Taylor, **A time to dance**, *Irish Biblical Studies* 18 June 1996

A TIME TO DANCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES*

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> *Does not Wisdom cry out, does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, in the paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: "To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to all humanity."* (Proverbs 8.1-3)

This is the pen-picture in Proverbs chapter 8 where the poet personifies God's Wisdom making her appeal to all who will listen. She takes her stand not in the temple but at the entrance to the city gates: that place which throbs with the life of city and country alike, amid the hustle and bustle of camels and donkeys weighed down with their burdens, of merchants and traders, foreign and local, of soldiers and officials, money lenders and market women, lawyers and protesters..

Where might the writer of Proverbs make God's Wisdom take her stand today? The cathedral or the assembly hall? More likely, the City Hall, the Stock Exchange, the High Street[1]. Her message would be to all those caught up in the helter-skelter of modern life. And I suspect that many of those who would hear her appeal would be people not often in Church; and I fear that among those most deaf to her teaching would be many in the religious and theological establishment - as of course was true also of the Ministry of Jesus Christ himself.

What is certainly true is that those of us who look back to the Old Testament through the glasses of reformed theology and tradition tend to view the Wisdom Literature of the OT as at the margin of our concern. Because of the particular thrust of much of our New

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* Union College "Carey" Opening Lecture, 25 September 1995

1 J Eaton (1989) makes a similar point.

Testament interpretation, we focus in our Old Testament studies on the law, the covenant, the sacrificial system, the prophets, the mighty saving acts of Yahweh in the history of Israel. Apart from a few well worn sermon texts, we find ourselves uncomfortable with the OT Wisdom literature - by which I mean in particular the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. For in those books, we find a God who seems to be universal, not just the covenant God of Israel; we find something more akin to a natural theology than a theology of revelation; we find a focus on this world rather than the next; we find material that seems to have been adapted from other ANE cultures and does not bear an authentic "made in Israel" stamp; we find no reference to the exodus, to election or the covenant, to the law, to the sacrificial system or to the temple, not even to the royal theology of Jerusalem - despite the close linking of the name of Solomon with the Wisdom tradition. We tend to summarise the central themes of the Old Testament without reference to the emphases of the Wisdom Literature; and then when the Wisdom books don't fit easily with our scheme we, in practice, relegate them to a second tier within the canon of scripture.

This tendency of course is not new. The Jews relegated the Wisdom books to the Writings, that third section of the canon after the all-important Law and Prophets (by contrast with the Greek canonical order followed in our English Bibles where the Wisdom books take their place after the books of History and before the books of Prophecy).

The various classics of Old Testament Theology of this century have all had difficulty in accommodating the Wisdom books as they have sought to codify the OT message and /or find a central theme to which all aspects of OT theology can be related. Eichrodt with his focus on "covenant" and Von Rad with his emphasis on historical traditions still stand as models of OT theology - and neither of them found it easy to fit Wisdom literature into their overall scheme.

A more recent scholar, BS Childs, in practice devotes little space to Wisdom in his OT Theology[2], even though his canonical approach might have made it easier for him to give a pride of place to the

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[2] BS Childs, *OT Theology in a canonical Context* SCM 1985

writings of the sages. In 1992 RE Clements published a series of lectures on Wisdom[3] in which he apologises for the fact that in his earlier OT Theology[4] he had taken *no account of the importance of the Israelite Wisdom tradition.*

It is perhaps ironic that as Christians we downplay the Wisdom literature of the OT, when, arguably, Jesus, in his teaching, reflects the Wisdom literature more than any other part of the Old Testament. The parables and the Sermon on the Mount for example contain innumerable echoes of the Wisdom tradition and method. Bultmann spoke of the "necessity of understanding the synoptic sayings in the context of Jewish Wisdom"[5]. Some scholars refer to Jesus as primarily a Wisdom teacher or as the "ultimate expression of Wisdom"[6]. In a book published earlier this year, Claus Wetermann speaks of:-

> ... a task that heretofore has scarcely been recognised in terms of its importance: namely a comprehensive and detailed examination of the relationship between Jesus' preaching and the early proverbial wisdom of Israel. [7]

He goes on to speak of the Wisdom heritage as a main link between the OT and the teaching of Jesus.

W Brueggemann, in his refreshingly challenging style, has argued that this tendency to downplay Wisdom literature is no accident. He says, for example:-

> I argue that the recovery of wisdom materials as a legitimate perhaps even central feature of scripture constitutes a considerable threat to the theological establishment that dominates much of Protestantism.[8]

He continues:-

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3 RE Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* Paternoster 1992 p 7

4 RE Clements *OT Theology: a fresh approach* London 1978

5 R Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition,* 4th edn, 1970, p 113

6 Max Kuchler, *Fruhjudische Weishheitstraditionen, OBO* 1979 pp 157 ff

7 Westermann (1995) p 113

8 Brueggemann (1972) p 13

> The wise in Israel characteristically appreciate life, love life, value it, enjoy it. They appreciate the best learning, the newest knowledge, and the most ingenious cultural achievements.

He contends that this Wisdom outlook was also true of the Reformers, especially the Swiss reformers, though it sadly has not generally been true of the latter-day children of the Reformation.
He goes further:-

> Sometimes we are not real. Faith can become a way to work the system, to explain life, to manipulate for our own ends. Theology can become so safe and respectable that it is the announcement of yesterday's authenticities in the face of new realities, the parroting of old certainties, the defence of old positions, ... the passion to make events and persons fit the scheme of how they are supposed to be.[9]

Wisdom, he maintains, challenges this mindset. Wisdom will not be content with yesterday's answers. He concludes:-

> It is not our wisdom traditions that are in question but our unfair, one-sided handling of scripture, which has celebrated and used only those parts of scripture which have supported our dogmatic presuppositions and commitments.

It is my first contention this afternoon that we must face up to the implications of Wisdom literature - and not just in the Old Testament classroom but in our understanding and living out of the Christian faith as a whole. **Wisdom literature is no less Scripture and no less Gospel than the Law and the Prophets**.
Now if Christian theologians have been uncomfortable with OT Wisdom literature in general, when it comes in particular to the book of Ecclesiastes then that unease manifests itself in an extreme form.
Nietsche had referred to Ecclesiastes as an "eerie guest" within the canon. Von Rad goes so far as to say that in Ecclesiastes Wisdom completely *lost its last contact with Israel's old way of thinking in*

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9 idem p 115

terms of saving history and ... fell back on the cyclical way of thinking common in the east ... in an utterly secular form.[10]

Rylaarsdam in Peake's Commentary reflects the scholarly orthodoxy of his generation when he describes Ecclesiastes as a *cul-de-sac of rational scepticism* ; and he goes on:-

> While strict logic should have driven him to nihilism, he seems to end up as an agnostic relativist.[11]

In one of the most recent commentaries on Ecclesiastes (1988), James Crenshaw maintains this negative tradition of interpretation, giving this summary of the book's message:-

> Life is pointless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. ... Virtue does not bring reward. ... The deity stands distant.[12]

An ancient rabbi even wrote that King Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youthful ardour, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his senility!

Now of course the Book has not been altogether without its supporters. A common view in the early Christian writings saw Proverbs as a handbook for beginners in Wisdom, while Ecclesiastes was a textbook for the advanced course - with its emphasis on despising the things of this world. In the last century, Delitzsch[13] regarded the Preacher (as the author of Ecclesiastes is customarily known) as the epitome of piety.

Some of the more recent studies and commentaries have also sought a more positive evaluation of the Preacher's message - but nonetheless it remains an inescapable fact that Ecclesiastes more than any of the Wisdom books strikes a chord which seems discordant with much of the rest of the OT . The cautionary note sounded by the German scholar Lohfink should therefore be ringing in our ears, when he warns against defining the essential message of

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10 G Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* ET Oliver and Boyd 1962, Vol 1, p 455

11 in Peake's Commentary on the Bible, p387

12 Crenshaw (1988) p 23

13 Delitzsche (1891)

the Old Testament without taking account of the Preacher in our definition:-

> When one characterises Ecclesiastes, as has become fashionable among exegetes, in comparison with the rest of the Bible, as "no personal God", "denial of human freedom", " falling away from salvation-history thought", "a loss of trust in life", one flees the challenge which this book puts to the mind; one exposes oneself to the danger of even understanding wrongly what one was intending to defend."[14]

This is particularly so when one considers the number of points of contact there are between Ecclesiastes and the teaching of Jesus [15] .

What then are we to make of this enigmatic book, in which God is never called by his covenant name, Yahweh, and which is summed up for most scholars, even those who seek to be positive in their assessment of it, by the recurring phrase: *Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*? The Good news Bible puts it more forcefully: *Life is useless, all useless.* Can we still maintain that Wisdom literature, including Ecclesiastes is just as much scripture and just as much gospel as the Law and the Prophets?

Now may I say at this point that there is clearly no time here to discuss questions such as the authorship and date of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Suffice it to say for now that few even among conservative scholars would want to attribute the authorship of the Book to Solomon. Most prefer the view that the Preacher puts himself so to speak into Solomon's shoes, inviting the listener to do the same, so that Preacher and hearer together are forced to the conclusion that even if one had the wealth, pleasure, and power of a super-Solomon it would all be *useless / vanity* in the end.

As to dating, the mainstream of scholarship dates Ecclesiastes in the 3rd century BCE - though it should be noted that one important

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14 Lohfink, pp 15f

15 For example, Mat 16.26 cf Ecc 1.3; Mat 6.28ff cf Ecc 2.4ff; Mat 16.27 cf Ecc 3.17; Luke 12.15 cf Ecc 5.10; Luke 21.34f cf Ecc 9.12; Luke 12.3 cf Ecc 10.20; Mat 25.15ff cf Ecc 11.1ff; Mat 5.42 cf Ecc 11.2; Mat 24.29 cf Ecc 12.2.; Luke 23.46 cf Ecc 12.7

scholar, Mitchell Dahood[16], has argued on linguistic grounds that a date during the period of the monarchy is preferable. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this lecture, I will assume that the Preacher is an unknown author from the 3rd century.

However, before considering the message of the Book, it is first necessary to look critically at a number of presuppositions which underlie much scholarly discussion of Ecclesiastes and which have helped to reinforce the wholly negative interpretation which has been so commonplace.

First of all, it is commonly presupposed that in the normative Wisdom tradition Israel, in common with the ANE in general, there was a strong emphasis on what is sometimes called the *doctrine of deed-consequence* or *the doctrine of retribution and reward.* Under this doctrine, the good could expect always to prosper while the wicked would inevitably suffer in the end. The diligent man would prosper, while the sluggard would find himself in poverty..

Now the presupposition often is that the Book of Proverbs is founded on this doctrine of retribution and reward. It is then further presupposed that, after the exile, and perhaps because of it, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with the whole Wisdom tradition, because of a growing awareness that it is the good who are so often the ones who suffer and the wicked the ones who prosper. Either the Wisdom teaching was wrong about God; or else God was no longer on the throne of the universe. Indeed scholars commonly refer to this reaction as a "crisis" which threatened to undermine the Wisdom tradition completely.

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16 M.J Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician influence in Qoheleth" *Bib* 33 (1952) pp 30ff; also " The Phoenician background of Qoheleth" *Bib* 47 (1966) pp 264ff. For specific criticism of Dahood, see Gordis in *Bib* 41 (19660) pp 395ff. For views similar to those of Dahood , see JR Davila in *Maarav* 5-6 1990) pp69ff ; and also GL Archer in *JETS 12 (1969) pp 167ff.*. While Dahood's view is undoubtedly attractive, the scholarly consensus (from the time of Delitzsch's quip, *If the Book of koheleth was of Solomonic origin then there is no history of the hebrew language)* has been that Qoheleth's Hebrew is late post-exilic tending towards Mishnaic Hebrew.

On this view, it was specifically in response to this crisis that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes were written - challenging and indeed rejecting the conventional and more optimistic Wisdom of Proverbs with its doctrine of retribution [17] . For example, James Crenshaw, in his recent commentary wrote:-

> These [the Preacher's] views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the Book of Proverbs in which fear of God and adherence to the insights of previous generations **guarantee** long life, prosperity, progeny, and honour ... In the resulting religious and intellectual crisis, the voices of Job and Qoheleth rose to express **alternative** perspectives. ... Qoheleth discerns no moral order at all. His argument strikes at the foundation of the sages' universe.[18]

Thus Job and Ecclesiastes are widely credited by scholars as being responsible for the final breakdown of a belief in the mechanical correspondence between good / evil actions and good / evil results; and they therefore represent a rejection of the whole basis on which the Book of Proverbs rests.

But can it be true to say that the dilemma of undeserved suffering was never a problem for generations of wise men until the Preacher and the author of Job drew attention to it? It is manifestly self-evident to anyone with any experience of life, and who looks honestly at the world around him, that people do not always get what they deserve , that the good do not always prosper while the wicked often do, and that the hard-worker does not always gain over the indolent. It is verging on the absurd to suggest that the wise men behind the Book of Proverbs should have sought to insist on a strict deed-onsequence doctrine of retribution and reward in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It is certainly true that the Book of Proverbs sees **some** connexion of righteousness / wisdom with happiness on the one hand and of wickedness / folly with

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17 The suffering servant theme of the latter chapters of Isaiah is also often seen as a parallel attempt to deal with the question of undeserved suffering.

18 Crenshaw (1988) p 23 (my emphasis). Blenkinsopp (1983) had taken a similar view: see pp 46ff.

suffering on the other hand - but not the kind of mechanical doctrine of retribution and reward that (for example) Job's friends appear to represent. Roland Murphy has recently made make a similar point when he says:-

> It is questionable if this "deed-consequence" mindset is as important as claimed. The sages were aware of God' s surprises![19]

It is important to remember that the Book of Proverbs is not a book of laws. Laws are quite different from proverbs - which are good advice towards getting the best out of life. When talking to students about the Book of Proverbs, I like to compare it to the Highway Code. The Highway Code, as its introduction makes clear, is not primarily a book of laws (though it does contain in an appendix a list of the law's specific demands). Like the Book of Proverbs it contains a good deal of common-sense good advice. (It says, for example: *at a level crossing without gates, always give way to trains*!) There is certainly the implication that if you follow the good advice of the Highway Code you are more likely to be safe on the road, and that if you neglect the code you are much more likely to become a cropper. But there can be no guarantee either way. All kinds of circumstances beyond our control, including the behaviour of other drivers, may bring grief to the innocent; and we all know of the most abominable drivers who seem to have nine lives. So it is with the Book of Proverbs, a sort of Highway Code for life, which if we follow it will certainly increase our chances of a safe passage through life, and *vice versa* - **but there can be no guarantees.**

It is worth noting in passing that the so-called deuteronomic or covenant theology of much of the Old Testament is sometimes cited as proof that there was a clear doctrine of retribution and reward entrenched in Israelite religious thinking. Under this covenant theology the nation of Israel was promised prosperity from Yahweh as the reward of loyalty and obedience, whereas national disaster would follow unfaithfulness and disobedience. But in the first place the deuteronomic theology was addressed to the nation not to individuals; and there was no implicit assumption that all good

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19 Murphy (1992) p lxvi

people would escape when the nation as a whole was to suffer - or *vice versa*. A national theology is quite different from a doctrine of automatic retribution for the individual. Indeed the deuteronomic narratives are themselves full of examples of undeserved suffering. Furthermore, the national theology of election and covenant is surely presented to us as an **exceptional** arrangement between God and the **single** nation of Israel.. It was not claimed as a norm of the universe that **all** righteous nations will prosper. Rather it was asserted that, exceptionally, indeed uniquely, Yahweh would ensure the prosperity of his one chosen people subject to their obedience. One could indeed go so far as to say that the deuteronomic theology carries within it the implicit assumption that a mechanical doctrine of retribution and reward is **not** the norm of God's creation.

Now, if the Book of Proverbs was not in fact based on an inflexible doctrine of retribution and reward, and if the deuteronomic theology is about something fundamentally quite different, then we cannot argue that the main purpose of the writing of Job and Ecclesiastes was to question and reject that doctrine as it was found in earlier Biblical literature.

What may of course be true is that the Preacher found that in his own day (as indeed today?) that there were small-minded religious people (of whom Job's friends have become the stereotype) who wanted to turn the genuine Wisdom tradition into a doctrinaire system of absolutes[20]. Some so-called Wisdom schools may have degenerated into this kind of thinking. This may explain the Preacher's occasional scathing comments about the value of Wisdom. It is certainly true that the Preacher is concerned with the issue of the suffering of good people contrasted with the prosperity of the wicked and with the implications of this for faith. [21]. Indeed, more than any other OT writer, he faces up to those issues fair and

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20 The later 2nd century BCE Book of Ecclesiasticus shows a tendency for the Wisdom tradition to become more and more legalistic - a direction of course which led in the end to something of the Pharasaism against which Jesus directs much of his wisdom teaching.

21 eg 3.16

square. Part of his overall contribution to the Wisdom tradition is undoubtedly his exploration of how best one can live **and have faith** in a world in which there is no sure retribution or reward. He does this, however, from **within** the mainstream Wisdom tradition (as represented by the Book of Proversbs) - not as a rejection of the literature that had gone before.

The **second** common presupposition that I want to deal with is the frequent contention that the Book of Ecclesiastes is incoherent and contradictory, with little thread of logic running through it. Certainly the book has defied any consistent structural analysis. Various explanations are offered for the apparent contradictions. The author may be quoting or alluding to a variety of views that are not necessarily his own - commenting on the relative merits of differing standpoints both traditional and contemporary. Sometimes the discussion may take the form of a debate with an imaginary interlocutor in which opposing perspectives are weighed up. In places the Preacher may be reflecting on different views which he has held at various stages of his own life. Or the author may simply be seeking to reflect the uncertainties and ambiguities of life.

Various ingenious theories have been put forward as to the structure of book. ADG Wright, for example, has extensively applied the study of numerology, noting many fascinating features[22]. To take but one example of many, if one takes the numerical value of the Hebrew letters that make up the phrase *vanity of vanities all is vanity* and then adds them up, the answer comes to 216 - which is the exact number of verses in the book[23]. There is certainly significant evidence that though the author may have cultivated an informal, colloquial, non-literary style, nonetheless the book is written in an altogether intricate, careful, and deliberate manner: it is neither haphazard nor incoherent.

Kathleen Farmer in her 1991 commentary suggests:-

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22 ADG Wright in: CBQ 30 (1968) pp 313ff; CBQ 42 (1980) pp 35ff; and CBQ 45 (1983) pp 32ff

23 apart from the few verses that have been added later to the final chapter as a commendation of the work

> ... that the material in Ecclesiastes fits into the category of **journaling** (the process of keeping a reflective journal) better than it conforms to our modern notions of a treatise or a reasoned argument on a single subject.[24]

Another view to which I am particularly attracted is the suggestion of John Eaton who has helpfully likened Ecclesiastes to:-

> ... those modern plays for one actor. The actor, perhaps seated simply on stage at a table, takes the part of a character with experiences to relate and relive, to ponder and evaluate. The audience are closely engaged .. and are led to think again about the nature of life, with all its hopes and disappointments. ... Ecclesiastes is quite like such a play.[25]

This analogy is particularly helpful if (as I will suggest below) it was the Preacher's intention to engage primarily with an audience outside of the community of the faithful.

The **third** presupposition that I want to challenge is with regard to the accuracy of translation and the significance of that familiar phrase *vanity, all is vanity*. The Hebrew word is הבל . It occurs 37 times in the book - and it seems literally to have meant *a puff of breath / wind*. The usage in the Hebrew is thus a metaphor - and the fact that we in our EVV have abstract terms such as *vanity* (or other words which imply *uselessness* or *pointlessness*) is the result of a long historic process of translation, or mistranslation, that goes back through the LXX and the Vulgate, each stage of which has introduced connotations that may be far removed from the meaning of the original[26]. It would perhaps have been better if our translations had simply used some such phrase as *puff of wind*, leaving us to elucidate the metaphor for ourselves from the context.

In a recent study (1993), Daniel Fredericks has argued convincingly, on linguistic and contextual grounds, that the object of the metaphor from a *puff of breath* was **not** to imply the negative connotations of emptiness, uselessness and vanity which have long been associated

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24 K Farmer (1991 p 149

25 J Eaton (1989) p 8

26 The LXX has ματαιωτης, which in turn was represented in the Vulgae as *vanitas*.

with the phrase from the LXX onwards, but to imply simply *fleetingness* or *transcience*, without any necessarily negative overtones. [27]. Kathleen Farmer has similarly argued that the point of the metaphor is lack of permanence rather than lack of value[28].
Equally interesting is the contention of Graham Ogden's that הבל is a technical term for the Preacher to which he gives a very specific meaning of his own. For Ogden הבל:-

> identifies the enigmatic or ironic dimension of human experience; it suggests that life is not fully comprehensible. It in no sense carries the meaning of vanity or meaninglessness.[29]

The basis of both these suggestions is that the definition of the Preacher's use of this metaphor must be contextual, from within the usage of Ecclesiastes itself - though the scholars concerned can each also show parallel instances elsewhere in the Old Testament to back-up the theory. In other words, they argue that we must not gratuitously import into Ecclesiastes connotations which come from the usage of other texts - and especially not if as a result the Preacher is wrongly made in our translation to appear either totally cynical or totally incoherent. Instead of *vanity of vanities,* the allusion on Frederick's view is to the *fleeting* nature of life; whereas on Ogden's thesis the allusion is to the *mystery* of everything in life and creation. The important point is that neither of these alternative definitions carries with it the negative implications of *emptiness,*

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27 DC Fredericks (1993). He argues in effect that the connotation of *emptiness* was an illegitimate transfer of significances from other OT instances of the *hebel* - not justified by the actual contexts in which it is used in Ecclesiastes He cites Ps 143. 3f and Ps 39.5,11,12 as instances outside of Ecclesiastes where *hebel* is used as *transitor* without any connotation of emptiness.

28 op cit pp 142 ff. Farmer also makes the point that in several places (eg 1.14; 2.11; 4.4; 6.9) הבל and רוח are virtually equated - the latter presumably having neither the insubstantial nor the negative overtones so often associated with הבל:

29 Ogden (1989) p 14

uselessness, or *lack of value* that have so profoundly influenced almost all interpretations of the book. Fredericks concludes:-

> It is the best of both worlds to maintain a legitimate biblical connotation for הבל ... and to receive in return a more coherent and a more conventional sage.

Quite apart from the precise connotation of the הבל- metaphor, there is the equally important question as to whether the phrase does in fact represent the book's focus and thesis. Is the Preacher in fact **himself** proclaiming, as centuries of interpretation have assumed, that life and everything in creation is הבל, a mere puff of wind (in whatever sense of the metaphor)? Or does this catch-phrase represent rather the stereotyped view that the author is putting forward to consider, to debate, and eventually to reject? Derek Kidner says, for example:-

> It is easy to forget that, if Qoheleth is taking the stance of the worldly man to show what it involves, this is the very outlook he must expound. And if he is doing it to expose it and create a hunger for something better ... he should not be identified with it except by virtue of his fellow-feeling and depth of insight.[30]

Accordingly, having rejected these three common presuppositions, I would like to contend this afternoon that far from being the most negative book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes has in fact a very positive overall thrust . It is **a discussion or debate on various approaches as to how life can best be lived with happiness and purpose** - a discussion that must nonetheless take account of the fact that we live in a world in which there is much injustice, a world which we can do little to change, and a world in which we cannot know what the future holds for us.

The Preacher does warn us that this quest, if we are intellectually honest, rather than simply doctrinaire or dogmatic, may often stretch any faith we have to the limit and may indeed at times leave us concluding in frustration: *its all a puff of wind*! Nonetheless he asserts that it is indeed God's will that we should seek, and that

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30 Kidner (1976) p 27

normally we should find, "life in all its fullness" (to use a NT phrases from the lips of Jesus[31]). RE Clements puts it this way:-

> ... in Qoheleth we begin to encounter serious wrestling with the question of human happiness ... to focus attention on the life-goals of each individual human being and the relationship of such happiness to virtue.

Notice that the paramount question is not (as in much of the rest of the OT Scriptures): *How can I be righteous?* The paramount question in this book is more like: *How can I be happy?* And why should we feel guilty or embarrassed about such a quest when we are followers of the one who said:-

> I have come that you might have life - life in all its fullness.

This is just one of the many interesting points of contact between Ecclesiastes and the New Testament Gospel.

Secondly, I want to contend that the Preacher may be addressing himself primarily to people who are not necessarily unbelievers but who are nonetheless outside of established religion. He therefore meets them where they are, amid their scepticism and frustration, acknowledging from the outset that there are many unanswered questions about life and the world around us which he refuses to run away from or offer glib answers to. He does not preach **at** them, but nonetheless leaves them at the end of the argument with the almost inescapable (though in the book almost unspoken) conclusion that faith in God does work and should be investigated further.

Now in examining some of these ideas more fully, there are several things that we can usefully notice. First of all, the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, power, even wisdom and book-knowledge are from the outset rejected as the path to happiness and fulfilment in life. The Preacher appeals to those who have already tried out these pursuits and found them in the end to be no more than הבל - a puff of wind - not least in view of the stark reality of which we are reminded many times in the book that each and every one of us will die.

To state as Crenshaw does that *because death ends every human achievement, Qoheleth has concluded that life has no meaning* [32] is

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31 Mat 7.7 & John 10.10

32 Crenshaw (1988) p 25

altogether to miss the point of what the Preacher is saying. Rather, the Preacher is asserting that no theory of human happiness will be valid if it does not face up to the reality of death. Blenkinsopp remarks:-

> Of all things death is least under our control, and to accept this situation is to free the mind from a major source of crippling anxiety. ... It seems that Qoheleth is offering a positive answer to the numbing questions which death poses to any reflective person.[33]

We might note in passing how amazing it is in any age that those who have either a wealth of goods or a wealth of learning find it so hard to interpret life in the context of that certainty of death - a truth which is so often self-evident to the unsophisticated. (I often think in this connexion of a man who worked on a farm which belongs to friends of mine. His name was Paddy. He was what in the country was called a "simple soul": he could neither read nor write. But sometimes for all his lack of sophistication he had profound things to say. On one occasion my farmer friend and one of his neighbours were discussing the serious implications of the price per acre that land had reached in a recent auction. It was Paddy who turned to me and who said: "I don't know why they're so worried about the price of land, for one bit, six foot by two, will do the both of them in the end." The Preacher would have approved of Paddy!) One is reminded of the chilling words of Jesus at the end of the parable of the rich man with many barns and storehouses: -

> You fool. This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared whose then will they be?[34]

Indeed there is so much in the teaching of Jesus that echoes the thinking of the Preacher:-

> A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.[35]

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33 op cit p 66

34 Luke 12.22

35 Luke 12.15

> Consider the lilies of the field ... they neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.[36]

an allusion surely to the picture of Solomon in Ecc 2.

Roland Murphy has asserted that the *kerygma* of Wisdom literature is *life* itself[37]. On this Brueggemann comments that *life* in this context includes *all the assets - emotional, physical, psychical, social, spiritual - which permit joy and security and wholeness*[38]. And the Preacher is primarily speaking of life "under the sun", life in this world. The Preacher will not accept a deferred heavenly goal. He does not deny that there may be a heaven - but he will not have it as a substitute for the legitimate goal of fullness of life in the here and now.

What then will bring happiness and fulfilment in life, if wealth, pleasure, power or even wisdom will not deliver? The Preacher is quite clear on this, and repeats himself on several occasions in the book. We are to enjoy the simple pleasures of life: eating and drinking, home and family life. We should take pleasure in our work, but avoid any workaholic tendency. He would have approved of the words of the popular song *One Day at a Time*. He regards these true pleasures and the ability to enjoy them as gifts from God not to be in any way underestimated or trivialised. One quotation from the text will be representative of several such passages:-

> I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil[39].

Fredericks comments that since life is so transitory one's enjoyment should be an urgent, wholehearted objective in life.[40]

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36 Mat 6. 28f

37 R Murphy, "The Kerygma of the Book of Proverbs" *Interpretation* XX (1966) pp 3ff

38 op cit p 15

39 3:12-13 (RSV). See also 2.24; 3.22; 5.18; 8.15; 9.7-9; 11.9 - 12.7

40 op cit p 77

Of course it goes without saying that the Preacher is not recommending a debased pleasure seeking, an Epicurean hedonism, an *eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die* philosophy. There is a time to laugh - but it is not a shallow frivolity. Side by side with this emphasis on enjoyment there is an emphasis on the need for virtue; and (in Clements' words) for:-

> a distinct awareness that the formation of a personal character and the acquisition of resilience to cope with life's demands and disappointments is a primary goal of wisdom.[41]

Martin Luther's summary may be of interest:-

> Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in everyday affairs and business of this life so that we may live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future.[42]

The Preacher is certainly enjoining on us that God wants us positively to enjoy daily life whenever possible. In the words of the well-known third chapter of the book, there is indeed a time for joy, for dancing, for kissing and making love, as well as for the sadder, sombre side of life which we must also encounter - and we must enjoy those good times to the full when they come. If we don't do so, because perhaps of worries and cares about things over which we have no control, then we are squandering God's greatest gift to us for this world.

Ogden argues this from his analysis of the book's structure, conlcuding that:-

> its thesis is that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery[43]

and he rightly goes on:-

> These calls to enjoyment are actually theological statements of faith in a just and loving God, despite many signs which might appear contrary[44].

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41 op cit p 38

42 "Notes on Ecclesiastes" in *Luther's Works* 15:7-8, quoted in Murphy (1992) p lii

43 op cit p 14

44 op cit p 22

Scholars have of course found different ways of relating the message of Ecclesiastes to that of the Gospel and the NT story - apart that is from the specific correspondences we have already seen between the teaching of the Preacher and that of Jesus. One interesting comment has been made by the German scholar Hertzberg, who ended his commentary with the words:-

> The Book of Qoheleth is the most staggering messianic prophecy to appear in the Old Testament.[45]

By this he seems to have meant that that while the Preacher indeed provides for enjoyment in this life, he also tackles life's fundamental questions in such a way that the Gospel message and NT belief in the life to come are the inevitable logical next step.

To this I would like to add that the Preacher's message, with its frank acknowledgement that there is no automatic reward for righteousness or punishment for the wicked, side by side with insistance on a just and righteous God, thereby lays an essential foundation stone for the NT doctrine of justification by faith.. Even our good works are no more than הבל, a mere puff of wind. How can it ever make sense to argue that a few good deeds in this life could ever entitile us to an eternity of reward as of right? **The doctrine of justification by faith is thus a logical next step to the Preacher's outlook.**

Several commentators quite rightly point out that Ecclesiastes tentatively paves the way for the development of a belief in life after death - a subject on which the Old Testament is overall strangely silent but yet which has become highly developed by New Testament times. As often, the Preacher does not discuss the topic explicitly, but his penetrating analysis of the implications of life and death leaves the reader with little option but to consider that as a corollary to life "under the sun": there must be another life to come. Certainly there are several passages that imply an after-life [46]- though the Preacher acknowledges that he has no idea what form this might take, **and he carefully avoids any suggestion that our conduct in**

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45 H Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* 1963

46 See eg 3.21; 6.12; 7.14

this life should be motivated primarily by some expectation of reward in the next.

Two of the commentators who point up the hints in Ecclesiastes of life after death are Farmer and Ogden. Ogden concludes that Ecclesiastes:-

> represents the earliest OT document to express, albeit in a tentative manner, the thought that there is something beyond death.[47]

The last (but by no means least) contention that I want to put forward this afternoon is that the Book of Ecclesiastes may have a much more important part to play than has been realised in Christian witness and apologetic among the unchurched community. I began this lecture by pointing out that Wisdom is pictured in Prov 8 as standing at the city gate, at the heart of the hustle and bustle of city life. The Book of Ecclesiastes, perhaps most of all books in the OT, meets modern men and women at the point of their pressures and busyness, recognising their questionings about the meaning of life, about the justice or otherwise of God, amid their disillusionment with materialism, and their suspicion of established religion and its tendency to duck out of the problems of this life by a slick appeal to the next. To begin our apologetic to such people with the themes of Law and Covenant might well seem to them to be a dated irrelevance. But perhaps the Preacher is the one who can reach them - ironically as the one who does not preach, or at least does not preach at them, but who nonetheless can lead them to a point where faith in God and indeed the Gospel message is the only feasible way forward. The Preacher is the one who can present to them, among other things, a God who actually wants people to experience "life in all its fullness", in this world as well as in the next, and a God who can actually deliver where other pursuits and philosophies have failed. Whybray has commented:-

> One way of approaching his [the Preacher's] thought is to see him as a theologian or perhaps even an apologist who was trying to find a way of reconciling the Jewish faith

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47 op cit p 15

> which he had inherited with the world as he knew it: a "modern" world which was undergoing rapid change. [48]

John Eaton speaks of the Preacher as the one who:-

> preferred to feel the destitution and futility of life rather than be fed with what is not truth. He sees the evil under the sun so clearly that he cries that it might be better to be dead ... When such a man as this can yet teach a way of joy, he has earned a hearing[49].

Brueggemann also speaks of the whole of the Wisdom literature, including Ecclesiastes, as the best means of establishing contact between Biblical faith and our contemporary culture.[50] He says:-

> Wisdom is contextualisation at its best.[51]

There are many facets to Ecclesiastes. I have sought only to highlight a few in a deliberately selective way to suggest a different overall picture from that which has conventionally been presented.

The Wisdom literature is part of Scripture - **including** the Book of Ecclesiastes. We need to take its peculiar insights on board if our overall understanding of the message of the Scripture is to be complete. It provides us with several interesting links between the OT and the NT. It represents an approach to witness and apologetic from which we can learn much as we seek to relate our faith to the modern world.

Crenshaw remarks in his commentary:-

> As in a kaleidoscope, apparently incongruent features of the text come together, almost magically, framing many different but meaningful configurations.[52]

As I shake the kaleidoscope of Ecclesiastes this afternoon, out of the whole complex of ideas contained in the Book, the thing that comes to the centre of the picture for me above all else is the simple fact that **God actually wants us to enjoy life here and now.** If we want to communicate our faith in today's world, then, yes we must face

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48 op cit p 82

49 op cit p 135

50 op cit p 7

51 idem p 89

52 op cit p 49

the difficult questions of suffering and sin, of guilt and forgiveness; but we must also convey the message that, in God's book, in the Preacher's words:

there is a time to dance.

J. Patton Taylor