

The Self-Reliance of Ecclesiastes

Lilli Sutton, Department of English and Modern Languages, Shepherd University

In this paper, I analyze the book of Ecclesiastes, especially its messages on the futility of life and death. Ecclesiastes is one of the few books in The Bible which portrays a somewhat critical view of God, particularly regarding his withholding nature and ambiguity. Ecclesiastes is also notable because of its anonymous first-person speaker, who uses his position as king to discuss poverty, abuse by the higher classes, the innocence of the dead, and finding meaning in the face of oblivion. Additionally, I discuss the speaker's disregard in the family and his disinterest in genealogy, which contrasts the Old Testament fixation on familial relations.

I argue that Ecclesiastes focuses on the speaker's ability to rediscover meaning through developing a reliance on his individual self, rather than on a higher being. I do this by using close readings of specific verses which illustrate the speaker's gradual reclamation of his own autonomy. As I demonstrate, an analysis of Ecclesiastes is essential to understanding the Old Testament, in which loyalty to God comes with no reward of eternal life, central to the New Testament. In Ecclesiastes, faith in God becomes less important than the speaker's choice to believe, as his doubts regarding a higher power lead him to discover his self-reliance. Regardless of God's existence, the speaker creates his own autonomy through his ability to postulate questions and search for answers.

Ecclesiastes, with its striking proclamations of individuality and intense meditations on death, stands apart from the majority of the Old Testament. The author is not overly interested in history, or politics, or nobility. Instead, he chooses to convey a wavering exploration of his inability to find meaning in his life, and is particularly troubled by the idea that his search for purpose may be totally in vain. He finds that material possessions and wealth bring no enjoyment, and is haunted by the looming prospect of facing death and then oblivion, the fate shared by any animal. Ecclesiastes has long been studied because of its universality: even in a collection of books largely celebrating the otherworldly and inconceivable goodness of an unseen God, these feelings of existential hopelessness and futility still arise. Is Ecclesiastes meant to drive home the concept of ineffectuality, to reinforce the idea that life is meaningless and that death reclaims all human effort? Or is it

intended to be a comforting work, aimed at encouraging humanity to embrace the unpredictable nature of life and accept death as part of the natural cycle? Critics have interpreted Ecclesiastes both ways, and no clear answer exists as to which category the book truly belongs. But that is part of the mystery, and the draw, of a book so divided from the rest of The Bible. I will argue that Ecclesiastes is a spectacular search for meaning through inward self-revelation, as the author indirectly proclaims his ability to control his own destiny, rediscovering his individual autonomy along the way.

Throughout the Old Testament, individual choice is not a celebrated or emphasized concept. Obedience to higher power is favored above all else, first to God, and later on to various kings. Humans who are not kings, or prophets, or otherwise specially-connected to God, live a life of submission to authority and function as part of a greater whole. Many books of The Bible

highlight the importance of nationality or genealogy, especially the books that focus on kingship, such as the books of Samuel. Even Genesis, which describes events that took place in a time without kings, is essentially a long-winded explanation of the descendants of the first humans, and the gradual formation of nations based on genealogy. There is no individual or self beyond that which can be connected to a family, community, or nation.

Ecclesiastes is unusual in its deviation away from focusing on blood ties and group functionality. Although the book begins by explaining that the unnamed “teacher” is a “son of David, king in Jerusalem,” that is about the extent of importance placed on the teacher’s title (*New International Version*, Ecclesiastes 1:1). Although some have speculated that this nameless king is Solomon, among other identities, allowing him to remain anonymous creates room for a more powerful interpretation. The speaker’s concerns are not wholly tied to his position of power. They are more universal, and more human, than are problems arising strictly from a noble title. The speaker describes his wealth and power, stating that he “amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces... I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me” (Eccles. 2:8-9). Although these riches were probably only attainable due to his position of kingship, the concept of material possessions is not limited to the wealthy only. In a capitalist society, ownership dictates status for all: even poorer citizens are controlled by their *lack* of possessions, in contrast to the abundance that the teacher has acquired. Attainment of such possessions is a slippery slope, as the teacher in Ecclesiastes conveys – even though he has more than any other person in his city, his innermost needs are unsatisfied, leading him to dread death, the moment his possessions will be taken away, for fear that he will face oblivion unfulfilled.

The speaker’s mindset is one that we still understand today. Consumerism drives many twenty-first century society models, so it is simple to understand the vicious cycle that the speaker has fallen into, unable to find meaning through ownership despite being a member of a community in which possession of wealth is necessary to lead a comfortable life. However, it is that very search for stability that deepens the need to continue to consume. In order to understand the teacher’s own personal relationship to wealth and consumption, it is helpful to consider the mindset of an individual in the historical society that The Bible portrays. In his paper “Ecclesiastes Considered Psychologically,” Edward T. Root analyzes the cause of the teacher’s troubles and his inability to find security because of his inappropriate response to perceived hardship. Root argues that to analyze Ecclesiastes outside of its historical context is “to persist in walking in the twilight, after the day has dawned” (Root 138). Root presents the speaker as a man almost irretrievably lost because he has strayed too far from his teachings of faith. Indeed, this is evident in Ecclesiastes; the teacher’s mentions of God often sound bitter: “I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him” (Eccles. 3:14). The speaker’s relationship to God, and by extension his faith, are expressed in terms of futility and reluctant acceptance. According to Root, this is because the speaker exists only to serve himself, and has no sense of larger and more meaningful community. He writes that “to him whose centre is self, there is only succession of phenomena, profitless toil” (Root 140). The teacher is undoubtedly distraught at the grip that material possessions hold over him. However, faith does not seem to be the answer that he desires to turn toward. Root argues that if the teacher were to simply restore his faith in higher power, he would be able to let go of his earthly troubles and find inner peace. But

the speaker of Ecclesiastes has already accepted that God has granted humanity “wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them” (Eccles. 5:19). It is not the possession itself, but rather the pressure to obtain it, that the teacher is lamenting.

The speaker’s ability to connect to the community around him is also complicated – as a king, he is both attached to and separated from the rest of mankind. He is for the people, but not of the people. He seems to be disappointed with the nature of humanity as a whole, especially nobility such as himself, and dissatisfied with the way that wealth has fostered cruelty throughout society. He describes “the king himself” (Eccles. 5:9) profiting from “the poor oppressed in a district” (Eccles. 5:8) while officials turn a blind eye. Similarly, he sees “the tears of the oppressed - / and they have no comforter; / power was on the side of their oppressors” (Eccles. 4:1). Although he appears to be speaking out against abuse of the lower classes, as a king, his power lies with those same oppressors. He seems to be blaming a theoretical king for not taking action to dismantle such mistreatment, yet nowhere in Ecclesiastes does he use his own influence to make a change. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis analyzes this theme in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, noting that “the Preacher’s failure to respond actively to the injustice... may seem to us a flaw” (Louis 267). But it is due to “chance and death [that] the quality of a man’s action has no final meaning,” which is possibly why the teacher feels it is futile to attempt a change (Louis 278). Perhaps, then, the oppressor that the teacher refers to is a substitute for God, who has predetermined all of life’s courses. He has seen humans suffer and struggle for no reward, and himself has received no satisfaction from great wealth. Only God knows why certain humans must undergo an agonizing life of labor, but he remains mute and unreachable. Thus the teacher seems to distance himself

from the greater community in order to minimize his own suffering.

The teacher’s autonomy also arises secondarily from his dismissal of familial relationships. He notes that “a man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet... if he cannot enjoy his prosperity... I say that a stillborn child is better off than he” (Eccles. 6:3). This seems to argue back against the idea commonly described by biblical authors, which is that the only way to secure a future is to have as many children as possible. However, the speaker suggests that a legacy does nothing for the parent, whose toil is simply added to by the effort of raising the children, a task for which he may not even “receive a proper burial” (Eccles. 6:3). The speaker finds nothing noble in the idea of the sacrificial parent. As Elias Bickerman writes in *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, “there is no survival, neither personal in the abode of the dead, nor through children” (Bickerman 148). In terms of stylistics, Ecclesiastes is also interesting in its lack of genealogical records. Many biblical books feature at least some description of the lineage of important characters, but Ecclesiastes contains none. The speaker is described only as a “son of David,” through which the reader is meant to infer his ancestral history. But this minor mention isn’t enough to justify calling Ecclesiastes a book concerned about family or lineage. The speaker stands alone, an individual distant from family, friends, and any other significant communal experience. This aloneness no doubt reinforces the speaker’s ultimate turn towards celebrating individuality and finding meaning through the self-experience.

In contrast to his apathy surrounding family and other societal connections, the speaker of Ecclesiastes is highly preoccupied with his conceptions about death, and the ways in which the end of his life will affect his current actions. He expresses frustration at death’s lack of discernment: “the wise have eyes in their heads, / while the fool

walks in the darkness; / but I came to realize / that the same fate overtakes them both” (Eccles. 2:14). Like the “chasing after the wind” that the speaker frequently mentions, it is fruitless to try to escape death – it is all-encompassing and universal. Katherine J. Dell argues this point in her essay “The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes,” noting that “the cycle of life as controlled by God but experienced by human beings is an important theme” of Ecclesiastes (Dell 189). God holds “the key to the mystery of life itself,” leaving humanity to endlessly question why events take place in an exact order and at exact times (Dell 189). This view of predetermined yet unknown fate is what troubles the teacher in Ecclesiastes. “The fate of human beings is like that of the animals... as one dies, so dies the other,” the teacher states, seemingly unable to believe that man and beast could share such a similar ending (Eccles. 3:19). But it isn’t just the universality of death that strikes him – animals have no awareness of time or of an eventual end, and are thus able to continue through life without the pressure of finding meaning or a higher purpose, burdens under which the teacher struggles. He is instead lamenting oblivion, an empty death. He describes workers, noting that “all their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless” (Eccles. 2:23). All suffering, both physical and emotional, to achieve wealth and stability is useless if it is all going to be ripped away in the end.

The speaker of Ecclesiastes also displays an intriguing fascination with the world of the unborn, particularly as it relates to the dead. He declares that “the dead, / who had already died, / are happier than the living... but better than both / is the one who has never been born” (Eccles. 4:2-3). To the teacher, these unborn beings seem to occupy a space of blissful ignorance, never having “seen the evil / that is done under the sun” (Eccles. 4:3). To be unborn is to be at peace, even more so than the dead. This implies at least some sort of prevailing consciousness in

the dead, as if lingering memories of some evil witnessed can disrupt the solace that the unborn and the dead should theoretically share. The teacher iterates his point by saying that “a stillborn child is better off” than a man who has ungrateful children and is unable to enjoy his wealth (Eccles. 6:3). He expands on this claim by stating that the stillborn child “comes without meaning, it departs in darkness... though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man” (Eccles. 6:4-5). Again, he elevates the unborn child to a level of bliss unreachable by any person who has gained consciousness. Although he does not draw the comparison blatantly, it seems that the unborn child reflects an animal, as both have no awareness of death or time or even the evils that the speaker so frequently describes. If predestination does exist, what could possibly be God’s motivation for creating children who are never born, or born dead? In the teacher’s imagination, they seem to symbolize a connection to a spiritual world that is solely good, untainted by the evil deeds he witnesses on a daily basis, such as the aforementioned oppression of the poor. Although he seems to envy even the dead at times, none match the purity and innocence of the stillborn child who never has to face the cruelty that men endure on earth.

More than anything, the speaker is concerned about the fruitlessness of his labor in the face of a permanent ending. There is no eternal life waiting for the speaker, although, as previously mentioned, he implies that the dead may have some sort of lingering memories concerning their time spent on earth. Bickerman refers to this as humanity being “on leave from Death to visit the festival of Life” (Bickerman 155). However, the teacher seems envious of those who never take the leave from death at all. To him, death only holds its utmost value of undisturbed innocence when the being is never subjected to the conscious experience of life, such as the stillborn child. Still, the speaker claims that “the day of death [is]

better than the day of birth” (Eccles. 7:1) because “death is the destiny of everyone; / the living should take this to heart” (Eccles. 7:2). He stresses this burden of awareness again, stating “the living know that they will die, / but the dead know nothing,” arguing that it is not death itself, but its unpredictability, that adds to human suffering (Eccles. 9:5). The teacher is well aware that all beings die, even animals, but only humans are aware that all of their labor and strife will be for nothing. Not even wealth lasts, especially in the case of someone like the teacher who seems to lack significant familial attachments – he appears to have no children to whom he can pass down his acquisitions. Therefore, he must come to terms with the impermanence of life solely as an individual. And in doing so, he offers some of the more uplifting verses featured in the book of Ecclesiastes: “I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad” (Eccles. 8:15) and “banish anxiety from your heart / and cast off the troubles of your body, / for youth and vigor are meaningless” (Eccles. 11:10). By embracing the eventual end of his life, the speaker is able to find some comfort and joy in life’s pleasures, because knowing they will end makes them all the more significant.

The teacher’s frustration about God’s inaccessibility is also evident when he speaks about death. Throughout Ecclesiastes he reveals discontent about God’s withholding nature, but this dissatisfaction ultimately manifests as frustration with the concept of predestination. He acknowledges the “heavy burden God has laid on mankind,” this burden being a life of “toil” in order to keep up with a market-based society, despite death looming as an inevitable end (Eccles. 1:14). He attributes mankind’s routine of useless work to God, but he also acknowledges that “a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God” (Eccles. 2:24). He also notes that God “has

made everything beautiful in its time [and] has also set eternity in the human heart” (Eccles. 3:11). The phrase “set eternity in the human heart” is interesting because it conveys, in more poetic terms, the deep sense of despair that the teacher feels when considering the inevitable end of all things. The joy that the teacher is able to find in his life is made more poignant because he knows that it could end at any time. He concludes that humans should “fear God and keep his commandments,” although it seems to be almost a reluctant suggestion in lack of a better option (Eccles. 12:13). The teacher fully believes in God, he just seems to be in disagreement with God’s mystery and in bitter awe of his power. As Robert H. Pfeiffer discusses in “The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes,” the teacher’s frustration results from the fact that “God allots good or bad luck to men in capricious fashion... without following the dictates of either justice or mercy” (Pfeiffer 102). As a king, he reigns above the rest of mankind, even though he rejects the system that forces men into meaningless labor based on their classes. But as a being created by a higher power, he is inescapably a cog in a larger machine, inherently subservient. Despite his privilege, he is still prescribed a certain amount of suffering. He understands that God will bring his life to an end and judge him regardless of his actions, which is why he encourages others to enjoy being alive, “for God has already approved what you do” (Eccles. 9:7). Predestination is unchangeable and God has already mapped out the courses of each person’s actions, which ultimately allows the teacher to embrace whatever joy he can find in his earthly life.

Throughout Ecclesiastes, the speaker continually builds towards a reclamation and celebration of individual autonomy, which stands in defiance of the idea of predestination. After all, if God has already designed the entire course of human life and action, does individual choice still exist? The teacher seems to think so, although accepting

this ideology may require momentarily forgetting the existence of a higher being. He spends plenty of time expressing his concerns over meaningless labor, yet advises that there “is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work” (Eccles. 3:22). This itself is a way of conveying autonomy: to find meaning in prescribed, exhausting labor is an act of power, especially to a working class that has no other way of achieving freedom. Although it can be seen as the ultimate act of submission, it can also be interpreted as a reclaiming of individuality – to be viewed as an *essential* part of the greater function, rather than one that is replaceable. This is the kind of pride in labor that the teacher seems to advocate. He also emphasizes that people must find contentment with their lot in life. Again, there are themes of predestination when he says “I am determined to be wise’ - / but this was beyond me” - he isn’t entirely resigned to be a fool just because God did not designate him to be the wisest man (Eccles. 7:23). Ecclesiastes is, after all, intended to be a wisdom writing, and the teacher’s skepticism and thematic choices are not indicative of a man who never thinks deeply. Later, he notes that “a person’s wisdom brightens their face / and changes its hard appearance” (Eccles. 8:1). Even if an outward change to situations such as work and class status cannot be made, the teacher still seems to value inward education and enlightenment.

Wisdom is one way that the speaker seeks to reclaim value in his own life, in spite of predestination. The teacher is preoccupied with the distinction between a wise man and a fool, and spends considerable time discussing it throughout his writings. Sometimes he uses “wisdom” as a substitute for instinct or common sense, such as when he describes “cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly – my mind still guiding me with wisdom” (Eccles. 2:3). The teacher seems to feel that he is enlightened above the average man, in a sense that he occupies a

kind of duality. The other men that the teacher describes are either purely foolish, enjoying life’s pleasures with no regard to higher matters, or trapped in a completely distraught existence, plagued by existential dread. The teacher is caught somewhere in between – he does his best to enjoy life, including both work and riches, but is never able to dive fully into indulgence because his meditations on predestination and futility still follow him. In his words, “with much wisdom comes much sorrow; / the more knowledge, the more grief” (Eccles. 1:18). Because he has allowed himself to ponder concepts like death and the fact that all of his actions may already be predetermined, he is unable to escape from those thoughts no matter how much he tries to distract himself. Wisdom, which generally has a connotation of strength and comfort, has become an unsettling force in his life.

Still, the teacher is determined to use his wisdom to gain some type of insight about his own life and the amount of individuality that God has spared him. He knows that “the wise have eyes in their heads, / while the fool walks in the darkness; / but... the same fate overtakes them both” (Eccles. 2:14). Thus begins his frustrated and complicated relationship to his own mindfulness. He states that it is better to have “a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king,” which is perhaps a reference to himself (Eccles. 4:13). In spite of his attempts to become wiser, he is no closer to gaining any answers about the significance of his own fate. Thus the repetition of the phrase “this too is meaningless” throughout Ecclesiastes: no matter what efforts the teacher makes, he is no closer to God and no closer to understanding why his actions are futile. He craves autonomy to control his own destiny, but as his intelligence grows, he seems to become more certain that his fate is already sealed. However, he still refuses to shun intelligence entirely, perhaps because, though he is reluctant to admit it, his heightened awareness has given his life more

importance. He states that “wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing / and benefits those who see the sun” (Eccles. 7:11). The reference to the sun is important, because the teacher tends to describe evil as being done “under the sun.” So, although wisdom may not hold the answers to the deepest questions that he struggles with, it does give men the ability to discern good from evil. The teacher always pushes back against evil actions, even when encouraging others to enjoy life’s pleasures – there is always an implied stipulation to not engage in sinful behavior, and an outright renouncement of anything that the teacher sees as an evil endeavor.

Although, as mentioned earlier, the teacher does not seem to have a profound regard for human closeness, he does commend the existence of a supportive community. This is noteworthy because it is also an encouragement of individual choice – choosing to be supportive of others, even though predestination could potentially create an “every man for himself” attitude. Because, after all, if one’s life actions are already planned at birth, why make the effort to show kindness to others and engage in bettering the life of someone else? Such is the paradox of predestination: to do good for oneself and others, in spite of whatever fate has already been designed. The teacher, however, notes that “all toil and all achievement spring from one person’s envy of another” (Eccles. 4:4). In other words, competition between humans only makes their lives harder and increases their suffering. Since the teacher is a king, it is possible that he only arose to power through the sort of cutthroat, unsympathetic behavior he is now advocating against. The wealth he has acquired does little to placate the loneliness and regret he now experiences, cut off from the rest of humanity. Because, as he states, “two are better than one,” (Eccles. 4:9) and “though one may be overpowered, / two can defend themselves. / A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Eccles. 4:12). This could simply be a push for unity in

order to have a secure nation, but the teacher seems to be asking for a deeper connection between fellow humans, a willingness to transcend boundaries and protect one another. His days of kingship are coming to an end, and he has no desire to empower his domain, because he has no way of knowing what will happen after he dies, even if he secures his estate to the best of his ability. Therefore, he asks for something simpler than a powerful nation: kindness, and community, which will foster individual awareness through connection to others.

Even though he instructs others to nurture community, the teacher is too apathetic about his place in society to make any changes of his own. Still, his individuality radiates from a place of self-reliance, which is ultimately how the teacher comes to peace with his plethora of unanswered questions. Despite encouraging others to form communities and support their friends and family, the teacher is alone. He is close to no one except his own self, and from this stems his greater awareness. He knows that “there is nothing better for people than to be happy and do good while they live,” which is why he makes the active choice to share this answer with others (Eccles. 3:12). His teachings seem to fight back against predestination by reminding others that they do have some choice in their actions. This is the kind of optimism that Louis points out in his analysis on Ecclesiastes. “There is no pessimism... there is bluntness and honesty, and painful self-awareness,” he says of the teacher, noting that man will never attain the amount of good “proportionate to his yearnings for it” (Louis 281). According to the teacher, man must create his own happiness, through whatever way best suits “his nature and his instincts” (Louis 281). The teacher’s endless theories and questions don’t really matter, what matters is his ability to postulate such questions and search his own consciousness for the answers. In that way, his knowledge is a microcosm of the greater world, and his insight allows him to

examine the flaws of God, who some simply accept as all-powerful and righteous. The teacher's final destination is irrelevant, because of his ability to remain critical but not pessimistic. He understands that there is "a time to be born and a time to die" (Eccles. 3:2) just as much as there is "a time to search and a time to give up" (Eccles. 3:6).

Without ever directly saying so, the teacher demonstrates through his words that his own joy in life comes through his intelligence and his ability to search out answers that he knows will likely never be found. For all his lamentation on being alive, the teacher never once suggests suicide or an early death as a better option than meeting a prescribed ending. He states that "light is sweet, / and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. / However many years anyone may live, / let them enjoy them all" (Eccles. 11:7-8). As a literary work, Ecclesiastes exists to push its readers in search of the answers to their own questions about the meaning of life and their purpose on earth. The very act of questioning existence is what creates the ability to be self-reliant – to find those answers within, rather than through an external source, such as religion. The teacher is faithful because he makes the conscious choice, not just because God exists as a source of enlightenment. In spite of suffering, and fruitless labor, and the cruelty of others, humanity still has a propensity for joy, and this is the very concept that the teacher wants mankind to embrace. Self-reliance, to the teacher, is the ability to question the essential structure of earthly functions while still accepting the happiness that life brings – a duality between awareness and peace, existentialism and comfort, the cosmic and the earthly. This, then, is the meaning behind the meaningless, the message of Ecclesiastes.

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