

Navigating Life in a World that has Been Scarred by the Fall: Reflections on Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 and Living in a World of Suffering

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Qohelet's¹ world, like ours, is marred by the curse and suffering. As he takes us on a journey to discover meaning and purpose in life, he observes many results of the Fall, such as suffering, tragedy, and death. In 4:1 he notes an example of suffering: "Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them."² This situation is so gripping that Qohelet responds to it by extolling the dead who

had already died as "more fortunate than the living who are still alive" (4:2). Another result of the curse is the tragic situations that weigh heavily on Qohelet. He observes, in 7:15 and 8:14, that sometimes the righteous receive what the wicked deserve and vice versa. Further, death entered the created realm with the curse in Genesis 3. This prominent intruder has a major impact on Qohelet's worldview. In

a different context than 4:2, Qohelet pictures this invader in 9:4 like this: "he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion" (also see 2:14–17; 6:6; 8:8; 9:2–3, 5–6; 12:1–7).³ While everyone faces suffering and tragedy in varying degrees, all encounter death.

With the dialectical design of Ecclesiastes serving as a reflection of the nature of this world, suffering and death are contrasted with life. With Qohelet's poem on time in 3:1–8, the contrast between life and death is highlighted as the first of fourteen polarized subjects: "a time to be born, and a time to die" (v. 2). This contrast between life and death is also seen in 6:3–5 where the stillborn are better off than the living since they do not experience the misfortunes of life. The death and life motifs are key aspects of Qohelet's overall tension between a negative and a positive view of life. This pessimistic aspect of Ecclesiastes is tied to Qohelet's overall theme found in 1:2: "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity." The optimistic facet, however, is linked to the *carpe diem*, or enjoyment-of-life, passages ("there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in

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his toil,” 2:24a).⁴ On the surface, Qohelet’s negative conclusions about life seem to contradict his positive ones and vice versa. Is Qohelet confused or is there a deeper unity in his thought that allows us to reconcile these seemingly antithetical conclusions? And if so, then what does he have to teach us about living in a world marred by the Fall, sin, suffering and death?

The conclusion one reaches regarding Qohelet’s overall message has significant ramifications for Ecclesiastes’s place in biblical theology. That is, if the substance of the book is negative, as the *hebel* (“vanity”) refrain may connote, this indicates that Ecclesiastes should be viewed as a foil to the other books in the canon.⁵ If a celebratory note controls the book’s basic message, however, as the *carpe diem* passages may suggest, this indicates that Ecclesiastes has normative value for God’s people with an impact on how to live.⁶ Because Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 develops the *carpe diem* motif in connection with the *hebel* theme of death, the purpose of this article is to examine this passage and to explain how these verses relate to the message of Ecclesiastes as we draw lessons on how to live as God’s people “under the sun.”

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 occurs in a section of the book that extends from 9:1 to 11:6. This section emphasizes man’s inability to understand God’s providence.⁷ The book’s sixth use of the enjoyment-of-life motif⁸ is the focal point of the unit contained in 9:1–12. The use of “man does not know” (*en yodhea’ ha’dham*) in 9:1 and again, with a minor variation in the Hebrew text, “man does not know” (*lo’yedha’ ha’dham*) in 9:12 forms an *inclusio*, an envelope construction. The utilization of *miqreh* (“[everyone shares the same] fate”) in 9:2 and its cognate verb *yiqreh* (“[time and chance] happen [to all of them]”) in 9:11 further demonstrates the tight construction of 9:1–12.⁹ This pericope further subdivides into three subsections: vv. 1–6, 7–10, and 11–12. “Whether love or hate” (*gam ’ahavah gam-sin’ah*) in v. 1 and a slightly modified repetition of it in v. 6, “their love, their hate” (*gam ’ahavatham gam-sin’atham*), reveal the closely

bound nature of vv. 1–6. The subject of the first six verses is the inevitability of death for all men.¹⁰ Qohelet responds to the inevitability of death with a series of commands in vv. 7–10 that develop his most comprehensive statement on celebrating life. The imperative nature of these four verses sets them apart from vv. 1–6 and vv. 11–12. Further, while the content of vv. 11–12 is different than vv. 7–10, its textual connections with vv. 1–2 bind it to the unit as a whole. As with the emphasis in vv. 1–6 on death, vv. 11–12 return to the same subject. Verses 11–12 vary the emphasis of vv. 1–6 with an accent on the unpredictability of death. Verses 7–10 are infixed between the two set of verses and serve as a focal point of vv. 1–12. This unit reflects the following chiastic arrangement.

- A The inevitability of death, vv. 1–6
- B Enjoying life as a response to death’s certainty, vv. 7–10
- A1 The unpredictability of death, vv. 11–12

As the above chiastic arrangement illustrates, vv. 7–10 are the core of the pericope. In addition, these verses, like the other six *carpe diem* passages, commend the celebration of life, despite living in a fallen world. In the previous five passages, Qohelet presents his recommendation with comparative statements.¹¹ In this text he strengthens his strategy by using a series of imperatives to urge the enjoyment of life. Further, this four-verse unit reflects a threefold structure. Each unit contains one or more imperatives followed by a *ki* (“for,” “because”) clause. The verse breakdown looks like this.

- V. 7: Three commands (“go,” “eat,” “drink”) + *ki* clause (“for God...”)
- Vv. 8–9: Three commands (“let ... be white,” “let not oil,” “enjoy life”) + *ki* clause (“because that is...”)
- V. 10: One command (“do it”) + *ki* clause (“for there is no...”)¹²

This structure provides the framework for my discussion of the text.

V. 7: ENJOYING FOOD AND DRINK

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.”

Looking past the interjectory use of the imperative “go,” Qohelet uses two commands for eating and drinking. Finding satisfaction in what one eats and drinks was previously commended in four earlier passages: 2:24, 3:13, 5:18–19 (Heb. vv. 17–18), and 8:15. In this context two objects are added, namely, “bread,” (*lehem*), and “wine,” (*yayin*). The Hebrew noun *lehem* refers to grain used to make bread. *Yayin* was used at meals by both laborer (2 Chr 29:10, 15 [Heb. vv. 9, 14]) and governor (Neh 5:15, 18). Bread and wine are positively used together in other Old Testament passages. For example, Melchizedek brought both to the victorious Abram in Genesis 14:18. Jesse sent his son David to Saul with a donkey carrying bread and a skin of wine (1 Sam 16:2). To appease David’s wrath against her husband, Abigail sent David bread and skins of wine in 1 Samuel 25:18.¹³ In Psalm 104:15 bread and wine are used to fortify and bring joy to man’s heart. In our immediate text, the prepositional phrases that qualify the command to eat bread and to drink wine, “with joy” and “with a merry heart,” reflect the celebratory nature of both commands.

The *ki*, “for,” clause provides a basis for the preceding commands. The verb translated as “approved,” *rasah*, indicates that God has taken pleasure in “what you do.” The LORD is the subject of *rasah*, to “take pleasure in,” in the Qal stem some 28 times in the OT.¹⁴ At times, he takes pleasure in people (Ps 44:3 [Heb. v. 4]), with Zerubbabel’s Temple (Hag 1:8), and the deeds of men (Deut 33:11), and, in this text, with “what you do.” On the surface, this seemingly sounds like God takes pleasure in anything people may do.¹⁵ However, if we interpret v. 7b in its overall context, that cannot be the meaning.¹⁶ To clarify the contextual meaning of v. 7b, four observations are helpful. First, as with the other enjoyment-of-life passages, this one has a strong theocentric perspective, with God as

the subject of this clause. Each of the exhortations commending the celebration of life not only has a focus on enjoying life but also on God. In 2:24, 3:13, and 8:15 God bestows the gifts of satisfaction in food, drink, and labor. In 3:22, man’s satisfaction with his work is a God-ordained allotment in life. In 5:18–20 God enables man to enjoy his wealth and possessions. While Qohelet, in 11:9, exhorts young people to enjoy their youth, he balances this exhortation by the reality that “for all these things God will bring you into judgment.” In short, God’s sovereignty over this fallen world is not only a controlling factor in our immediate passage, but also in the other enjoyment-of-life passages.

Second, the adverb “already” (*kevar*) qualifies “has approved.” This adverb, used nine times in Ecclesiastes, reflects that God has previously approved “what you do.”¹⁷ From the specific context of vv. 7–10, this phrase refers to the divine gifts. Because this passage is similar to 5:18 (Heb. v. 17) with its focus on one enjoying God’s gifts, “already” may refer to what “God has decreed from the beginning.”¹⁸ This is to say, one is able to enjoy these gifts because God has ordained this enjoyment.

Third, “you” in “what you do” (*ma’aseyka*), a second masculine singular pronominal suffix, agrees with the three previous imperatives in this verse. The referents of the personal pronoun are those who savingly fear God, the people of God. In Ecclesiastes, they are more explicitly referred to as those who are pleasing in his sight (2:26; 7:26), who fear him (8:12; 12:13), “the righteous,” “the wise,” “the clean,” and “the good” (9:1, 2). These are the ones who temper their enjoyment of life with the knowledge that God holds them accountable for their deeds in his future judgment (11:9). The people of God can judiciously enjoy life as God has enabled them (5:19 [Heb. 5:18]; 6:2).¹⁹

Fourth, “what you do” has been interpreted in two different ways. Initially, this phrase may be taken as a reference to God’s delight in the righteous activities of the godly. Because of their righteousness, God guides them to the enjoyment of his gifts.²⁰ This fits the overall context of 9:1–10

since the righteous and their deeds were introduced in v. 1. As mentioned in earlier enjoyment-of-life passages, God grants his gifts to those who are “good in his sight” with similar statements in 2:24; 3:12; 7:26.²¹ Another interpretation of “what you do” is that it refers to God’s will being explicitly located in enjoying his largesse rather than in whatever we want.²² It is likely that Qohelet’s argument, as Martin Shields rightly notes, “is that, if life is enjoyable, it is only because God has allowed it to be so, and if God has so permitted it then presumably God is favorably disposed toward those who can enjoy life.”²³ While both views make contextual sense of 9:1–10, the latter view fits the immediate context of v. 7.

If this pericope stopped with v. 7, it would be an exhortation to enjoy the routine gifts of eating and drinking, like the preceding enjoyment-of-life passages. However, Qohelet adds some additional gifts in vv. 8–9.

VV. 8-9: NICE CLOTHES, OIL, AND ONE’S WIFE

“Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.”

Qohelet gives three commands in vv. 8–9: “let [your garments] be white,” “let [not oil] be lacking,” and “enjoy.” While the third command is an imperative, the first two are jussive forms used as commands. Each of these commands extols the enjoyment of new elements in Ecclesiastes: garments being white, no deficiency of oil, and enjoying life with one’s wife. The first exhorts one to always wear garments that are “white,” *levanim*, with this adjective denoting brightness.²⁴ “The white garments,” according to Delitzsch, “are in contrast to the black robes of mourning, and thus are an expression of festal joy, of a happy mood.”²⁵ The significance of the adverb “always,” *bekol-’eth*, is that whenever possible a believer should wear

clothes expressive of a joyful mood.²⁶ The second command focuses on regularly anointing one’s head with oil. While oil was used in the ancient Near East to fight the injurious consequences of the scorching heat,²⁷ it was also associated with joy in Psalm 45:7, as here. The commands in this verse about white clothing and oil, like other *carpe diem* passages in Ecclesiastes, presuppose that Qohelet derives his theology from the early chapters of Genesis. “Ecclesiastes and Genesis,” as Johnston writes, “exhibit substantial agreement as to the central point of the creation motif—that life is to be celebrated as a ‘good’ creation of God.”²⁸

The final command in v. 9a is to enjoy life with one’s beloved wife. Three aspects of this command require more explanation. To start with, the antecedent of “he” in the subordinate clause, “he has given you,” is God, just as he was in the *ki* clause of v. 7. Again, this asserts a strong theocentric perspective. In his sovereign control God grants man a “wife” (Gen 2:24).

Second, “wife,” *’ishshah*, could also be translated as “woman.” An argument supporting this rendering is drawn from “woman” being anarthrous.²⁹ However, there are verses in the Old Testament where the anarthrous use of *’ishshah* refers to a wife: Genesis 21:21; 24:3; 30:4, 7; and Leviticus 20:14.³⁰ Because Qohelet’s argument is based on a theology of creation, this provides solid support for taking this as a reference to one’s wife. As Bartholomew states, “Once we realize that the *carpe diem* vision is rooted in a theology of creation, then the case for this woman being one’s wife is compelling. Thus v. 9a is a positive affirmation of marriage that is to be fully enjoyed in all its dimensions.”³¹

Finally, the precision of the ESV’s translation of *hebel* as “vain” (“all the days of your vain life”) requires further examination.³² Some English versions, such as the KJV, NKJV, RSV, and NRSV, translate *hebel* in Ecclesiastes 9:9 the same way as the ESV. In distinction from the translation of “vain,” the NIV and NLT render this word as “meaningless.” And the NASB, CEV, NET, and HCSB take it as “fleeting,” though each version adopts a basic

meaning for this term as “vanity,” “nonsense” (or an equivalent), or “futility.”³³ In distinction from these English versions, Ogden and Bartholomew have argued that a core meaning for *hebel* in Ecclesiastes, including 9:9, is something along the lines of “enigmatic” or “mysterious.”³⁴ Though I am not convinced that any one word in English precisely corresponds to *hebel*, I concur with the translation of this term as “enigmatic,” or a similar expression, since in Ecclesiastes it most closely approximates the required sense of this Hebrew word in its overall context. This understanding requires clarification by providing an overview of the Hebrew noun *hebel* and then integrating it into my interpretation of its use in 9:9.³⁵

First, *hebel*’s placement in Ecclesiastes indicates that it is the subject of this book. After an introduction in 1:1, Qohelet provides a sweeping generalization in 1:2, “*Hebel of hebls, says Qohelet, hebel of hebls, all is hebel.*” Qohelet’s placement of this term at the inception of the book is where we might expect an author to place his subject. His catchword *hebel* is used five times in this verse. That this is the subject is further confirmed by the fact that Qohelet concludes his work with three uses of *hebel* in 12:8, with twenty-nine or thirty other uses.³⁶ The noun *hebel* is used in the Hebrew Bible seventy-three times with thirty-seven or thirty-eight of these occurrences in Ecclesiastes. The literal meaning of *hebel* is “vapor, breath.” It also has a metaphorical use denoting what is “evanescent, unsubstantial, worthless, vanity.”³⁷ Beyond Ecclesiastes the employment of *hebel* as a metaphor often denotes something that is vain or has no value.³⁸

The metaphorical rendering of *hebel*, however, is not limited to something having no value. This is illustrated by the Septuagint’s translation of Ecclesiastes with its rendering of this word as *mataiotes*, “emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness.”³⁹ Since the Greek term includes the nuance of “transitoriness,” it allows for a broader use than a strictly pessimistic sense.⁴⁰ However, the dominance of the derogatory sense of *hebel* goes back

to Jerome, who translated it with *vanitas*, “unsubstantial or illusory quality, emptiness, falsity, and untruthfulness.”⁴¹ Since Jerome’s day the majority of translations have rendered *hebel* with “vanity.” Currently, “vanity,” as well as similar pejorative renderings, is found in many English translations.

However, a few versions, such as NASB, CEV, HCSB, and NET, use multiple renderings of *hebel*, ranging from “vanity” to “futility” as a primary use, while employing “fleeting” in a few contexts like 9:9. With the multiple-word approach, “fleeting,” or another equivalent term, has some appeal. However, the multiple renditions of *hebel* as found in a few versions are a problem. More specifically, it is a problem in the contexts where *hebel* is defined as part of the “all is *hebel*” assessment of 1:2 and 12:8. If Qohelet announces in 1:2 and 12:8 that “all is *hebel*” and then describes the specifics of the “all” and evaluates these as *hebel*, then it must have a common nuance throughout Ecclesiastes.⁴² This has also been noted by Fredericks, who has perceptively observed that it is an error “to see distinct spheres of meaning for the word and to select the correct one for each context, ending in a multifarious description of reality that is contrary to a significant purpose for the unifying and generalizing agenda of Qoheleth—‘everything is breath.’”⁴³

As noted above, I am persuaded that a case can be made for rendering *hebel* as “enigmatic” or an equivalent expression. I will briefly present three arguments that support this understanding. (1) The phrase “striving after wind,” *re’uth ruah*, serves as a qualifier of *hebel*. This is seen in Ecclesiastes 1:14: “All is vanity and a striving after wind.” The phrase also occurs in Ecclesiastes 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9. “Striving after wind” could also be rendered as “shepherding the wind.” Either phrase pictures an attempt to do the impossible: control the wind.⁴⁴ “A man may determine or make up his mind,” as H. Carl Shanks maintains, “to accomplish something eternally significant in a creation subjected to vanity, yet no matter how hard he tries Qoheleth tells him it will be a fruitless endeavor. A man in his toil ‘under the sun’ grasps after the

wind and attains precious little for all his labor.⁴⁵ In short, this qualifying phrase lends support for taking *hebel* as “enigmatic.”

(2) Specific contexts evaluated as *hebel* also support taking this word as “enigmatic.” Though other contexts could be added,⁴⁶ I will make note of two such scenarios: 3:16–19 and 8:14. In 3:16–19 Qohelet, expecting to find justice finds wickedness instead: “I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness (3:16).” We should note that the legal setting is emphasized by parallel nature of “the place of justice” and “the place of righteousness.” Further, his disappointment and vexation are expressed by the repetition of “there was wickedness.” If wickedness is found in the very place that God has set up to execute justice, evil must pervade all the other places of life in this sin-cursed world. The repetition of “I said in my heart” at the beginning of v. 17 and v. 18 reflects a twofold response to this vexing situation. First, Qohelet initially provides an orthodox response in v. 17. Though not in this life, God will ultimately judge people according to their righteousness or wickedness.⁴⁷ Second, he provides a perplexing response in vv. 18–19. God uses the pervasiveness of evil to demonstrate to people that they have a common mortality with beasts and will die just like them. Though eventually all die, this second response often leaves the issue of injustice unresolved for those living “under the sun.”⁴⁸ In v. 19 Qohelet evaluates this frustrating situation as *hebel*. As Qohelet states earlier in this chapter, God has given people a sense of eternity in their hearts, yet they “cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (3:11). In this context the noun *hebel* “is the vehicle,” according to Ogden, “chosen to draw attention to an enigmatic situation, a theological conundrum.”⁴⁹ In 8:14 Qohelet describes a setting where a righteous person receives what the wicked should get; and the wicked what the righteous should receive. This situation conflicts with the common understanding of retribution dogma

stressing that righteous people are rewarded for their virtuous lifestyles and the wicked are judged for their evil lifestyles. Because our author cannot comprehend this situation, he is vexed and also assesses it as *hebel*.

Both 3:16–19 and 8:14 have a theocentric perspective. And, each passage is in a context that also contains a *carpe diem* text (3:22; 8:15). As a result, the *hebel* assessment in each text does not have a strictly negative sense such as “vanity.” Further, the issues described in both passages, the pervasiveness of wickedness (3:16–19) and the reversal of the retribution doctrine, are not temporary. Qohelet, in both contexts, affirms that God providentially controls all aspects of life with their appointed times, but recognizes that divine providence is veiled. Since the righteous and the wicked are under God’s control and his providence is shrouded, no one can comprehend the activity done “under the sun” (8:17). These texts provide further support for interpreting *hebel* as “enigmatic.”

(3) In Ecclesiastes Qohelet recounts his search for meaning and purpose in life. His pursuit was to gain insight into life’s meaning. When he recounts in 1:13 that he applied his heart to explore with wisdom everything done “under the sun,” he reflects the epistemological nature of his search. Further, his exploration was not random but a comprehensive quest that examined all the facets of life occurring “under the sun,” “under heaven,” or “on earth.”⁵⁰ A few examples stress the cognitive dimension of his rigorous quest. He observes “everything that is done under the sun” (1:14); wisdom and understanding (1:16); madness and folly (2:12); labor produced by rivalry (4:4); riches hurting the one who possesses them (5:13); injustice in the halls of justice (3:16); one whom God has not enabled to enjoy his wealth (6:1–2); and, retribution violating a strict cause and effect relationship (7:15). These are various aspects of “all is *hebel*” (1:2; 12:8).

In his search for the meaning of life, Qohelet is also perplexed because he sees the disparities of divine providence and cannot figure them out. In

addition, because he is unable to comprehend the work of God (3:11; 7:14; 8:17), he often communicates his vexation, adding an emotive element to his search. As he diligently uses his wisdom to study everything done under heaven, he states that it was an “unhappy business” (1:13). When evaluating, in 2:11, what he achieved with the pleasure-seeking experiment brought him no gain. Qohelet hates life in 2:17 because the work done “under the sun” was a grief to him. In 4:7–8 Qohelet observes how work was unsatisfying when a man has no one to share it with. He specifically identifies all these scenarios as *hebel* (1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:7, 8). It is these types of situations that reflect the incomprehensible nature of life.

With his investigation, Qohelet saw the unresolved tensions of a world that had been cursed by the Fall and which results in plenty of suffering. Nevertheless, even in the midst of this kind of world, he could also commend the enjoyment of life because God in common grace upheld aspects of his creational design. Qohelet’s tension arises from the perplexing conflicts between both aspects of creation. As a godly sage, Qohelet “could affirm,” as Caneday states, “both the aimlessness of life ‘under the sun’ and the enjoyment of life precisely because he believed in the God who cursed his creation on account of man’s rebellion, but who was in the process, throughout earth’s history, of redeeming man and creation.”⁵¹ All of this suggests that the use of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes relates to the issue of man’s inability to comprehend the activities done “under the sun.”⁵²

As this relates to Ecclesiastes 9:9, Qohelet’s use of *hebel* reinforces the book’s focus on the puzzling nature of life. As such, he exhorts his male audience to enjoy life with their beloved wives during their perplexing days on earth.⁵³

The *ki*, “because,” clause gives a reason for vv. 8–9a. The antecedent of the subject, “it” (*hu’*), is the preceding advantages: garments being white, no deficiency of oil, and enjoying life with one’s wife. The predicate nominative for the subject is *heleq*, “portion.” *Heleq* appears in the Old Testa-

ment sixty-nine times, with eight of its uses in Ecclesiastes. Outside of this book, *heleq* may refer to a portion of plunder (Gen 14:24), an inheritance (Gen 31:14), and a plot of land (Num 18:20).⁵⁴ In Ecclesiastes, it is used to describe satisfaction from the benefits of one’s labor and from the divine gifts (2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:18, 19 [Heb. vv. 17, 18]; 9:9; 11:2). In contrast to 9:6, where the dead no longer have any “portion,” *heleq*, in what is done “under the sun,” *heleq*, in 9:9, is used in reference to one’s life and labor prior to death: “in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.” This is to say, Qohelet contrasts his positive portion in v. 9 with the enigmatic nature of the lack of a “portion” in death (v. 6).

With Qohelet’s theology being derived from the early chapters of Genesis he has provided specifics for enjoying life in vv. 7–9, even though he is fully aware of the difficulties of living in a fallen world. Based on this theology, he makes a more general appeal in the following verse.

V. 10: LIVE WHOLEHEARTEDLY

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

Unlike the units in v. 7 and vv. 8–9, v. 10 has only one command: “do.” This command is to accomplish “whatever your hand finds to do.” Further, this task should be pursued “with your might.” This is to say, one should wholeheartedly pursue the divinely approved activities of this life. The phrase “whatever your hand finds to do” might be viewed as a reference to engaging in anything one desires.⁵⁵ However, the context of v. 10 prohibits this type of interpretation, as we saw in v. 7. In the phrase “whatever your hand finds to do,” the “hand,” *yadh*, and “finding,” *matsa’*, picture someone having the sufficiency or ability to accomplish something.⁵⁶ In the context of Ecclesiastes it means that, as God enables people (6:2), they should pursue the specifics of what is detailed in the *carpe diem* passages (eating, drinking, working along with the benefits from it, and wisdom).⁵⁷ As

the last half of v. 10 implies, one should diligently pursue life with intelligence and wisdom. Though Qohelet lived in a world that had been cursed by the Fall, and in which we all experience trials and difficulties, he also could commend enthusiastic activity because he understood that God was also preserving an aspect of his creational design. As such, v. 10a does not imply a cynicism towards life. However, Qohelet has more to say with the *ki* clause in v. 10b.

The *ki*, “for,” clause provides motivation for enthusiastic living: death will bring life to an end. Four aspects of earthly life are lost at death: “work,” “thought,” “knowledge,” and “wisdom.” While the living have capacities to enjoy life, prospects for rewards, and opportunities for planning, the dead can no longer experience these earthly benefits. Qohelet was not explaining, in the words of Glenn, “what the state of the dead *is*; he was stating what it is *not*. He did this to emphasize the lost opportunities of the present life, opportunities for serving God and enjoying His gifts.”⁵⁸

Highlighting the state of the dead as a motivation for living wholeheartedly, we should note that the concept of death in v. 10b is related to *Sheol*. According to this verse, Qohelet’s audience was destined for *Sheol*, perhaps the underworld. While the ESV, along with the NKJV, NASB, NRSV, and NET, transliterates the Hebrew word, other versions render it as “grave” (so KJV, NIV, and NLT). Arguments can be made to support either translation.⁵⁹ In either case, Qohelet’s motivation for celebrating life is clear: death is the terminus for life “under the sun.”⁶⁰

Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, then, provide an exhortation to its audience to enjoy the divine benefits and to affirm a God-centered approach to life. However, even in an encouraging passage like this, the influence of the curse is still present with the allusion to death in v. 10b. The state of the dead links the verse with the larger context of 9:1–12 and has implications that relate to the whole book. While the author has previously established in 2:14 and 3:19–20, as well as 9:10b, that the same

fate of death awaits every person, he devotes more space to the discussion of death in 9:1–6, 11–12. Though a sage cannot know his future, he knows one truth about his future: the inescapability of death. When vv. 7–10 are set in their immediate context of 9:1–12, this passage reflects the contrast between life and death. How does this antithesis integrate with the book as a whole?

THE ANTITHETICAL NATURE OF ECCLESIASTES

The tension between life and death is reflective of Qohelet’s overall dialectical design in Ecclesiastes.⁶¹ The author recounts how he lives in a paradoxical world that was cursed with unsolvable conflicts and disjointedness, yet he also affirmed that God is renewing creation and man. Because of this mixed fabric of life “under the sun,” he did not craft Ecclesiastes with a logical progression of ideas. Rather his literary masterpiece has a cyclical structure: “The author returns again and again to the same point and often concludes his discussion with the same recurring formulae.”⁶² Qohelet’s cyclical pattern mingles negative and positive themes to mirror the perplexing nature of life. His *modus operandi* is initially to develop a negative subject and then follow it by another with a celebratory note. Why did he mix the two perspectives? Ryken explains:

His mingling of negative and positive is realistic and faithful to the mixed nature of human experience. The technique keeps the reader alert. It also creates the vigor of plot conflict for this collection of proverbs, as the writer lets the two viewpoints clash. The dialectical pattern of opposites is a strategy of highlighting: the glory of a God-centered life stands out all the more brightly for having been contrasted to its gloomy opposite.⁶³

With Qohelet’s dialectical approach, the *hebel* and *carpe diem* passages are the dominant polarizing subjects in the book. Other subjects include the contrast between an enduring cosmos and the

temporal nature of man in 1:4–11, a list of antithetical subjects in 3:1–8, work as an infuriating enigma in 2:11 but in 2:24 it is something to be enjoyed, and justice not being found in the halls of justice in 3:16.

What is specifically pertinent in this paper is Qohelet's struggle with the antithetical nature of life and death in 9:1–12. From a theological perspective, this polarizing nature of life was divinely imposed on the created realm when God judged it with death and destruction. It is this struggle that impacts 9:1–12. However, the author has more to say about this issue. For example, he states that the day of death is better than the day of birth (7:1); however, he also explains that anyone who is living has hope and that a living dog is better than a dead lion (9:4–6). He hates life in 2:17, yet recommends its enjoyment in 2:24–26. In addition, death is no respecter of animate beings. Both man and animals die (3:18–21). Someone may vigorously work to acquire wealth during his lifetime, but he will die like the fool. At death he must leave the benefits from his work, "Just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind" (5:16 [Heb. 5:15]). Like the rest of humanity, the wise man has no power over the timing of his death (8:2–8). Returning to 9:7–10, these verses are antithetical to vv. 1–6 and 11–12. In response to the ever-present nature of death, Qohelet uses a series of imperatives in vv. 7–10, to make a strong case for celebrating life.

As the book of Ecclesiastes recounts the author's consuming pursuit to find meaning and purpose in life, it starts and concludes with "all is enigmatic" (1:2; 12:8). In Ecclesiastes Qohelet recounts his consuming pursuit to find meaning and purpose in life, and he begins and concludes his work with "all is enigmatic" (1:2; 12:8). This search involved his use of experimentation and empirical observations. But Qohelet's interpretation of this data is predicated on his commitment to Israel's wisdom tradition. This tradition explains why Ecclesiastes is permeated with connections to the early chapters of Genesis: creation,

Fall, and redemption. Because of man's finiteness and depravity, the sage's attempt to fully fathom life was marked by one exacerbating turn after another, each ending at an impasse. Qohelet became fully aware that he could not grasp God's work. Yet, as a sage, he embraced his sovereign God who disperses his gifts according to his own good pleasure. In brief, Qohelet designed his book to follow a dialectical pattern showing the many distortions and conflicts in life and the beauty of a God-centered worldview along with his many gifts. Therefore, in its immediate context, 9:7–10 provides a glimpse of the book's overall message for realistically navigating life in a world marred by the curse.

Having looked at the antithetical nature of Ecclesiastes and its connection with 9:7–10, we are in a position to look at this text's function in Ecclesiastes.

THE FUNCTION OF 9:7-10 IN ECCLESIASTES

The function of 9:7–10 and the other enjoyment-of-life passages in Ecclesiastes are an issue of some debate.⁶⁴ Is 9:7–10 an emotional outburst of "wishful thinking," as Anderson contends?⁶⁵ Or is this passage, as well as the other enjoyment-of-life texts, "a concession to human nature"?⁶⁶ Both of these questions reflect a pessimistic view of Ecclesiastes. However, this is not the only way to interpret this text. What role does this passage have in Ecclesiastes? Three explanations of it will be evaluated. Before this evaluation, however, I will briefly summarize the argument of Ecclesiastes.

The subject of Ecclesiastes is found in 1:2 and 12:8: "All is enigmatic." This is to say, Qohelet's message focuses on his inability to comprehend the significance of the activities in this life. His failure is put on display in Ecclesiastes with his perplexing search for meaning and purpose in life. To focus his search, he poses a programmatic question in 1:3: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" With this question, his topic is exemplified in the issue of labor. This

question simply frames his subject in terms of the dominion mandate of Genesis 1 and 2 where God appointed Adam as a vice-regent to subdue the earth. When Adam disobeyed by eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God judged the first couple and the world over which they presided. With the divinely imposed curse on the land, man's labor became strenuous and frustrating (Gen 3:17–19; cf. Eccl 2:22–23). The noun translated as “gain,” *yitrôn*, is used ten times in Ecclesiastes⁶⁷ and refers to gaining an advantage in life.⁶⁸ As a sage, Qohelet shows how he evaluated wisdom. For instance, in 2:13 he states “there is more gain (*yitrôn*) in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain (*yitrôn*) in light than in darkness.” However, this gain, in 2:14–16, is relative since both the sage and fool die. Wisdom has some advantage in this life but it does not provide an answer to the enigmas of life.

With his search Qohelet portrays how life reflects the curse. He saw how all creation had become twisted by the Fall (Eccl 1:15; 7:13). Yet, in the midst of a disjointed and inexplicable world, Qohelet, as a godly sage, could also see how God began a process of bringing blessing to his creation (see Gen 1:28; 3:15; 9:1, 26–27; 12:2–3). Because he has not rescinded his creational design, the *carpe diem* passages affirm God's presence and extol his gifts. Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 should also be integrated with these texts: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” While the fear of God and keeping his commandment are not explicitly linked in other sections of Ecclesiastes as they are here, both concepts appear in this book. For example, fearing God has been referenced at other places (3:14; 5:7 [Heb. v. 6]; 7:18; 8:12, 13). In addition, true obedience to the Law has also been mentioned (5:1–7 [Heb. 4:17–5:6]; 8:2; 9:2; 12:1) and building one's life on the wisdom outlined in Ecclesiastes.⁶⁹ Factoring in the positive passages with the negative ones, the book's message

may be summarized. In spite of life being filled with unsolvable enigmas and injustices, “life,” as Glenn states, “should not be abandoned or filled with despair. Rather, life should be lived in complete trust in God, be received and enjoyed as a gift from His good hand, and be lived in the light of His future judgment.”⁷⁰

Having summarized the book's argument, a perspective is established to examine the function of 9:7–10 in Ecclesiastes. Though there are a number of options, we will look at a representative for three options that appear in evangelical commentaries.⁷¹

The first view is a resignation to the meaninglessness of life. Since 9:1–12 is dealing with death that has nothing beyond the grave, this implies that life makes no sense.⁷² Death's darkness indicates that life is pointless. As a result, the pleasures of vv. 7–10 are only a concession to this darkness. Longman maintains that,

life is full of trouble and then you die. Some interpreters attempt to mitigate this hard message by appealing to six passages that they interpret as offering a positive view toward life (2:24–26; 3:13–14; 3:22; 5:17–19 [English 5:18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10). One must admit, however, that Qohelet only suggested a limited type of joy in these passages. Only three areas are specified—eating, drinking, and work. In addition, Qohelet's introduction to pleasure was hardly enthusiastic In the commentary section we will argue that here Qohelet expresses resignation rather than affirmation. Then further, he believed God was the only one who could allow people to experience enjoyment, a situation that brought him no ultimate satisfaction It is more in keeping with the book as a whole to understand these passages as they have been taken through much of the history of interpretation, that is, a call to seize the day (*carpe diem*). In the darkness of a life that has no ultimate meaning, enjoy the temporal pleasures that lighten the burden.⁷³

As Longman's states, 9:7–10 is a *resignation* to the vexing nature of life. In describing 9:1–10, he maintains that these are "among the most clearly pessimistic of the entire book, though its thought has already been encountered ... The only recourse for beings is to eke out whatever enjoyment life offers (vv. 7–10), because there is nothing beyond the grave."⁷⁴

The second view is a celebration of life as a gift from God. According to this view, Qohelet's response to the antithetical nature of life and death is to enjoy God's gifts. One of the leading proponents of this view, Ogden summarizes this reading.

It will be argued in this the commentary to follow that although the *hebel*-phrase occurs in many concluding statements, these are points at which the author answers his own programmatic question. They are not the point at which he offers his advice on how to live in a world plagued by so many enigmas. That advice comes in the reiterated calls to enjoyment in 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17 (18); 8:15, as well as 9:7–10. We shall be looking not to a secondary element in the book's framework, but to the climactic statement, the call to enjoyment, as that which puts the thesis of the book. Thus the structure assists in our answering the question of the book's thesis. Its thesis, then, is that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery.⁷⁵

In contrast to Longman's view, Ogden maintains that the use of imperatives in 9:7–10 "gives the enjoyment theme in this case a more authoritative cast." He further states, "The pursuit of pleasure, as Qoheleth defines it, is enjoined for the reason that it is a divine gift."⁷⁶

The final view is a celebration of life as the culmination to Ecclesiastes. Recently, Bartholomew has proposed this interpretation. In his commentary he attempts to resolve the conflict between the pessimistic evaluation of the *hebel* passages and the sanguinity of the celebration-of-life texts with the positive resolution prevailing in the last

part of Ecclesiastes. Because his view is of recent vintage, it requires a brief explanation.

Having been influenced by third century BC Greek philosophy, Qohelet's *hebel* conclusions are a result of his autonomous epistemology. These conclusions are in juxtaposition with the joy passages—a reflection of Israelite tradition. The deliberate juxtaposition of both motifs creates gaps for the reader. Ecclesiastes describes Qohelet's journey to resolve these gaps. His trip ends when the deliberately juxtaposed gaps are resolved in 11:8–10 and 12:1–7.⁷⁷ Through most of the first eleven chapters in Ecclesiastes, the author's pattern is to initially draw a *hebel* conclusion with an enjoyment-of-life text immediately following. However, the order is reversed when the enjoyment-of-life passage comes first in 11:8–10 and 12:1–7. Rather than responding to life with an autonomous epistemology, the reversal of both motifs ostensibly fills the gaps by providing the solution to life in an enigmatic world. With this reversal the emphasis of the joy passage on rejoicing and remembering one's Creator answers the *hebel* passages with their emphasis on the lack of meaning in life.⁷⁸ In reference to 9:7–10, Bartholomew maintains both motifs threaten,

to pull each other apart. As the advice to seize the day becomes imperative, so the enigma of life pulls in the opposite direction, and we see here the imminent explosion of Qohelet's attempt to hold on to both. Once again the exhortation to enjoyment should therefore not just be seen as the answer to the problem of the universality of death. The contradiction remains unresolved.⁷⁹

In briefly evaluating the three approaches, Longman's resignation view is tethered to his pessimistic view of Qohelet's words. In his view, the *hebel* passages are the controlling mood of Qohelet. As such, he describes 9:7–10 as having no ultimate meaning.⁸⁰ Since Qohelet's words are those of one who is unorthodox and cynical,⁸¹ normative theology will not be found in passages like 9:7–10

or in any of Qohelet's words. With this view the only value the words of Qohelet have relates to his supposed function as a foil to the other books in the canon. In the final analysis, normative theology will only be derived from the "frame narrator" in 12:8–14.⁸²

The value of Bartholomew's overall view of Ecclesiastes is that it is not a foil to the other books of the canon. Again, Bartholomew's conclusion about celebrating life in 11:8–10 and 12:1–7 is helpful, though his contention that the contradictions in 9:7–10 are not resolved gives me pause. In 9:1–12 Qohelet's autonomous epistemology (the enigmatic nature of death in vv. 1–6, 11–12), collides with Israel's wisdom tradition (the celebration of life in vv. 7–10).⁸³ My reservations relate to Qohelet's autonomous epistemology. While Bartholomew has Qohelet's epistemology based on Greek philosophy, with a return to Israelite wisdom only in the conclusion of the book, it is preferable to say that Qohelet's epistemology throughout the book, including 9:7–10, is based on the wisdom tradition of Israel.

Ogden's preferable explanation of 9:7–10 works with the patent meaning of this text and is not given to exegetical inference. In brief, as a response to all sharing the same inevitable fate of death, the people of God are urged to celebrate life's gifts as coming from the sovereign God. Our exegesis of 9:7–10 is consistent with Ogden's explanation of this text's function in the context. This type of approach takes into account not only the exegesis of this text, but also the overall theology of Ecclesiastes, and, as such, provides wisdom for living in a sin-cursed world which is characterized by suffering, death, and judgment.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article's objective has been to examine a passage, Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, containing the *carpe diem* motif in connection with the *hebel* theme of death and to explain how this text links to the message of Ecclesiastes, and thus teaches us how to live realistically "under the sun." Initially, this

study analyzed 9:7–10. The development of this text reflected three units: verse 7 with its focus on enjoying food and drink, verses 8–9 emphasizing nice clothes, oil, and enjoying life with one's wife, and verse 10 with its attention to living wholeheartedly. In addition, 9:7–10 was placed in the overall context of Ecclesiastes, including an examination of the antithetical nature of Ecclesiastes. The sage designed his work to reflect the paradoxes of life in a sin-cursed and fallen world. The nature of life "under the sun" hindered his search for meaning and purpose. Another facet of this placement focused on how 9:7–10 functions in Ecclesiastes. After a brief synopsis of Qohelet's message, three explanations of this passage's function were summarized: the resignation, the celebration-of-life, and the culmination-in-celebrating-life views. Ogden offers the best explanation since he shows how death in 9:1–12 provides a motivation for God's people to celebrate life as a gift of God.

Like Qohelet we live in a world that is cursed by the Fall. Further, as creatures in Qohelet's day and ours, none can comprehend the mysterious and paradoxical nature of divine providence. People are unable to predict whether good or evil lie in their future. God has made all the facets of life in such a way that humanity "may not find out anything that will be after him" (7:14). In short, like Qohelet we live in a perplexing world, yet certainly in light of Christ we have greater understanding than he had. In the midst of this sin-cursed world, the sage's advice, from 9:7–10, for navigating life is to fear our sovereign God and enjoy his good gifts. In light of the coming of Christ and the greater realities he has ushered in, Paul has a similar thought when he says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Living in a fallen and suffering world is inevitable until Christ comes again, but in the meantime, we are called to live life to its full in joy, faith, and confidence in our sovereign God who is bringing all of his purposes to pass in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Hebrew text of Eccl 1:1 identifies its author as Qohelet (“preacher,” “teacher,” etc.). Until the nineteenth century with the development of historical criticism, the majority of Christian scholars identified Solomon as Qohelet (see Craig Bartholomew, “Qoheleth in the Canon? Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes,” *Themelios* 24 [1999]: 4–7). Since that time many evangelical scholars no longer accept this understanding (Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* [New International Commentary on the Old Testament; ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 4). Though a number of evangelicals no longer entertain the possibility of Solomonic authorship, I am convinced that a case can be made for Solomonic authorship: see Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 528–37; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 257–66; Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; eds., Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 31–36; James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 314; and Mark F. Rooker, “The Book of Ecclesiastes,” in *The World and the Word* (Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti; Nashville: B&H, 2011), 540.
- ² All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 2001 ESV.
- ³ Shannon Burkes argues that death is the focus of Qohelet’s message (*Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* [SBL Dissertation Series, no. 170; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999], 48–80). Also see Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary; eds., J. Gordon McConville and Craig Bartholomew; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 130–31.
- ⁴ The *carpe diem* passages appear in 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20 [Heb. 5:17–19]; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:9–12:1.
- ⁵ See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 212–15. Along this line other authors make a distinction between the words of Qohelet in Eccl 1:12–12:7 and a narrator in 1:1–11 and 12:8–14. In this case, the speech of Qohelet is viewed as a foil to the remaining books of the OT (so Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 38).
- ⁶ For example, Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (2nd ed.; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 17; and Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 36–41.
- ⁷ The unit of 9:1–11:6 begins with “no one knows” (9:1) and concludes with a threefold repetition of the same expression in the second person: “you do not know” (11:5–6). The same type of expression is found throughout 9:1–11:6 (9:5, 10, 12; 10:10, 15; 11:2, 5, 6). See Addison G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 323.
- ⁸ For a listing of the seven *carpe diem* passages, see n. 4.
- ⁹ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word Books, 1992), 89.
- ¹⁰ The same motif of death’s certainty is developed earlier in 2:14; 3:19–20.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of Qohelet’s use of the comparative proverb in Ecclesiastes, see Graham S. Ogden, “The ‘Better’-Proverb (Tòb-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 489–505.
- ¹² Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164.
- ¹³ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “Yayin,” by W. Dommershausen, 6:62.
- ¹⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (5 vols., rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm; Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 2:1280–81 (hereafter cited as HALOT).
- ¹⁵ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 229.
- ¹⁶ So Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 359–60.
- ¹⁷ *Kevar* is used in 1:10; 2:12, 16; 3:15 (twice); 4:2; 6:10; 9:6, 7.
- ¹⁸ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 92. See also Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (*Journal for the Study of the Old Tes-*

tament Supplement Series, 316; Sheffield, England: JSOT, 2001), 138.

¹⁹Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (eds., John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Wheaton: SP Publications, Victor Books, 1985), 977.

²⁰So Fredericks ("Ecclesiastes," 209), Moses Stuart (*A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* [reprint of Warren F. Draper, 1864; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005], 293), and H. C. Leupold (*Exposition of Ecclesiastes* [reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952], 213).

²¹Fredericks, "Ecclesiastes," 209.

²²Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 164.

²³*The End of Wisdom* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 203; also see Robert Gordis (*Koheleth—The Man and His World* [3rd ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 306) and Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 92).

²⁴See Athalya Brenner, *Color Terms in the Old Testament* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 21; Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1982), 81–91.

²⁵*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (3 vols. in 1; trans. M. G. Easton, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2:363.

²⁶HALOT, 2:900; see also Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth* (trans. O. C. Dean, Jr.; Hermenia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 171–72.

²⁷J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 162.

²⁸"Confessions of a Workaholic: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 22.

²⁹Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 306. Longman recognizes that *'ishshah* could refer to either "woman" or "wife" (*Ecclesiastes*, 230–31). So also Jerry E. Shepherd, "Ecclesiastes," in vol. 6 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (eds., Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 336–37.

³⁰See Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 80.

³¹Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 304–5.

³²In Eccl 9:9 the Leningrad Codex, the base text for *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, has a virtual repetition of the line "all the days of your vain life" (*kol-yemey hayyey hebleka*) with the subsequent "all your vain days" (*kola hayyey hebleka*), which omits one word, "life" (*yemey*). Following the Leningrad Codex, the text could read: "all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun—all your vain days." I should note, however, that there is textual evidence supporting the ESV's omission of this repetition. This evidence includes a few Hebrew manuscripts, Alexandrinus, and the Targums. The basic repetition of this phrase in Leningrad's textual tradition is an example of dittography—a repetition of words.

³³To this list of negative rendering found in the various versions, Michael V. Fox's translation of *hebel* as "absurd" could be added ("The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 [September 1986]: 409–27; and *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 71; eds., David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 29–51). This rendering is also followed by Enns (*Ecclesiastes*, 25, 31–32).

³⁴Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 21–26; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 105–7. Ogden's discussion is taken from his earlier article "'Vanity' It Certainly Is Not," *The Bible Translator* 38 (1987): 301–7. Following the lead of Ogden, I made a similar argument that has an influence on this current article: "The Message of Ecclesiastes," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 (1996): 88–94. However, there is one aspect of my argument about *hebel* that I would modify. Rather than taking *hebel's* core meaning in Ecclesiastes as "frustratingly enigmatic," it is preferable to take the word as I have argued in this paper.

³⁵For a constructive discussion of the various uses of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes being bound together by the nuance of "enigmatic," see Jason S. DeRouchie, "Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15 (Fall 2011): 4–16. Another intriguing article discussing the many uses of *hebel* in Ecclesiastes is Ardel B. Caneday's "'Everything is Vapor': Grasping for Meaning Under the Sun," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15 (Fall 2011):

- 26–40. Following the lead of Douglas B. Miller (“Qohelet’s Symbolic Use of *הבל*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 [Fall 1998]: 437–54), Caneday argues that “vapor” functions “as a single imagery or symbol that embodies a multivalency (layers of meaning) with various referents that he [Qohelet] teases out throughout his book including insubstantiality, transitoriness, and foulness” (“Everything is Vapor,” 34).
- ³⁶Whether one sees 37 or 38 appearances of *hebel* depends on how the repetition in v. 9 is handled; see above, n. 32.
- ³⁷Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press), 210.
- ³⁸See Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 105–7.
- ³⁹Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed. revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 621.
- ⁴⁰See Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 48.
- ⁴¹P. G. W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 2010.
- ⁴²Fredericks argues for *hebel* to have a core meaning related to time such as temporary or fleeting (“Ecclesiastes,” 46–54). A similar argument is made by Ethan Dor-Shav, “Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part I,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 36 (2008): 211–21; and “Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless: Part II,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37 (2009): 17–23; and Russell L. Meek, “The Meaning of *הבל* in Qohelet: An Intertextual Suggestion,” in *The Words of the Wise Are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* (eds., Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Christian G. Rata; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 241–56.
- ⁴³*Coping with Transience* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 23–24. Similarly Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 35–36; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 106–7; and DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind,” 6.
- ⁴⁴Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 24. So also, Caneday, “Everything is Vapor,” 32. The ESV translates two parallel Hebrew expressions as “striving after wind”: *re’uth ruah* (1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9) and *rayon ruah* (1:17; 4:16). DeRouchie shows that both phrases refer to either “shepherding/herding the wind” or “windy/disturbing thoughts” (“Shepherding Wind,” 11–12). Whether “striving after wind” indicates that it is impossible for man to comprehend God’s world or man’s ineffective internal struggle to put life together, this phrase refers to the enigmatic nature of this life.
- ⁴⁵“Qoheleth’s World and Life View As Seen in His Recurring Phrases,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (Fall 1974): 67.
- ⁴⁶See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 22–24.
- ⁴⁷See James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, Concordia Commentary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 154.
- ⁴⁸See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 177.
- ⁴⁹Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 23.
- ⁵⁰See Shank, “Qoheleth’s World and Life View,” 67. The prepositional phrase “under the sun,” is used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes. Two other similar phrases appear in Ecclesiastes, “under heaven” and “on earth.” The first is used three times (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) and the later six times (5:2; 7:20; 8:14, 16; 11:2; 12:7). A parallel use of “on earth” and “under heaven” is found in 8:14–15. Qohelet describes an event that occurs “on the earth” in v. 14; but in v. 15, he replaces it with “under the sun.” This same pattern is again found in 8:16–17.
- ⁵¹“Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?” *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (1986): 43–44.
- ⁵²For a fuller discussion of evidence that supports taking *hebel* as “enigmatic,” see DeRouchie, “Shepherding Wind,” 4–25.
- ⁵³Eccl 9:7–9 reflects some cultural and literary similarities with ancient Near Eastern literature (for a listing of pertinent texts, see Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 265–66). However, the most striking parallel with 9:7–9 is the Epic of Gilgamesh, with the Akkadian version dating back to the early second millennium B.C. (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, J. B. Pritchard [ed.], 90, sec. 10.3.6–14):
- Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
Make thou merry by day and by night.
Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,

Day and night dance thou and play!
 Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
 Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
 Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
 Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
 For this is the task of [mankind]!

The similarities should be noted: feasting, rejoicing, clothes, his head, and spouse. The issue concerns whether or not Ecclesiastes is dependent on the Epic of Gilgamesh. For those who have a commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture, a couple of options seem apparent. First, the writer of Ecclesiastes could have drawn from this epic and theologically adapted it. Fredericks maintains, “OT wisdom can certainly borrow and then redeem its neighbours’ wisdom gleaned through common grace” (“Ecclesiastes,” 209). Second, because Ecclesiastes has general similarities with other ancient Near Eastern texts, Ecclesiastes shares similar motifs because of the common cultural background. For a cautionary note on the issue of Qohelet borrowing from either Mesopotamian or Egyptian texts, see Karel van der Toorn, “Did Ecclesiastes Copy Gilgamesh?” *Bible Review* 16 (2000): 22–30, 50.

⁵⁴David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (7 vols. to date; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994–), 3:243–44 (hereafter cited as *DCH*).

⁵⁵See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 231.

⁵⁶*DCH*, 5:435.

⁵⁷The *carpe diem* passages are listed above in n. 4.

⁵⁸“Ecclesiastes,” 999; also see Caneday, “Qoheleth,” 54–55.

⁵⁹*New International Dictionary of Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. “Sheol,” by Eugene H. Merrill, 4:6–7. For a discussion of the use of *Sheol* in Eccl 9:7–10, see Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 83.

⁶⁰Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 167.

⁶¹For a fuller discussion of the polarized subjects in Ecclesiastes, see Caneday, “Qoheleth,” 39–42.

⁶²Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 17; so also Estes, *Handbook*, 279.

⁶³*Words of Delight*, 320–21.

⁶⁴See Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 190–91.

⁶⁵William H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and Its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1997), 133.

⁶⁶Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lx.

⁶⁷*Yitrôn* is used in 1:3; 2:11, 13 (twice); 3:9; 5:9 (Heb. v. 8), 16 (Heb. v. 15); 7:12; 10:10, 11.

⁶⁸See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 27–30.

⁶⁹David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 253.

⁷⁰“Ecclesiastes,” 977.

⁷¹See Ingram, *Ambiguity*, 191–93.

⁷²Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 231.

⁷³*Ecclesiastes*, 34–35. As Longman notes, Crenshaw takes a similar position, though he differs from Crenshaw in that he derives the book’s normative theology from frame narrator in 12:8–14 (*Ecclesiastes*, 28).

⁷⁴Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 224.

⁷⁵*Qoheleth*, 17. A few other advocates of this view include Fredericks (“Ecclesiastes,” 38–39); Whybray (“Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 [1982]: 87–98); Glenn (“Ecclesiastes,” 976–78), and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (*Ecclesiastes: Total Life* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1979], 15–19)

⁷⁶*Qoheleth*, 163–67.

⁷⁷*Ecclesiastes*, 81–83.

⁷⁸Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 354–58; also see his “Ecclesiastes,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 181–84.

⁷⁹*Ecclesiastes*, 305.

⁸⁰*Ecclesiastes*, 231.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 36.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 37–39.

⁸³Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 307, 310–11.