

## A TEMPORAL REFLECTION ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES TSENG KUEI-CHI

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### Abstract

Time is the one of the major themes in the book of Ecclesiastes. This paper aims to explore several aspects of time in this book, that is, wisdom, vanity, repetition, process, and determinism. The preacher Qohelet initially looks for the wisdom of life, and eventually via a deep reflection of time, he concludes that wisdom in time is to turn to God for redemption.

**Key Words:** Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, time, wisdom, vanity, repetition, process, determinism.

### A Temporal Reflection on the Book of Ecclesiastes

#### I. Introduction

Time is one of the major themes presented in the book of Ecclesiastes of the Old Testament. The book of Ecclesiastes is a book of the preacher, that is, a Qohelet, who seeks universal truth, the wisdom of life, finding that life is essentially hebel/vanity in an eternal and cyclical repetition, which is in the control of God, and which is a sort of determinism. Upon reflection of the temporality, the wisest way of a human being is to look for God's wisdom, which is also salvation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Philosophy is conceived a manifestation of life, and hermeneutics is the way this understanding enlightens itself. In this paper, applying hermeneutics to gain freedom from

prejudice although such freedom is hard to gain, I enjoy the quietude of soliloquizing and communing with the spirit of history. And thus, the average way of interpreting has been articulated in discourse and expressed in language.

#### II. Time: on the aspect of wisdom

Et is the regular word for 'time' in biblical Hebrew. It does not have an abstract sense in the Old Testament, either in this book or elsewhere, but signifies the moment of a particular occasion of happening. Sometimes, however, it has the added nuance of a 'regular' or 'appropriate' happening: the 'right' time. (Whybray, 22) In the "Catalogue of Times" (3:

1-8), Qohelet declares that “everything has a time” and proceeds to illustrate the principle by fourteen pairs of examples. The following verses vv.9-15, draw conclusions from this fact. In spite of the repetition, it is not evident what it means for everything to have a time. It is not even clear what a “time” (et) is. The present study seeks to clarify the notion of “time” in Qohelet and its implications for the meaning of the Catalogue.

Qohelet was a seeker after truth of time. The kind of truth with which he was concerned was truth about man and his fate in the world in which God had placed him. The standard repository of truth of this kind was the wisdom tradition, a tradition with which Qohelet was clearly very familiar, and so it was this that he took as his starting-point. But he was not content to take its tenets for granted: he aimed to test their truth by setting them against his own personal experience of life in the Jerusalem of the third century BC. He lived in a period when the old tradition of Israelite life was breaking down. His book has been described as a running dialogue with a hypothetical ‘wise man’ representing the conventional wisdom which had prevailed up to that time.

Wisdom Literature occupies a strange place in the Bible. Unlike the historical books or the prophets, it shows little awareness of or interest in the foundational redemptive acts of God as recorded in the Pentateuch. Furthermore, God, as portrayed in the Wisdom Literature, is not a free agent but appears to be bound by the rules of moral cause and effect that

the sages supposed were foundational to the universe in which they lived. According to Proverbs 8, even God must operate within the confines dictated by the wisdom that orders the creation.

Actually, Wisdom in Qohelet’s usage manifests itself in three ways: ingenuity, good sense, and rational intellect. The type so important in Proverbs, the sagacity of ethical-pious living, is a subset of the second, but Qohelet never treats it by itself. Qohelet calls these three forms of wisdom *hokmah*. He does not define these categories or analyze wisdom into different types of intelligence.

In addition, *Wisom-hokmah*—has two aspects: faculty and knowledge. As a faculty, wisdom is an intellectual power similar to intelligence in the uses to which it can be put. It encompasses common sense and practical skills. It includes the faculty of reason, that is, the capacity for orderly thinking whereby one derives valid conclusions from premises. *Hokmah* also exists as knowledge: that which is known, the communicable content of knowledge. Knowledge gained and transmitted by study of books and lore is “learning” or, if extensive and deep, “erudition” (e.g., Qoh 1:16; Jer 8:8; 9:22; Dan 1:4)

### III. Time: on the aspect of *hebel/vanity*

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet is wise enough to see through the essence of life, revealing it is *hebel/vanity*. Qohelet begins and ends his teaching with the declaration that all is *hebel*, and throughout the book he calls things he

sees hebel. What exactly does he mean by this? And what does he mean when he applies this word to everything? The basic meaning of hebel, the literal sense from which the others are derived, is vapor. This sense is evident in Isa 57:13; Prov 13:11; 21:6 and Ps 144: 4, as well as in RH, Jewish Aramaic, and Syria. It is usually used in ways easily derived by metaphoric transfer from the qualities of vapor. (Fox, 27)

Furthermore, the traditional gloss “vanity” means something worthless or trivial. An effort that achieves nothing, or nothing worthwhile, is in vain. Elsewhere in the Bible, hebel has this sense several times. Examples: Isa 49:4 (“And I said, ‘In vain I have toiled, for emptiness and vanity [hebel] I wasted my strength’”); Isa 30: 7 (“Egypt will help only in vain [hebel] and emptily”); Job 9:29; Lam 4:17. Human plans are vapor—trivial, ineffectual (Ps 94:11).

In addition, life experiences are linked between birth and death. As care, Dasein is the “between.” Birth and death are thus connected in a manner characteristic of Dasein, which maintains itself in the connectedness of life. The Being of Dasein has been defined as care, which is grounded in temporality. And the authentic Being-toward-death—that is to say, the finitude of temporality—is the hidden basis of Dasein’s historicity. Death is the end of Dasein, of which the totality is closed round by death.

#### IV. Time: on the aspect of repetition

And vanity of life is also a cyclical

repetition. Ecclesiastes is full of repetition as Murphy, for example, recognizes: “While judgement about the peculiar grammatical characteristics of the language is still out...there can be no doubt about the distinctiveness of Qoheleth’s literary style. The poem on the repetition of events in 1: 4-11 is as it were a symbol of this style; repetition is its trademark. This repetition is manifest in vocabulary and also in a phraseology that is almost formulaic. (Bartholomew, 238) For example, Qoh.1:5-7 turn to the natural elements and connect the notion of permanence to more dynamic ideas of continuity and repetition. While the issue in 1:4 could simply be one of continuity versus brevity, 1: 5-7 introduces the idea of a cyclical movement which can be tied closely to the more static permanence explored in the second half of 1: 4. The elements are neither transitory nor immobile. Their movement is one of repetition, and thus of cyclicity. Sun, wind, and water are all excellent metaphors for time, and in these verses their immediate function is to exemplify the repetitious movements of nature through time. They are part of a pattern which neither changes substantially nor ends. (Bundvad, 25)

It would initially seem that Qohelet carries on his depiction of cyclicity and repetition into the human realm in 1: 8-11: as the rivers flow and flow, so the human sees and hears—endlessly and without satiation. Certainly, this is how the poem is generally read. The main point of 1: 4-11, then, would be that there is no gain to be had despite the overwhelming continuity, permanence and

repetition observed in the world and in human life. Instead of being meaningful and progressive, the repetitious movement of human beings and phenomena across the face of the world is entirely without purpose—an endless striving without any goal. As the order of things is always the same, neither humanity's nor nature's efforts accomplish anything.

Moreover, in the poem's presentation of the human situation in time, a strong dichotomy is established between the elements' repetitious, cyclical movement through time—embodying the cosmic, temporal structure—and the linear, ephemeral life of individual human beings. The human being not able to participate in the continuous repetition which characterizes the temporal movement of the elements. Instead, it is emphasized that he or she is cut off from both the past and future of mankind.

History is recurrence of the possible. Dasein exists explicitly as fate by the mode of repetition. Dasein's authentic historicity is fate and repetition. Dasein gains such a unity of connectedness that the sequence of experiences can subsequently be linked together. And the historiological disclosure of the past is based on fateful repetition. (Heidegger, 439-455)

Moreover, Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" presents a challenge to the temporality of Christianity. Nietzsche is convinced that every event in the life of an individual, a people, a culture and in the cosmos itself is destined to repeated occurrence. And he maintains that an entire eternity has already elapsed up to the present instant. This notion is beautifully

depicted in *Thus Spoke Zarathustras*:

Everything goeth, everything  
returneth; eternally rolleth the wheel  
of existence. Everything  
dieth, everything blossometh forth again;  
eternally runneth on the year  
of existence. Everything breaketh,  
everything is integrated anew;  
eternally buildeth itself the same of  
existence. All things  
separate, all things again greet one another;  
eternally true to itself  
remaineth the ring of existence. Every  
moment beginneth existence,  
around every "here" rolleth the ball  
"there." The middle is  
everywhere. Crooked is the path of  
eternity (Nietzsche, 244).

Cynically enough, Nietzsche's vision of temporality stated here is echoed by that of his abused Christianity. A verse in Ecclesiastes goes in this way, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (Eccles. 1: 9). Does the doctrine mean that all events are repeated endlessly in this world?

King Solomon further points out in Ecclesiastes that all things within temporality are vanity in vanity. All human plans or goals are meaningless in the history. All that men experience in this earth is the heaviest burden..."this

sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and vexation of the spirit” (Eccles. 1: 13-14).

V. Time, on the aspect of being concrete in Judaism

Besides the feature of repetition, temporality in the book of Ecclesiastes is of the nature of being concrete. Wheeler Robison defines biblical time as concrete time. He argues that the Hebrew mind conceives time in the concrete, in its filled content, and not as an abstract idea. In addition, Stern considers the concept of time to be completely absent from the Hebrew Bible, as well as from ancient Judaism more generally. He argues that the ancient Jews understood reality as consisting of a multitude of discrete and concrete phenomena—activities, motions, changes, and events—occurring simultaneously or in sequence, i.e. processes. The words ‘discrete’ and ‘concrete’ are important here. Stern does not imagine a cohesive system of temporal thinking in which process serves as an abstract label, simply replacing that of time. Instead, he argues that the ancient Jews experienced their reality as a number of concrete processes—including both human activities, such as the process of harvesting or the period of pregnancy, and processes tied to natural phenomena, such as the movement of the sun across the sky during the course of the day. Processes like these are real and concrete, and

Stern argues that you don’t need a functional concept of time in order to organize your activities according to them.

Indeed, Time is only an abstract measurement of processes: it is, primarily, a way of expressing how long a process is. The modern concept of time as a general category, an autonomous flow, an empty extension, or a structure and dimension of the universe, is only a generalization and synthesis of all the discrete time-measurements that can be made of the individual processes which we empirically experience....Inasmuch as we tend to treat it, in modern culture, as existing and real...time often becomes a reified abstraction.

Since time shows itself as a passing-away in itself, it is an endless, irreversible sequence of nows, which is taken as something that is somehow present-at-end. Time is actually understood as a succession, as a flowing stream of nows, as the course of time. The measurement of time is concrete. This dating of things in terms of the heavenly body which sheds forth light and warmth, and in terms of its distinctive places in the sky, is a way of assigning time. This can be done in our Being with one another under the same sky, and this can be done at any time in the same way, so that within certain limits everyone is proximally agreed upon it. (Heidegger,456 )

Furthermore, the power of time is the effect of the past. World-history is the interpretation of spirit in time. History, which is essentially the history of spirit, runs its course in time. Thus the development of history falls into time.

History stands in the context of a becoming. In such becoming, development is sometimes a rise, sometimes a fall. As epoch-making, history determines a future in the present. Here, history signifies a context of events and effects, which draws on through the past, the present, and the future.

#### VI. Time, on the aspect of determinism

Was Qohelet a determinist? Many commentators have suggested as much. Delitzsch, for example, despite dating Ecclesiastes to the Persian period, nevertheless saw key texts expressing Qohelet's worldview such as Eccl. 3.1-15; 9.11-12 as deterministic, stating that '(Man) is on the whole not master of his own life.' More recently, Fox argued in much the same vein. Other commentators more wary of committing themselves on this question have nevertheless hinted that at least some aspects of Qohelet's work may be explicable from a deterministic angle. (Ruman, 33)

It should be noted that Qohelet's meaning cannot be resolved on the lexical level, since both main senses of "time" appear in the book, though not in the passage under consideration. We must ask just what kind of time Qohelet has in mind in the Catalogue and in what sense there is a time "for" everything.

If by *et* Qohelet means a unique moment on the time-line, he is assuming a strong determinism: every act and event is assigned in advance a moment at which it will occur. Qohelet would be saying that people will inevitably harvest at harvest time. This represents one line of

interpretation of the present passage. In an earlier study, I interpreted the Catalogue as a statement of divine determination of all that occurs.

Furthermore, I now interpret this passage as presuming a less rigid sort of determinism. Qohelet does believe in divine control. God controls what will happen on the large scale, creating the world the way it is, and on the small scale he repeatedly and unpredictably intrudes and overrides human efforts. He makes man die at apparently arbitrary times. He radically circumscribes human freedom and effectuality. Nevertheless, Qohelet does not hold to a strict fatalism. God does not predetermine exactly what will happen and when. He has the power to do so but does not always use it. The Catalogue speaks about the right times, the circumstances when, in the proper course of events, something should happen or be done. But these are not the times when things will inevitably occur.

#### VII. Conclusion: on the aspect of salvation

Is Ecclesiastes a Wisdom book in the common understanding of the term? The answer is yes regarding the literary form of many verses, particularly those found in the large middle section. The pattern of observation, reflection, and drawing a conclusion is common in Wisdom literature. Regarding content, the answer is also yes, even if one qualifies the response by placing strict limitations on what constitutes wisdom. But how should wisdom be defined? One helpful

definition of wisdom is this: (Bollhagen, 16)

The Spirit-given ability to ascertain through the Word of God that the One who has created and redeemed us in Christ for the life to come cares also about the even now of everyday existence, enough to show his children through explicit messages the structure and meaning of his world and the laws by which he governs it.

This definition will work well with Ecclesiastes. We must remember that ours is a fallen world subject to capricious forces of evil, so that often we can only speak of what is generally true or ultimate true. God will always maintain a degree of unpredictability and will keep his creatures guessing about why he allows certain things to happen to us in this world. Nevertheless, his ordering and governance of this creation is still evident in the laws of nature. What is more, the Word made flesh has redeemed God's lost and condemned creatures for eternity, and this gives our present lives meaning and purpose in here and now.

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