

In 4.1-6.9, Qohelet shifted from philosophical meditation to moral instruction, giving his hearers practical advice in light of his insights into the constraints placed on human existence in God's world. This week, he shifts back into meditation upon experience to explore the possibilities for human knowledge.

Ecclesiastes 6.10 marks the middle of Qohelet's work. While this may not have been the intent of the final editor of Ecclesiastes, rabbis and scholars have noted the central position of this verse for centuries. In a book that doesn't offer much in the way of literary structure, knowing that this verse stands at the heart of Ecclesiastes provides a structural and thematic turning point that provides confidence that we are, in fact, heading off into new terrain in Qohelet's journey.

6.10-7.14: Humanity Cannot Discern True Goodness

As Qohelet opens the second half of Ecclesiastes, he continues to raise questions about the quality of human understanding. 6.10 questions the ability of any person to establish any sort of knowledge. He affirms that everything that happens has already been named (6.10a). As 1.9 already stated, "there is nothing new under the sun." Whether in the course of history or by divine appointment, there is nothing "new" in the world of human experience. It may be new to us in our experience, but God or those who have gone before have already "named" it. In addition, human beings themselves are known prior to their own self-understanding (6.10b). The presumption here is that God knows individuals prior to and better than they can ever know themselves. So, much like the case of Job, people cannot "dispute" (6.10c) with the Lord who is clearly "stronger" (6.10c), who lays prior claim to all knowledge, and who ultimately circumscribes all human knowledge.

Because God's human creatures are not a source for knowledge, they cannot discern "what will be after them under the sun" (6.12b). People may guess at what will happen beyond the number of their days, but their claim to knowledge is nothing compared to God's understanding. So, people can lay no claim to knowledge either in the course of their lives, "which they pass as a shadow" (6.12), or beyond their days. Therefore, anyone who professes to know anything about the meaning of life or

something about "the Good" is just piling on words without any grounding (6.11). These three verses (6.10-12) combine with 7.13-14 to frame this section and provide the interpretive framework for this section. So, before getting into 6.13-7.12, we will cover these two closing verses.

7.13 brings us back to Job with its declaration to "consider the work of God." Here Qohelet establishes the priority of the Lord to all forms of human knowledge and understanding. The rhetorical question, "who can make straight what he has made crooked?" (also in 1.15), re-establishes the point as only the Creator can, of course, make straight what was originally established to be crooked. 7.14 reiterates 6.12 with the refrain, "so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them." Since God as Creator establishes and contextualizes the space and time in which humanity exists, God understands and knows human being in a way that is inaccessible to people. So, when we experience "prosperity," we ought to be "joyful" (7.14), and when we face what we consider "adversity," we ought to remember that we cannot know in any absolute sense the actual difference between the two relative to

our experience. What we perceive as adversity, may just be prosperity, and vice-versa. The point Qohelet tries to make is that as God's creatures, we do not enjoy the perspective from which to make any actual judgment or to make any claim of knowledge of ourselves or the quality of the space in time we inhabit. This affirmation, informs all of Qohelet's reflections in this section of Ecclesiastes.

6.13-7.12 returns to the "better than" sayings like those we encountered in Ecclesiastes 4. In 7.1, he claims that having a name that is remembered after death ("fame") is better than luxury or wealth, symbolized by "fine ointment." This reading is consistent with his fixation on death in 7.2-4 and creates the paradox that the present experience of death is to be favored over different dimensions of immediate experience. 7.1b affirms that the "day of death" is better than one's "day of birth." 7.2 suggests a funeral is preferred over celebrating a festival. 7.3, that sorrow is better than laughter. 7.4 even goes as far to suggest that the wise person prefers the "house of mourning" and that fools dwell in the "house of mirth." Death is to be preferred in all of these circumstances because all living creatures understand and know death as the end of life (7.2). As such, people who are wise should prefer



death over life, which is deeply shrouded in mystery and the realm of the fool.

Therefore, it makes sense that the “rebuke of the wise” is preferable to the “song of fools” (7.5) since fools mistakenly believe that they comprehend life. But it is the wise who understand and know that the common experience of death is the great equalizer and that nobody can peer “beyond their days” and truly know anything. This is why the “laughter of fools” (7.6) is vacuous. Qohelet returns to this theme in 7.8a when he declares that the “end of a thing” is better than its beginning and that those who wait for the end with patient anticipation (7.8) are better than the “proud” who believe that the present has any meaning and value of its own.

All of these confounding claims should not lead one to anger (7.9) and, of course, nobody should question the value of one period of human experience relative to another (7.10) since neither perspective is grounded in knowledge and understanding. Only the wise, as Qohelet defines wisdom here, perceive things properly (7.11). Thus, the wise will protect their understanding and will know that knowledge comes by just the sort of wisdom that aligns with Qohelet’s understanding in these verses.

The height of wisdom, then, is to know and understand that humanity cannot establish meaning about itself in the course of life. Only the end of life defined by death provides a touchpoint where some sort of knowledge about human being can be established. To embrace meaning and value in the course of life, Qohelet says, is foolish because it is simply beyond the ability of humanity to establish anything so absolutely.

7.15-29: Humanity Cannot Discern True Righteousness and Wisdom

Qohelet’s concern about the possibility of human understanding continues in his meditations on righteousness and wisdom. In regard to righteousness (7.15-22), Qohelet reaffirms his authority as one who has “seen everything” in what he calls his “vacuous” life. (7.15). One of his summary observations is that some “righteous people” perish and some “wicked people” flourish. (7.15). Qohelet likely presumes that this human observation is common to all of his readers - both in his day as it certainly is in our own time.

At this point, Qohelet offers counsel on how to live in the light of this realization. He suggests that his hearers “not be too righteous, and do not act too wise” (7.16-17). Also he offers that his hearers “not be too wicked, and do not be a fool” (7.17). Finding a golden mean of sorts between the extremes among each of these pairs appears to be

the pathway for those who “fear God” (7.18). The wise person is the one who can hold wisdom and foolishness and righteousness and wickedness in a finely balanced tension in the course of everyday life (7.18). In 7.20, Qohelet reaffirms this insight with a refrain that reminds us of Jesus, Paul and Martin Luther: “Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning.” Luther was fond of saying that humanity is “simultaneously justified and a sinner.” Luther takes this insight from Jesus, who in a crowd of teachers of the law counsels, “let him without sin cast the first stone” and is then greeted by thudding sounds as rocks hit the ground. The refrain also echoes Paul’s experience in Romans, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (7.19). So, righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly held in dynamic tension is the substance of wise living because it is ultimately not possible for humans to attain righteousness or wisdom.

For this reason, we “should not give heed to everything that people say” (7.21). Because we live as beings in tension, which we know from the “many times [we] have yourself cursed others” (7.22), we should give people mercy when they speak harshly, manipulatively, or disparagingly. Because they are very much like us at the end of the day, unable to discern righteousness and wisdom. And, therefore, of course people say and do horrible things.

Qohelet returns to meditation in 7.23 and explores his quest for wisdom. “All this I have tested by wisdom,” he says, but wisdom itself turns out to be elusive. Instead of discerning wisdom and knowing the pitfalls that keep us from it, namely wickedness and foolishness (7.25), he instead runs across our old friend from Proverbs, Lady Folly (7.26). She is “more bitter than death,” “a trap,” has “snares and nets” for a heart (7.26), and has “fetters” for hands (7.26). She takes sinners captive like a hunter (7.26). As pictured in Proverbs, Lady Folly roams about to entrap those seeking wisdom. The only one who “escapes” (7.26) is the one who pleases God.

In 7.27-28, the final editor of Ecclesiastes provides a summary for Qohelet, who is directly named here for the first time since 1.1. Qohelet has taken account in a very orderly fashion (7.27) and has continued to quest for understanding despite multiple past dead ends (7.28). He considers himself unique among other men in his pursuit (“one man among a thousand”), and doesn’t know of a single woman who has undertaken the journey (7.28). The key finding articulated here is that God has made humans “just right” and not crooked (echoing 7.13). The predicament, the editor surmises, is that people continue to try to “make straight what [God] made crooked (7.13)”

In the final two verses of this section, then, the final editor of Ecclesiastes overrides the insights of Qohelet. Qohelet has deemed vacuous all sorts of individual and social activities in the world and has called into question the quality of human understanding and wisdom. One could start to think that these observations might begin to reflect poorly on God as creator. So, the editor steps into the conversation to make a theological affirmation for Qohelet's hearers: God's creation is perfect, but by their nature humanity has a corrupting influence. The final editor will assert himself (likely) again later in the book, but 7.27-28 clearly demonstrates the discomfort that the final editor has with Qohelet's insights. Throughout Ecclesiastes, the final editor, makes theological correctives to "straighten" what he sees as the "crooked" path explored by Qohelet.

8.1-17: The World of Human Experience is Arbitrary

Ecclesiastes 8 opens with a rhetorical question that finds its answer in vv. 16-17: "Who is so wise?" (8.1). This question is elucidated by the parallel, "Who knows the interpretation of a thing?" (8.1). These questions assume that the wise have insight into insight, understanding and genuine knowledge. In answer to the question after a bit of explication (8.2-15), Qohelet arrives at the insight based on experience that "no one can find out what is happening under the sun" (8.17) and "even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out" (8.17). This section summarizes the insights Qohelet arrives in the journey from 6.10 through 8.17: Human wisdom, understanding and knowledge is "vacuous."

This thoroughgoing pessimism comes, in part, through Qohelet's meditations on the position of political authorities in the world (8.2-9). Kings wield absolute authority over their subjects as evidenced by the fact that he "does whatever he pleases" (8.3). The best position for a subject of a king is obedience since the king's authority cannot be questioned (8.2, 4-6). However, the king's authority and power, while very real from one perspective, is meaningless when seen in wider perspective. Kings "do not know what is to be" (8.7) and have "no power over the wind...or power over the day of death" (8.8). In fact, by the very sake of their power over their subjects they "exercise authority over another to the other's hurt" (8.9). Qohelet thus points out that kings are no better than their subjects relative to genuine power and authority. This vacuousness of political authority calls for great wisdom while living in its midst (8.5).

Qohelet's pessimism is also fueled by the injustice he encounters "under the sun." The wicked are able to move freely about in sacred spaces (8.10) and are held in high

standing in the public square (8.10). When they die, they receive an honorable burial, which Qohelet sees as unjust. In addition, he observes human hearts full of evil because the "sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily" (8.11). Yet, in the midst of this injustice, Qohelet holds on to the confidence that "it will be well with those who fear God" (8.12). Extending these observations into injustice, Qohelet notes that there are righteous people "who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked" (8.14) and wicked people who are treated like the righteous (8.14). This confounding observation affirms Qohelet's insight into the vacuousness of being and reality.

As Qohelet counseled earlier in Ecclesiastes when faced with the seeming absurdity of human being and thriving "under the sun," he commends "enjoyment" (8.15) through eating, drinking and other activities balanced with "toil" (8.15). Because Qohelet keeps returning to this point it seems consistent to say that the original sage of Ecclesiastes counseled his hearers to face the vacuousness that confronts us on all sides with well-intentioned enjoyment through eating and drinking as we pass the days God has allotted us "under the sun."

As noted, this section closes with Qohelet's affirmation that his inquiry into the restlessness of humanity (8.16) has thus far come up empty. In light of the "work of God" (8.17) it becomes quickly clear that nobody knows "what is happening under the sun" (8.17). Even wise people who claim to know cannot penetrate God's mysteries and come to any genuine understanding about reality.

Summary

With nearly three-fourths of Ecclesiastes behind us, Qohelet has us nowhere closer to resolving the inquiry to discover meaningful grounding for human understanding. If anything, as Qohelet cycles through different dimensions of human inquiry and comes back empty-handed we may find ourselves standing more and more with him in decrying the "vacuousness" of human existence.