

STUDENT ESSAY

## Facing Death in the Context of Faith: A Pastoral Application of Ecclesiastes



The book of Ecclesiastes occurs only once in the three-year Sunday lectionary cycle. As a result, unless Catholics intentionally seek to engage the Scriptures they may never gain an appreciation for the wisdom this book contains. Furthermore, many see the book, with its repetition that “all is vanity,” difficult to reconcile with the hope and ethical directives of the Gospel. Some biblical commentators even consider that Ecclesiastes contests the traditional Old Testament view of wisdom. As a result, Ecclesiastes may appear as not particularly applicable to the life of faith. This conclusion should seem odd, since the book intends to impart wisdom,

and wisdom is not supposed to be merely theoretical. A look at Ecclesiastes 9:1-12 will show how the words of the narrator of the book, Qoheleth, can enrich the hearts and lives of those who read it. I will propose that this passage may be applied during training for bereavement ministry, an apostolate currently growing among the parishes of Long Island. The passage reads:

All this I have kept in mind and recognized: the just, the wise, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Love from hatred man cannot tell; both appear equally vain, in that there is the same lot for all, for the just and the wicked, for the good and the bad, for the clean and the unclean, for him who offers sacrifice and him who does not. As it is for the good man, so it is for the sinner; as it is for him who swears rashly, so it is for him who fears an oath. Among all the things that happen under the sun, this is the worst: that things turn out the same for all. Hence the minds of men are

filled with evil, and madness is in their hearts during life; and afterward they go to the dead.

Indeed, for any among the living there is hope: a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they are to die, but the dead no longer know anything. There is no further recompense for them, because all memory of them is lost. For them, love and hatred and rivalry have long since perished. They will never again have part in anything that is done under the sun.

Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works. At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of the fleeting life that is granted you under the sun. This is your lot in life, for the toil of your labors under the sun. Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going.

Again I saw under the sun that the race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant, nor a livelihood by the wise, nor riches by the shrewd, nor favor by the experts; for a time of calamity comes to all alike. Man no more knows his own time than fish taken in the fatal net, or birds trapped in the snare; like these the children of men are caught when the evil time falls suddenly upon them.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12  
New American Bible

The context of a biblical passage is an important part of its interpretation. I consider below a three-fold context for Eccl 9:1-12: its historical context and its context within the biblical wisdom literature, its context within the book of Ecclesiastes, and its context within the life of faith.

### **Historical and Biblical Context**

Most commentators believe that the book was finished near the end of the third century B.C. (Bartholomew 262; Fox, *Ecclesiastes* xiv; Krüger 19). This means that the historical context of the book is the period of Greek, or Hellenistic, rule in Judea, specifically under the Ptolemaic kings, who reigned from their capital city of Alexandria (Krüger 19). During this period "Judea seems to have enjoyed a kind of partial autonomy" with regards to governance (Krüger 20). As a result, the influence of Hellenistic culture would have been

relatively passive but not altogether absent. For example, in Eccl 9:11 Qoheleth writes, "the race is not won by the swift," possibly referring to Greek athletic competitions (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* xiv).

*Ecclesiastes* has an additional context insofar as it is part of the wisdom literature of both Israelite and other ancient wisdom traditions. As a genre, wisdom literature "offer[s] advice on how to succeed in life as well as reflect[s] on its meanings and problems" (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* x-xi). Wisdom literature can be divided into two types: didactic and speculative. Didactic wisdom seeks to teach and offer instruction, whereas speculative wisdom draws out the implications of didactic wisdom. *Ecclesiastes* is a form of didactic wisdom, as it offers "admonitions. . . which can also be placed together with longer admonitory speeches" (Krüger 9). Within didactic wisdom there are two further divisions: dogmatic and empirical. Dogmatic wisdom seeks to teach by presenting a statement as fact and asking the listener to reflect upon it. Empirical wisdom, exemplified in *Ecclesiastes*, teaches by presenting conclusions reached through reasoning about experiences (Krüger 11-12).

Some interpreters see *Ecclesiastes* as a critique of traditional wisdom, in that Qoheleth offers reflections that posit something entirely new (Whybray 58). It would seem especially important, then, to place this book in relation to the rest of the Old Testament wisdom tradition. There is a wide variety of opinions about this relationship. First is the contention that, despite some tensions with the biblical wisdom tradition, *Ecclesiastes* generally conforms to it, albeit offering a unique contribution. Points of contact with wisdom books like *Proverbs* and *Job* come especially from the concluding verses: "Qoheleth sought to find pleasing sayings and to write down true sayings with precision. . . . As to more than these, my son, beware . . . . The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is man's all" (Eccl 12:10-13). These verses place the book within the context of a tradition that "unambiguously requires fear of God and obedience to divine commandments" (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* xv). Additional points of contact are found when interpreting Qoheleth's conclusion about the "limits of human wisdom" and his assertion that "all is vanity." These correspond to the characteristic biblical view that "wisdom can lead to a happy and fulfilled life, but it cannot reliably guarantee such a life" (Krüger 22; cf. Prov 16:2, 9, 25).

A second contention holds that *Ecclesiastes* presents a departure from the older wisdom tradition. This view sees the book as critiquing the dogmatic wisdom presented in *Proverbs* 1-9. Qoheleth's life experiences seem to lead him to conclude that elements of traditional wisdom do not hold. Qoheleth's work is an "alternative attempt to overcome the 'crisis' of traditional wisdom" (Krüger 23). There is no doubt that Qoheleth is faithful to truths "about the existence or

the power of God." What he seems to question is prevailing thoughts "about God's justice, and about the worth of human life" (Whybray 60). In the extreme, this view sees Qoheleth as "deconstructing the tradition by always focusing on the individual exceptions," using his empirical method of observation (Bartholomew 257).

A third interpretation is put forward by Craig Bartholomew. He believes that the message of Ecclesiastes is in complete accord with the earlier wisdom traditions. The apparent critique of wisdom in the book ends up as a critique of the empirical method itself and of Epicurean thought, which the Jews may have been exposed to by contact with Hellenistic culture. By arriving at paradoxical conclusions, Ecclesiastes produces "an ironical exposure of such an empiricist epistemology, which seeks wisdom thorough personal experience. . . the resolution of this paradox is found in the fear of God" (Bartholomew 263). This reverence for God is the precise aim of the more traditional forms of biblical wisdom literature, in which fear of God is the necessary first stage of wisdom (e.g. Prov 1:7; Job 42:1-6; Sir 1:9-12; Wis 3:9).

All three viewpoints agree about some of the unique characteristics of Ecclesiastes but disagree significantly as to the author's purpose. In the following discussion, I will adopt the first of these three viewpoints, as it currently appears to be the most soundly justified of the three.

### **Context within the Book of Ecclesiastes**

Eccl 9:1-12 can be seen as a unit with three subdivisions. Verses 1-6 are guided by the theme of "death," verses 7-10 are guided by the theme of "pleasure," and verses 11-12 are guided by the theme of "contingency" (Krüger 6, 167). The passage can be seen to reflect key themes of the book as a whole.

The most prevalent theme of Ecclesiastes is the conclusion that "all is vanity." In Eccl 9:9 Qoheleth speaks of life as "fleeting" (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* 64). Life "finds its definitive and irreversible end in death" (Krüger 3), and as a result all life's activities "appear equally vain, in that there is the same lot for all. . . for the good and the bad" (Eccl 9:2). In Eccl 9:1-12 this feeling of vanity reaches a climactic level, perhaps because it seems to encompass even the moral quality of life: "among all the things that happen under the sun, this is the worst of all, that things turn out the same for all" (Eccl 9:3). One can accept that human works sometimes fail, or that wealth is fleeting, but when the basic justice of the world is questioned one is confronted with the possibility that even life itself is senseless.

In Eccl 9:1-12, Qoheleth shows that death "makes nonsense of all human pretensions" (Whybray 69). Wealth, wisdom, and even memory, both personal and communal, can be lost in death (Eccl 9:5). For these reasons, Qoheleth

exhorts his listener to value what one has in life all the more (Whybray 70). The situation of death should not lead to hopelessness because Qoheleth also tells his listeners to do things “with joy” (Eccl 9:7). Joy comes not from one's personal achievements, but from the way “God favors your works” (Eccl 9:7). As Bartholomew comments: “Life is God's gift and one can enjoy life, because the fact that God has given one the opportunity for joy means that He has already approved one's actions” (248). Although it must be acknowledged that good and bad opportunities are presented by the Lord to the wicked and just alike, the point remains that joy in Ecclesiastes is a joy centered in the Lord and in what He has done for a person, not in what the person has done for himself.

This leads to Qoheleth's repeated recommendation after recognizing that all is vanity: “eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart” (Eccl 9:7, cf. 2:24-25; 3:13; 5:17). This conveys a positive message in Qoheleth, because “happiness is, by its very nature, meaningful and gratifying” (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* xxi). It is interesting to note that in this didactic moment Qoheleth doesn't only suggest enjoying one's blessings, but *commands* it, using an imperative form (Bartholomew 249).

This joy is not a call to hedonism, that is, license to live out all of one's temptations and desires. Eccl 9:9 speaks of “enjoy[ing] life with the wife whom you love.” Using the example of one's wife is indicative: “the instruction of Qoheleth addressed to young people appears as a moderate and religious one and, at the same time, is based on an integral humanism in harmony with Israelite tradition. The exhortation of the author is not, then, reduced to a mere *topos* of *carpe diem*” (Pahk 380). Joy is always lived out in a community, and Israel's community was with the Lord, with each other, and with all the land. Even in joy, righteousness is to be sought. Further attestation is given in Eccl 9:8: “At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head.” The “festal symbols” (Bartholomew 249) of the white garments and perfumed head may carry a double meaning here. Later rabbinic commentators saw “these actions [as] represent[ing] purity in behavior,” as acting righteously as to be “morally ready for God's 'banquet' on the day of our death” (Fox, *Ecclesiastes* 63).

A final theme in Ecclesiastes is the relationship between God and human beings, God's wisdom and human wisdom. “God is regarded as the creator of human beings and their experience of reality” (Krüger 2). And yet God is utterly transcendent: “Between God's absolute knowledge and man's puny efforts to possess such knowledge there was a complete gulf; and this was unbridgeable” (Whybray 66). We see resonance here with the divine speech at the end of Job, in which God makes it clear that “not even the wise can fully comprehend the workings of God” (Krüger 5).

Life, suffering, and death are difficult concepts to understand. Some aspects of life, such as where one stands with God (Eccl 9:1) are utterly unknowable. Humans can and should try to apply wisdom to their daily tasks, but they must recognize that in the end they may be subject to chance or directions that are humanly unpredictable, like valiant warriors going off to battle, not aware of an impending storm that may wipe out their troops (Eccl 9:11-12). For this reason Qoheleth admonishes his listener: "anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have" (Eccl 9:10), but he never advocates "the frantic attempt to gain more and more wealth at the expense of peace" (Whybray 73; cf. Eccl 5:9-11).

The book of Ecclesiastes touches on the mysteries of the human experience with God and the limits of human wisdom. In this way it makes contributions similar to other biblical wisdom books. Yet Qoheleth's experiential approach and his insistence on focusing one's joys on the blessings of God offer teaching that is developed in a new and insightful way.

### **Context within the Life of Faith**

A particular application of Eccl 9:1-12 to the life of faith would be in training for bereavement ministry: that is, volunteers who go out on behalf of their parish to visit and comfort someone near death or the family of someone who has recently died. During times of intense emotional struggle it can be difficult to accept any advice or even consolation. What this biblical passage can do is aid those who hope to console others to grasp the dimensions of grief and react appropriately to people's needs, rather than simply leaving them with a Scripture quote and expecting all to be resolved.

During the training of such volunteers, an evening of Scriptural reflection would include Eccl 9:1-12 as a central source of illumination. The evening would begin with prayer centered around a recitation of Psalm 127. This psalm, like the book of Ecclesiastes, acknowledges the vanity of human action without God's help, and the joy of God's blessings. It would set the tone for Ecclesiastes but with the more prayerful and lyrical poetic language characteristic of the Psalms.

Then, following some explanation of the goal of the evening (Scriptural insights into bereavement ministry), Eccl 9:1-12 would be read aloud. The leader of the group would both solicit initial reactions to the passage from participants and guide the group towards a fuller understanding of the text.

After this initial discussion, the group would reflect on two sets of questions aimed at bringing them to a deeper understanding of how this Scripture passage might help them serve the dying and bereaved. The first set of questions would be: (1) What draws you to be a believer? (2) What discourages you from believing? (3) In what way do you see your faithfulness as having an

impact on your life? These questions would help the trainees reflect on the importance of the presence of God in their own lives, on challenges to being faithful, and on ways of persevering in faith. This is crucial because the whole point is to understand how Ecclesiastes speaks within the context of the life of faith.

A second set of questions would invite the trainees to think more deeply about the human experience of suffering and death: (1) What are some of the thoughts a dying person may be thinking? (2) How does one inventory one's life when one is aware that its end is near? (3) What makes life worth living? (4) Why is there suffering and death in the world? The last question is not meant to be answered fully but intended to bring trainees to realize the need to abandon their own wisdom to God's infinite wisdom. Eccl 9:1-12, as the rest of Ecclesiastes, points out the limited nature of man's wisdom: "Love from hatred man cannot tell" (Eccl 9:1), "a time of calamity comes to all alike" (Eccl 9:11), and "man no more knows his own time than fish taken in the fatal net, or birds trapped in the snare" (Eccl 9:12). The trainees themselves can take some comfort from these verses, knowing that they need not feel compelled to explain the situation of those to whom they offer consolation, as there may be no discernible answer to the question: "why did he/she die?"

The second series of questions is intended to help the trainee understand how tough is the pain for the dying person and his or her family. Qoheleth speaks of that pain and of the dark thoughts that often rise up at the time of death. Pain exists not only on a physical level (and in fact, with modern medicine, there may be no physical pain). On a spiritual level death can appear to contradict God's justice and goodness. Qoheleth speaks to the heart of that pain. At the same time he holds up for us things from which we can draw comfort: the blessings God has given us, especially in our family and our relationship with God.

Here the trainees can be made aware of the evangelical component of their work. Many whom they encounter may have fallen away from faith. If they have reflected on their own faith, on what brings joy in their lives, and on the undeniable benefits bestowed by God, they will have strengthened their ability to encourage faithfulness in those they serve.

After reflection on these questions a final discussion would allow for synthesizing the ideas that have surfaced and affirming the value of keeping Qoheleth's wisdom (the fruit of his experience) in mind. The evening would conclude with a final prayer, beginning with a re-praying of Psalm 127. The leader would stay behind to field any questions that participants might want to ask but felt uncomfortable asking in the larger group setting.

This example of a parish training session for bereavement ministry attempts to demonstrate how the wisdom of Ecclesiastes is illuminating for human experiences and the life of faith. It is hoped that the fruits of this sacred book will continue to be enjoyed in the future with greater insight and enthusiasm.

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