through Qoheleth's explorations, connecting his discourse to Christ or a New Testament principle would be crucial to avoiding repeated pessimism and repetitively returning to the fear of God throughout the series.

Making the Christ Connection[43]

Considering the challenge posed by Smith above, the preacher may choose to make connections to Christ in a variety of ways as he preaches through Ecclesiastes. Smith observes that preachers can make connections to Christ through the Covenant Approach, the Fulfilment Approach, the New Testament Connection, the Quotation, the Linguistic Connection, and the Thematic Connection.[44]

The preacher can use any of the above-suggested approaches. For example, in Ecclesiastes 2, Qoheleth concludes that "nothing is better than for a person to eat, drink, and enjoy his work as a gift of God," and those who do not realize this gift burden themselves to do more. Preachers may choose to make a

[38] Tremper Longman III, 102-121.

[39] Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, xiii.

[40] Sidney Greidanus observes a similar pattern in discussing the form of Ecclesiastes. He notes that Qoheleth's discourses read as reflections that are sometimes an autobiographical narrative, and in other cases an anecdote. See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010) 13-15.

[41] Steven Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Structure* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 156.

[42] Smith, 156.

[43] If all of Scripture point to Christ, then it is the preacher's duty to get to Christ even from non-Christocentric texts like Ecclesiastes. See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* 3rd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

[44] Smith, 157.

thematic connection with the parable of Jesus about a man whose land yielded increase (Lk. 12:13-34), which he used to teach the relationship of the human heart in pursuit of wealth or God. Other connections are possible as one preaches through Ecclesiastes.[45]

Sidney Greidanus subjects Ecclesiastes to his suggested methods of preaching Christ from the Old Testament: Redemptive-Historical Progression, Promise Fulfilment, Typology, Analogy, Longitudinal Themes, New Testament References, and Contrast. He finds connections between Ecclesiastes and Christ through four of these methods. First, preachers can employ redemptive history in connecting Ecclesiastes to Christ. Whereas Qoheleth spoke of death with finality, the coming of Christ brings in the concept of resurrection. Hence, preachers may expose the Qoheleth's view of death as ultimate but must proceed to speak of the resurrection in Christ.

Also, preachers can compare Qoheleth's teaching analogously to those of Christ. If, as mentioned above, Qoheleth speaks of work or wealth, what did Christ teach on work and wealth? Preachers can employ longitudinal themes to trace themes the possibility of other themes taught in Ecclesiastes that are taught elsewhere in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. For example, Qoheleth speaks of fearing God. The theme of the "fear of God" recurs through the entire Bible. Particularly, Jesus speaks of fearing the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (cf. Matt. 10:28).[46]

Conclusion

This paper has argued that reading and preaching through Ecclesiastes requires preachers to approach it as narrative wisdom. Ecclesiastes unveils wisdom through the explorative journey of Qoheleth, who narrates his experience to show wisdom rather than tell it. The book expresses the message that because of the *hevel* of life, readers should enjoy life as a gift from God and fear God in their dealings. Qoheleth and the frame narrator codes this message in words, which this paper has examined as the substance of Ecclesiastes. Preachers will find it relevant as they expose and preach through the book to underscore the meaning and different nuances with which Qoheleth employs these words. Furthermore, while the structures suggested by scholars above could be useful in preaching through Ecclesiastes, this paper has shown that identifying Qoheleth's explorative markers will also aid preachers to delineate paragraphs from which they could preach. Lastly, understanding the book as a narrated performative exploration without trying to oversimplify its teachings would cater to the contours which the preacher will find in the book as they preach through it.

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[45] William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 121-137. Brown makes six thematic connections linking Ecclesiastes to the New Testament gospel message.

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