

Time and Eternity: Qohelet's Dual Classroom

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Introducing Qohelet

The book of Ecclesiastes is arguably the most enigmatic book in the entire Bible. This enigma is twofold: (1) the self-identification of the author, and (2) the basic conceptual framework of the book. The pursuit of these puzzling issues is a precursor to any attempt to explicate Qohelet's thought.

The author of the book identifies himself as Qohelet. The word occurs several times in the book but nowhere else in the OT (Loader, 1986, 1). The term is derived from the Hebrew stem קהל (qhl) from which the noun *qahal* is also derived. *Qahal* refers to an assembly or congregation of people, perhaps in a worship context (Davidson, 1986, 7) though not necessarily so (Murphy, 1992, xx). Qohelet is the substantive participial form of qhl and denotes someone who is connected to *qahal*. Several possibilities present themselves as *qohelet* could refer to one who serves *qahal*, convenes *qahal*, or speaks in *qahal* (Murphy, xxi). Equally debatable is whether this person is a leader of *qahal*, simply a member of *qahal*, or one who is tasked with bringing *qahal* members together. With these possibilities in mind, Qohelet could be "teacher," "preacher," or "one who assembles *qahal*." The idea of someone fulfilling this assembling task appears to fit the sense in the book best but the morphology of the term does not allow further precision (Fox, 1999, 161).

However, this discussion of qhl uncovers a further dilemma because the word *qohelet* is in feminine form. What is expected is the masculine participle *qohel*, a construction frequently employed as a job designation, or the causative *maqhil* (Alter, 2010, 337). The *qohel* nominal type is observed in several similar constructions to indicate occupation; for example, *boqer* for cowherd, *korem* for vineyard owner or vintner, and *kohen* for priest (Fox, 161). In the book, *qohelet* is used with the article (7:27; 12:8) and without the article (1:1, 2, 12; 12:9, 10). Despite its feminine morphology, the word may have been employed as a title of office as evidenced in the use of *soperet* in Ezra 2:55 and Neh 7:57 (Fox, 160). The ambiguity of the term allows for multiple interpretations and "teacher" may be the possibility that suits this study, but the book's author is simply referred to in this study by the Hebrew appellation, Qohelet.

The second enigma of the book pertains to Qohelet's conceptual framework. The book is enveloped by the expression *hebel habelim* (1:2 and 12:8), constructed from the Hebrew הֶבֶל (*hebel*), whose precise meaning is uncertain. Several possibilities have been proposed for *hebel* with a wide range of meanings (the KJV reading of "vanity" for *hebel* is no longer applicable in contemporary English due to the semantic change of the word; see Alter, 339-340). Fox proposes the idea of "absurd" for *hebel*. He contends that this fits the book best as the sense of the absurd "arises from a contradiction between two undeniable realities" and provides "disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality" (31). Murphy suggests that *hebel* "is a colourful expression for achieving nothing" and favours the "vanity" reading as code word while conceding that this is not the best rendering (lix). Davidson leans in the direction of *hebel* as something futile and argues that this meaning is frequently used in the OT to describe the powerlessness of the gods of the other peoples (9). Tidball suggests "meaningless" as the best way to understand Qohelet's use of *hebel* (1989, 12), a reading also preferred by Loader (20). Constable refutes this idea of "meaninglessness" and asserts, "As Solomon used this word in Ecclesiastes he meant lacking real substance, value, permanence, or significance" (2013, 7). In view of all this, I posit that the HCSB reading of "absolute futility" is a fairly close counterpart of *hebel habelim*.

Hebel “probably indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air” (Alter, p. 340). The word most likely refers to the transient nature of breath and pictures *hebel* as the opposite of “life-breath” (Alter, 340). Fox agrees with the literal meaning of *hebel* as vapor (evident elsewhere in Isa 57:13; Prov 13:11; 21:6; and Ps 144:4) but proceeds to outline the various metaphoric derivations of this idea (pp. 27-29). These are: ephemerality (Job 7:16; Ps 39:6 Prov 21:6); worthlessness or triviality (Isa 49:4); nothingness; mystery; deceit (Zech 10:2; Ps 62:10; Prov 31:30; Job 21:34); and nonsense (Jer 10:3, 8; Ps 39:7).

The construction *hebel habelim* in 1:2 and 12:8 is a form of the superlative used only in these verses (see Murphy, 3) and could be understood as the most transient breath or vapour (Alter, 340, offers the reading of “merest breath”), a construction that is also applied to such expressions as “holy of holies.” The phrase *hebel habelim* serves a dual purpose, as literary inclusio for the book and to encapsulate the skeptical nature of Qohelet’s deliberations. However, it is possible to posit alternative readings for *hebel habelim*. One possible reading views the phrase as highlighting the pessimism of Qohelet’s worldview. Qohelet “intends an all-embracing declaration of nullity” and in so doing leaves no doubt that he “regards all things as meaningless” (Loader, 20). The dark overtones of this approach can be observed in the fact that the word *hebel* is used 38 times in the book and “only 35 other times elsewhere in the Old Testament. In 13 of these passages the word describes idols” (Constable, 7, n. 18). Qohelet considers much of life *hebel*. Wisdom, wealth, success, pleasure, and even life itself are *hebel*. Nothing is permanent, nothing lasts, nothing is of eternal value. The apparent skepticism descends into such dark corridors that Qohelet shocks his readers by maintaining that there is really no difference between humans and animals because both meet the same fate (3:19).

Another possible reading of *hebel habelim* underscores the fact that Qohelet employs this phrase as code for his diatribe against the secular view which maintains that there is no real meaning to life and one must simply accept the inevitable and surrender to its grip. Further, it may be argued, as does Ellul, that the expression “implies a value judgment” and Qohelet provides “the means to measure each reality” so as to eliminate the “false meanings” attached to such realities (1990, 51). Here, Qohelet is playing devil’s advocate against the pessimism of those who live without a clear understanding of eternal destinies and values, those who live without God as referent to life.

Close examination of Qohelet’s thought reveals that this pessimism is somewhat illusory. The book is also peppered with statements concerning the pleasure of life and the need to enjoy life to its limits (for example, 3:13; 9:7-10; 11:7-10). While appearing at times to be gloomy and pessimistic, Qohelet actually urges the pleasure of life and insists that there is nothing better than to eat well, enjoy life, and seek wisdom (see Eaton, 1983, 36). He also presents a spectrum of thought that ranges from *hebel habelim*, with its connotation that things under the sun are *hebel*, to discourse about the presence of God, with its depiction of value and worth which is truly eternal. As Ellul puts it, “Qohelet’s judgement, however, is not the vain harangue of someone who is by nature a pessimist . . . He tries to make intelligible the secret that the wise person should receive from God” (58). Set in this framework is Qohelet’s best known passage, Qoh 3:1-15.

Time and Eternity: Dual Classrooms

Qoh 3:1-15 is the most widely recognised passage of the entire book. The book itself plays a major liturgical role in Judaism, is listed by some Hebrew traditions as belonging to Megillot (the five scrolls), and was read during the Sabbath of Sukkoth, the feast of Tabernacles (LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 1996, 498), its role among Christians is much more nebulous almost to the point of neglect. Even Theodore of Mopsuestia, the influential exegete of the Antioch school, questioned the

canonical standing of Qohelet (LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, 498). Arguably, even among Christians, Qoh 3:1-15 (especially the first eight verses) is well-known (Loader, 35) and functions as the crux passage of the book.

Qoh 3:1-15 “constitutes a single unit with a continuous train of thought” (Fox, 193). It is bound by several repetitions of certain words like *תּוֹ* (*‘et*, “time”). The unit is divided into two sub-units, 3:1-9 and 3:10-15. The first sub-unit was popularized in the 1960’s in the form of a pop hit song entitled “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Qoh 3:1-9 is structured in a unique way. The pericope is framed by vv 1 and 9 which sandwich seven pairs of poetic antithetical lines (vv 2-8) exhibiting a specific structural pattern. The first verse provides a general introduction to the subsequent lines (vv 2-8), while verse 9 serves as a bridge to the second sub-unit (3:10-15). Loader refers to this unit as “one of the most ingenious” passages in the OT and asserts that its appeal lies in the beauty of its perfect symmetry and the precise balance of its pronouncements (33). It is the verses within the envelope (vv 2-8) that have attracted the most attention.

Verse 1 reads: “There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven” (HCSB). When examining various translations (see below), the complexity of v 1 begins to emerge:

- “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (ESV)
- “For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth” (NET Bible)
- “A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven” (JPS)
- “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (NIV)
- “Everything has a season, and a time for every matter under the heavens” (Alter, 354)
- “For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under the heavens” (Fox, 191)
- For everything there is a moment, and there is a time for every affair under the heavens (Murphy, 28)

The verse follows an ABB’A’ chiasmic structure which reads: *lakkol zeman v’et lekhol khefets*. Literally rendered, (A) *for everything* (B) *a season* (B’) *and a time* (A’) *for every activity*. The noun *‘et* has a similar semantic range as the English word “time.” However, the noun *zeman*, while a synonym of *‘et*, refers more to “time” that is appointed for something (Neh 2:6; Esth 9:27, 31; see Fox, 200-201). The chiasmic parallelism utilized here implies that time is something ordained by someone, God perhaps, and that time is cyclical, as are the experiences of life. The events listed in the subsequent verses are more typical than specific (Fox, 200). Consequently, Qohelet’s usage should be viewed not as something prescriptive but rather descriptive (Loader, 35). The apparent fatalism expressed in this text could only be true if the second sub-unit is not a factor (see below).

The structure of verses 2-8 reveals a pendulum movement that climaxes in a simple chiasm. Each pair of statements contains depictions of things that are negative (N) and positive (P). The negative statements include events that are unpleasant or destructive, while positive statements represent the opposite (Fox, 193). The pairing of statements reflects neither complementarity nor the presence of merisms (Fox, 194). The pairings do however indicate a polarity which implies a totality of life. When these statements are analysed, the following pattern emerges (see Fox, 193; Murphy, 32; Loader, 34). The first pair is made up of P N//P N statements (v 2). This is followed by two pairs of N P//N P and N P//N P (vv 3-4). Next comes two pairs of P N//P N and P N//P N (vv 5-6), followed by a pair of N P//N P (v 7). The final pair is a simple, climactic chiasm P N × N P (v 8). The following enumeration sets out these relationships.

3:2	P N (being born-dying)	//	P N (planting-uprooting)
3:3	N P (killing-healing)	//	N P (tearing down-building up)

3:4	N P (weeping-laughing)	//	N P (mourning-dancing)
3:5	P N (casting-gathering stones)	//	P N (embracing-shunning embrace)
3:6	P N (seeking-losing)	//	P N (keeping-discarding)
3:7	N P (tearing-sewing)	//	N P (keeping silent-speaking)
3:8	P N (loving-hating)	×	N P (war-peace)

Qohelet is not saying that these events, opaque as some of them are, must happen or that we should expect them to. Nevertheless, he is saying that this is how life essentially works; life is a tapestry of positives and negatives. The ever-changing kaleidoscope we call “life” comprises of joy and mourning, life and death, peace and war, and so on and so forth; things “unmasked and without our control” as well as things unhelpful or chosen (Davidson, 22). “The positive-negative pairing teaches that everything in life, even unfortunate and destructive deeds and events, have their right times” (Fox, 194). As Loader puts it, there is a specific occasion for everything that happens. “When the occasion arrives, the event that fits it occurs . . . Whatever happens happens, and there is nothing you can do about it” (35). These things happen to us, yet this is not mere determinism as these things “are under divine control” and, therefore, are God’s times instead of ours (Murphy, 39). This is not so much a portrayal of the inevitability of life but rather its reality. This mixture of positives and negatives is what each of us will encounter in life. This poem is “a statement of the divine determination of all that occurs” (Fox, 197).

After confronting such inescapable reality, Qohelet is left with an exasperated rhetorical question: “What does the worker gain from his struggles?” (v 9 HCSB). This question is the climax of Qohelet’s “Catalogue of Times” (Fox, 208). “The contradictory events of human life, both good and bad, are beyond man’s control” (Alter, 355). This question is essentially a judgment on human activity, for humans are “locked into a world of events” that they cannot shape (Murphy, 34).

To every person, life is no more than serving time. There is a certain despondency regarding life that leaves the thinking person burdened by inevitability. The very thing that should serve humanity becomes a tyrant that no one can escape. Time runs its own course and people are quite helpless to do much about it and “no amount of effort can change the time that God has determined” (Murphy, p. 34). This is the first classroom that Qohelet entered where he learned about the gloom and doom of human existence.

However, Qohelet is not yet done for he continues his discourse by entering a different classroom. While he has struggled in the classroom of time (3:1-9), with all of its trappings and implications, in 3:10 he enters another, a classroom of eternity. In this new classroom, Qohelet admits that there is something else to learn. He begins to fathom the reasons behind the litany of times and its discomfiting message. The veil is lifted, allowing Qohelet to discover the hand of God behind the apparent paradoxes of life.

The second sub-unit in this passage also exhibits a noteworthy pattern. The centre piece (vv 12-13) addresses the value of the joy of life and “is enclosed by two sections dealing with the inscrutability of God’s work” (vv 10-11 and 14-15; see Loader, 39). In verse 10, Qohelet speaks of what he “sees” (the verb רָאָה is used here; cf. 3:16; 4:1, 4, 7; 6:11; 7:15; 8:10; 9:11, 13), while in verses 12 and 14 he says, “I know” (the verb יָדַע is utilized). Qohelet experiences a paradigm shift by what he “sees” and “knows.” The repetition of יָדַע with its connotations of “learning” and “understanding” evidently points to the new lessons that Qohelet is compelled to embrace (Murphy, 35).

The first lesson concerns the control that God exercises over human existence. Such control involves what God assigns for people to do (v 10), the appropriateness of God’s actions (v 11a), and the fact that God will always remain a mystery (v 11b). Qohelet admits, “I have seen the task that God has

given people to keep them occupied” (v 10 HCSB). Our lives are ordained by God and it is he who determines what we become. On our own, life would be no more than *hebel habelim*. Further, God “has made everything appropriate in its time” (v 11a HCSB). God continues to make “things at all times;” he makes “the day of good fortune and the day of bad fortune (7:14)” (Fox, 209). He “has also put eternity in their hearts” (v. 11b HCSB). There is no consensus on the second sentence among scholars because of differing opinions concerning the use of the Hebrew word עולם (*’olam*). The word *’olam* normally means “eternity” (cf. 1:4; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6; 12:5) and, in this verse, it is the antonym of time. However, it has been suggested that in this verse the word should be emended to *’elem* to mean “ignorance” or “darkness” (see discussion by Fox, 210-212; cp. Davidson, 23). It has also been suggested that *’olam* here means “duration” (cf. Gen 9:16; Exod 21:6; Ps 61:7) rather than eternity (see discussion by Murphy, 34). It seems best to retain the nuance of “eternity” as Qohelet is attempting to depict two different temporal realities: time and eternity (see Davidson, 23; Alter, 355).

This view of time and eternity allows Qohelet to share two more new things he has learned. In verse 12, using the emphatic sense of “I know,” he tells his readers that the best thing about life is simply to enjoy it because it is a gift from God (v 13). It may be said that “there is only one possible lifestyle: making the best of the prevailing circumstances” (Loader, 40).

“Qohelet urges us to enjoy the pleasures of life here and now, but he is perfectly aware it is a matter of luck, or God’s unfathomable determination, whether we are given the time and means to enjoy the good things of life . . .” (Alter, 356)

Despite the pervading presence of *hebel habelim* in life, such darkness is not the only reality since there is another realm of reality. Time is one classroom, but eternity affords another. Qohelet also knows that while time and its contents are fleeting, eternity, the abode of God, is non-fleeting.

Finally, Qohelet learns that whatever God does lasts forever (v 14a), there is nothing that can be added or subtracted from his work (v 14b), and man’s primary task is to stand in awe of God (v 14c; cf. Deut 4:2; see Tidball, 52). God is in complete control of time and life (Alter, 356). We can neither add a favourable event or subtract an unfavourable one from God’s determinations (Loader, 41); he is the divine guarantor of the secure life (Eaton, 82). To punctuate the thought, Qohelet winds up this unit with another enigmatic statement: “Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. God repeat what has passed” (v 15 HCSB). Despite the difficulty of interpreting this final verse, the gist appears to be that God is in control both in time and eternity (cf. Fox, 213-214); “nothing escapes the dominion of God, who has everything within the divine purview” (Murphy, 36). In the classroom of time, Qohelet has learned about human privilege (vv 12-13), while in the classroom of eternity he has faced the purpose of God (vv 14-15), bringing full circle the pessimism encountered in the litany of time by replacing it with an immutable hope in the security God offers (Loader, 41).

Two Classrooms: Reflections

If Qohelet’s message is to amount to anything in the life of God’s people, then his two classrooms proposal should be carefully contemplated. Every lesson that is taught in the classroom, regardless of the field of study, should always endeavour to move the students from one classroom to the other. The classroom called “time” is essential for dealing with the reality of human existence. Even though such examination may compel students to confront the darkness of life, it is a necessary educational option. To function within the real world, students should be taught that their lives are not those of birds in a gold cage. There is pain, tragedy, and suffering all around us. Some of this is man-made, while some of it belongs to the natural order. Yet, such lessons require a counter-

balance or they will stifle the mind, burden the heart, and create students who are crippled, unable to enjoy the positives of life.

This is where the other classroom enters the picture. Every lesson of life should have its eternal counterpart for no matter how dark life may appear under the sun, God is present over it. What we are unable to fathom in time, is explicable in eternity. This is why Qohelet is able to conclude his entire discourse with the stirring words of Qoh 12:13, “When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity” (HCSB). Through the telescope of time, Qohelet has viewed the colours of eternity and this has put paid to the argument that life is *hebel habelim*. Without God’s eternal perspective, life is indeed *hebel habelim*. With God life is quite something else. The discovery of these two perspectives (classrooms) is the true challenge of all educational pursuits. It was true for Qohelet; it should remain a truism today.

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