A Disciple for Our Time
A Conversation

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Qoheleth's work invites a passionate response and a new way of living in paradox.

Though a product of antiquity, Qoheleth has an uncanny knack for addressing issues of contemporary relevance. Yet we tend to respond not with conversation but with analysis and critique—"What are the precursors to Qoheleth's views?" or, "What is the unifying thread of Qoheleth's dissonant themes?" While these are important questions, it must be noted that Ecclesiastes is first and foremost a performative work full of probing questions. And so Qoheleth, a "disciple for our time," beckons a performative response, as in the following letter.¹

Dear Qoheleth,

Some people think I am depressed because I am so fascinated with your infamous little work. They are wrong. I happen to believe that your honest views on life are quite relevant for discipleship in our time.

Having said that, however, I need to point out that you are probably the most misunderstood and neglected "preacher" of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I say misunderstood, because most people who have heard about you assume that you are thoroughly pessimistic, if not fatalistic. Your "sermon" seems too ambiguous and paradoxical for most

¹In Hebrew, Qoheleth refers to one who gathers the assembly to hear instruction (Eccl 12:9–10), hence the Septuagint's ἡ οἰκήσιας, "the preacher," and its correlation with ἡ οἰκήσια "the assembly" (Eccl 1:1; 7:27; 12:8).
people. Besides, what does one do with a preacher whose signature saying is "vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity"? Nevertheless, I cannot count you as a gloomy pessimist. You, Qoheleth, are a most astute theologian.

Your probing reflections are more clever than we imagine the biblical tradition to be. Your subtle mocking of unreflected conventions and simplistic values is refreshing. Perhaps apart from the writer of that comic story, Jonah, you are the most ironic writer of the biblical tradition. You do not have time for theology divorced from life or piety, theology that does not ring true to people's life experiences, and you make the point with pithy irony. Most people, understandably, can only cope with small doses of your kind of realism.

You might easily have begun with a statement such as "I think, therefore I haven't a clue," or, "The sum of the parts can never be calculated," or, "What has been?—but what will be!" Oh yes, you did say the last one. You begin by suggesting that all things keep returning, even if in new guises, and yet, we can never get to the bottom of anything. We have access only to traces of traces—whether in language, culture, or religion. We can never get to the absolute empirical bedrock, and therefore the unvarnished truth, of anything. Our "access" to truth is blocked.

By the way, I like your use of a pseudonym! "The son of David, king in Jerusalem"—now that is audacious. It is also quite ironic, especially in light of your caricature of proverbial wisdom attributed to Solomon. You dare to question the "incontestable" patriarchal, parental voice of Proverbs: "Son! Hear your father's instruction!" and its countless variations. Perhaps you wanted your contemporaries to think and reflect for themselves on life's demands. Of course, one does not want people to learn all the pitfalls of life simply on their own. However, prudence, no matter how plausible and useful, can easily founder on a simple fact: we do not know what will happen in the future. Tomorrow I might be dead; even that is something I cannot predict. People might assume they are wise, but who knows what the future will hold?

Now according to you, God is not a ventriloquist's puppet whose blessings we can secure by our good behavior—if we are good, God is obliged to do us good. This notion

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2Eccl 1:2; 12:8. *Hebel* is akin to describing something as completely transient; hence, "vapor" is an excellent alternative to "vanity."

3Eccl 1:9. Australian media commentator Phillip Adams coined the phrase "I think, therefore I haven't a clue."


5To say anything about life, for example, we use words, images, and metaphors that thread endlessly through our various discourses. What we name, describe, or tag with words signifies far more than we intend or assume—hence the traces. Current philosophical perspectives on "the trace" are found in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (d. 1995) and Jacques Derrida.

6Qoheleth appears to mock even the power of kings to ameliorate vanity (2:1–12; 4:13–16; 9:14–15).

7The writing belongs to the Hellenistic era (no earlier than the third century B.C.E.), therefore much later than King Solomon's era. Other writers of antiquity followed the same tactic (*Psalms of Solomon, Odes of Solomon, Testament of Solomon*). Biblical tradition shows evidence of contest and dialogue throughout, as one writer pits perspectives of God, faith, and community against another writer, but mostly, ever so subtly. Therefore, we might speak of contesting emphases, nuances, and subtle ironies.


has troubling theological implications: if we are not prospering, we have not been good—which is perverse. As you put it, Qoheleth, this is vanity, or vapor, and you have a good nose for foul air. Like the Scottish philosopher David Hume many centuries later, you break the assumed connection between cause and effect. Life is full of non sequiturs—things that do not follow sequentially or necessarily. You do not subscribe to a pernicious moral determinism with everyone’s just desserts calculated. Rather, you are an astute observer of humans who continually face similar, but quite random, events in their lives (9:11–12). One person gets cancer; another loses a child in a freak accident; while another prospers out of all proportion to an apparent lack of moral character. Circumspect prudence may be commendable, but it is mute about the paradoxes of life. The reality of inexplicable suffering contradicts simplistic cause-and-effect platitudes about life. Life’s vicissitudes, you recognized, are perplexing and difficult to accept (7:15; 8:14). While God does not determine the contingencies of human freedom as a divine puppeteer pulling the strings of human destiny, God is the source of life, providing the stuff of life with which we must work creatively, regardless of the unpredictable contingencies of life, serendipitous or tragic.

The thought of the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (you would like Søren) was permeated with the spirit of this observation: while we may comprehend life through the past, because it is known to us, we must live life ever before us, which is unknown to us. Living life one day at a time takes all our skill. Like Søren, you would have us embrace the present rather than be absorbed with the future. You distinguish between living life in the present and living in a fiction about life, preoccupied with the future—that is, being somewhere other than where we are now. This is a little like using a credit card. You would have called it debt. A credit card enables us to live in an economic fiction, to be somewhere else economically. This has its advantages, but financial fictions, especially on credit cards, invariably catch up with us!

For you, Qoheleth, it is futile to try to find life elsewhere, other than where it is—right before us. “Enjoy what is near you—enjoy your relationships, work, laughter and even sorrow, for life is here, not somewhere else,” I hear you say.10 This makes perfect sense, but how many of us really do this? You might like to know that a later preacher said something similar: “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear ... [c]onsider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither store nor barn, and yet God feeds them ... [a]nd can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”(Luke 12:22–25). I am second-guessing you, but the best way to prepare

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for the future is to give oneself fully to the demands, responsibilities, and joys of life before us now. As we are today, in all probability, barring unforeseen circumstances, so we will be next week, or even next year.

Your most prosaic, common sense advice addresses what is essential to our happiness and well being: to have human company and solidarity in whatever we do or pursue (Eccl 4:9–12). (This makes a mockery of "community" in some urban neighborhoods where "social responsibility" amounts to maintaining curb appeal.)

You know all about desire and the divided self—divided between wanting and not having. Absorbed solely in the pursuit of future prosperity, status, or fame, people cannot sleep at night, and people like to get their sleep (5:12). I am not sure how people handled sleeplessness in your time, but in our time a huge chemical industry has been built around insomnia. Preoccupied with attaining prosperity, people miss out on the very simple pleasures of life, like hot baked bread, conversation with friends, giggling kids, love, walking, reading, music, and sound sleep. As Wittgenstein pointed out, the things that matter are so "familiar" to us that we fail to "see" them. Searching for happiness, we can be like someone searching for mislaid spectacles . . . while wearing them!

Some might think we cannot make any difference in your kind of world, yet we can—once we recognize that our engagement with every "now" is fraught with transcendent possibilities. The particularities of life, not abstractions, are important to you—like planting and reaping, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, rending and sewing, silence and speech. These are descriptive of life's various symmetries (birth and death), but not all are necessarily determinative (kill and heal, love and hate, war and peace). Such observations of human activity affirm the reality of God as creator and life-giver within the particularities of human life—"everything has its opportune time." Indeed, rather than being an enemy, time is the medium through which we discover the amazing diversity of life and the uniqueness of human experience. "There is a time for everything"—and time takes time, but in it we are; in it we exist (3:1). Trying to defeat time, we only kill ourselves. After all, "being" is "being in time."

You preserve an amazing tension between freedom, which we must exercise responsibly, and the inevitability of things like death, not to mention taxes (7:2, 9–16). We are all on death row; the day we are born, we begin to die. Yet human lives—whether brilliant or mediocre—remain incorrigible mysteries. This is as it should be, if life is to be accepted as a serendipitous gift (7:14–18).

I have to disagree with those who have claimed that you are the enfant terrible of biblical tradition and that your "ratbag writing" does not deserve to be called scripture because

it is too pessimistic and devoid of “proper” faith in God.¹⁴ I admit you never mention YHWH, the covenant LORD, nor do you appeal to the messianic traditions in order to resolve the weighty issues of life. On the one hand, perhaps to the chagrin of some of your devout contemporaries, you appear to be agnostic about life after death (3:19–22). Perhaps you do not wish to be dogmatic about issues that only faith can address. After all, that “life is” is an indisputable fact. On the other hand, you avoid using “life after death” as a means of evading responsibility for present challenges. Marx once said that “religion is the opium of the people.” You, Qoheleth, would have us avoid such religion. Instead, you goad us into reflective faith that is aware of the world in which we live and of God to whom we must be responsible (12:11).

Next to Jeremiah and a few others, you are one of the early model disciples of our tradition. Whatever some might assume, I don’t believe you are lost in an existential nightmare spawned from an inability to ascertain meaning. I think you provide a healthy dose of humility, enhanced with appropriate fear and trembling in the face of life’s mysteries (5:1–2).¹⁵

Your meditation is a witty critique of doctrinaire and facile theologies that claim to know the “purpose of God.” You counsel us to recognize that some things in life are impenetrable in their paradoxes (8:16–17; 11:5). You have no time for glib answers to complex issues such as evil and suffering (7:14; 8:1a). Like the writer of Job, you leave us in a world with a God who is bigger than we can get our heads around (Job 38–41). Of course, if we could get our minds around everything that God is up to, God would not be God (Eccl 3:14; 5:2). We cannot corner God with our flimsy time- and culture-bound fabrications of theology. To recognize infinity in our midst—the transcendence of God—is to surrender our theological pretensions. God has put infinity—past and future—before us, yet we cannot comprehend the whole picture of what God is doing, from alpha to omega. Therefore, it is right that we should be “in awe of God.”¹⁶ This might feel like entering a free-fall without knowing if there is a bottom, but that is faith, at least faith in a God big enough not to be squeezed into the limited scope of our understanding and experience.¹⁷

Your insight that God comes as otherness to our claims about God and life is most valuable for human community. If God is not Other, then no one is safe from the tyranny of ideologues, including religious ones.¹⁸ Recognizing that we do not have all the answers, recognizing the infinity of God in our midst, we can let go of our idols and arrogant cer-

¹⁴Many scholars assume that 12:9–14 is an appendix designed to tidy up Qoheleth’s “agnostic theology.”
¹⁵Fear and trembling after Kierkegaard’s brief but famous pseudonymic reflection on Abraham and the ethical otherness of God. (Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio, trans. A. Hannay [New York: Viking Penguin, 1985]).
¹⁷Eccl 3:11; 14; 5:2; 7:18b; 8:12b.
tainties. We can also discover that God works elusively, mysteriously, and redemptively in our lives in many ways. The ways of God are affirmed only by faith. They are not self evident. A beautiful sunset might "pour forth speech," but it is also mute about the meaning of life's repetitions occurring over countless millennia.19

You do not say much about faith, at least not explicitly. However, I suspect the following, seemingly banal comment offers a unique contribution to biblical faith: "What is is far beyond, and a deep depth—who will discover it?" (7:24). This is an intriguing confession of sapiential faith, and perhaps that is why your work concludes with an admonition to

"remember now your Creator . . . fear God and keep the commandments" (12:1, 13). There are tinges of the Jewish philosopher Levinas here.20 Like you, he sees a summons to responsibility for "the other" in the ethical imperative of compassion, the aim of the law.21 This, as you state, is the summary of the whole business of life. Here is where one discovers the meaning of life—in the summons to responsibility for one's neighbor. Our neighbor exists as a prism between God and ourselves.22 Here is where one touches transcendence in healthy fear and trembling, transcendence that is nevertheless "nearer than a sibling." This too is where we must "work out our salvation" (Phil 2:12).

For all your equivocation about wisdom and our capacity to know, it is ultimately better to be wise than otherwise (Eccl 9:13–18). Besides, we have to know, hence your ecclesial vocation of collecting pithy insights into life and human conduct, juxtaposing them, often incongruously, simulating our own experience of a paradoxical world around us (6:11; 12:9–10). Unlike some of your contemporaries, you do not diminish the complexities of life that incessantly confront us. You are not suggesting that life should be as you describe it, but rather discerning that life is like this. Our experiences of life always outstrip our conceptual pigeonholes. Faith needs to be fully informed of the textures of life—the daily paradoxes, seeming absurdities, and delightful serendipities—in order for it to be woven into the warp and woof of integral, purposeful living. The only alternative is to reduce faith to an embarrassing, useless appendage.

Aphorisms are not lightweight.23 They are much heavier than weighty tomes, even if they fit on a postcard, which is about the size of some preacher's notes. By the way, I agree

19Ps 19:1–4; Eccl 1:4–10.
23Aphorism (apo + horos), literally "away from a boundary or limit," exhibits a gnomic or timeless sense.
with your comments in 12:12 ("Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh"), but then, I am hopelessly addicted to this particular pleasure, and I cannot see that I will ever be released from its grip.

Qoheleth, you did your theology where most of us do theology, consciously or unconsciously, by observing and learning from the experience of life, from "the University of Life," and this includes reading books, listening, and dialoguing with others, as we engage in intense observation and interpretation of life. You of all people, Qoheleth, may be interested to know that sometimes the University of Life is used as an excuse for doing none of these things! (I cannot tell whether you would laugh or weep.) You remind us that each generation needs to do its theology in its time, context, and community. Indeed, wrestling theologically with difficult issues of life out of our collective experience, past and present, is a biblical imperative. We take all that has been handed down to us—you, Job, the psalmists and prophets, Paul and Luke—and within communities of intentional inquiry, we listen, learn, and wrestle with their voices. We observe, we do, and together we discover the living word of God for our time. For this reason, Qoheleth, we should always listen to you, for you show us how to do such theology—with honesty and even a sense of mischief.24

Yours sincerely,

Ann Acolumthia

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