Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes 6

Just looking at the chapter numbers in Ecclesiastes, you would assume that Chapter 6 marks the halfway point of the book. Indeed, it does, but not necessarily as you’d think. Most modern scholars would end Part I of the book at verse 9 of Chapter 6. Then, Part II begins with verse 10. In fact, the Masoretes (medieval Hebrew scholars who included a group of Sopherim (“Counters”) who counted every letter and every word in the Hebrew Bible) said that verse 10 is the exact mid-point of Ecclesiastes when you count verses [Brown, William P., *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 67.].

This would allow for eight (8) sections in the first half, each ending with either emptiness of emptiness (vanity of vanities) or “chasing after the wind,” and eight (8) sections in the second half (four ending with the verb “to find” and four ending with the verb “to know.” [Ceresko, Anthony, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999.]

It also allows for grouping the two halves of the book under the rubric of two focusing questions: 1) What is the advantage of unfulfilling labor? (1:3) and 2) Who knows what is good? (6:11) [Miller, Douglas B., *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002, p. 23.] Similarly, one could divide the book into two parts, each respectively leading off with reflections about the subject matter and concluding with ethical advice or admonitions. In this approach, you would reflect on how short-lived (ephemeral) and uncertain everything is from 1:2-4:16, but finish the half with ethical considerations on how to deal with temporality and uncertainty from 5:1 (English versification)-6:9. Then, you would reflect on how hard it is to get a handle on anything in this world from 6:10-8:17 before you considered the advice, admonitions, and ethical considerations with which one deals with risk management and the certainty of death in 9:1-12:8 (followed by an epilogue summarizing the whole book). [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1997, pp. 46-47.]

For our purposes, it’s a good idea to consider this back and forth between observation and reflection followed by directions or guidelines in dealing with or coping with the problems considered in the former. If so, we’re currently dealing with the idea of uncertainty. It’s a very real issue today when both philosophers and scientists are dealing with the implications of relativity on both truth and reality, as well as when our socio-political world is dealing with those who find “alternate facts” to be acceptable. Just since our last session, the Chicago Tribune published two comic strips related to this where the little girl protagonist is dealing with her “coyote” friend and verbal antagonist. [See Slides]

Before we jump into the passage, I want to share with you some of the “rabbit hole” to which I descended as I was preparing these notes. I knew that the word often translated as vanity or emptiness was important. I read in one source that it was found 37 times in Ecclesiastes, but my count was 38 times and even 39 if you accepted the emendation found in some manuscripts (which I don’t). But I noticed how much the root for good, goodness, or “better” appeared and decided to count the number of times that root appeared. I found 52 times. Since I’d looked at good, I decided I had better look at evil and I counted 31 times (which agreed with Miller, *Symbol*, pp. 95-96n11.). Although used sparingly in Ecclesiastes, and in the Hebrew Bible, I was also curious about the use of the root that could be translated as sick, sickness, or illness (4 times in Ecclesiastes). While I was at it, I noticed that the root “darkness” tended to be used in different ways in the book. So, the chart below reflects my digging.



I will upload an Excel spreadsheet of this in case you want to translate to Chinese and use for your own purposes. What should be clear here, though, is that the negatives far outweigh the positives in the early part of the chapter and the positives sneak in toward the conclusion.

When our last chapter was concluded, we had seen Qoheleth offer some sound advice. We were to take the simple things as gifts from God and enjoy them. This was in contrast to the hoarder who seemed to have tried to hang onto everything until misfortune struck and he didn’t even have anything to leave his would-be heir. Now, Chapter 6 opens with something of a different story. This time the person doesn’t physically lose everything through misfortune or bad investments. Instead, he has everything but can’t really enjoy them. It clearly seems like an arbitrary reversal of Qoheleth’s advice [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 64.] from Chapter 5.

For this session, I’m going to give you Robert Alter’s very literary translation of Ecclesiastes 6 from Alter, Robert, *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), pp. 366-368.

***1) There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy on humankind: 2) a man whom God gives wealth and possessions and honor, and he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires, and God does not grant him to enjoy it, for a stranger will enjoy it. This is mere breath and an evil sickness.***

These verses describe something Qoheleth believes to be wrong so he uses the very strong word evil. Interestingly, many interpreters believe that Qoheleth is blaming God for that evil on the basis of “God does not grant him to enjoy it.” I see this in numerous commentaries [Brown, Ecclesiastes, p. 64; Crenshaw, James L., *Ecclesiastes: The Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 126; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 170.]

They may be right in that Qoheleth may be trying to challenge God like Job did, but I disagree. I think these interpreters are making too much of the “God does not grant him to enjoy it” line. Remember that God has provided this in the first place. I am also troubled by some differences between the last part of Chapter 5 and here that deal with the Hebrew grammar [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 225.] I would state them as:

1. **Is this an exception? The terminology here is “a man” versus the “every person” plural found in Qoheleth’s advice in 5:19. I know verse one says that this is “heavy” on humankind, but that doesn’t necessarily mean frequent (though Longman believes it does here). I believe he means that it is very difficult to understand and heartbreaking when you see it (or experience it, of course). I also believe that Qoheleth thinks that it happens too often.**

**2. Is this definitive? Is this something God destined? Is this something that had to be? The fact that this verse has “God gives” in the imperfect rather than the “God gave” in the perfect tense in 5:19 may offer a clue. The perfect tense was the favored tense of prophets because it conveyed the idea that God’s will was so powerful they could speak of it in past tense even when they were talking about the future. The imperfect tense is incomplete; it’s open-ended. At least, to me it suggests that the human response to God’s action is not pre-determined. Qoheleth isn’t always consistent with that, but I think the use of this tense leaves the possibility open.**

**3. Is this about attitude? Having said that, I would suggest that this may hinge a lot on the wealthy individual’s attitude. When we to the end of verse 2, we get back to emptiness or absurdity, but in 5:19 it was all about enjoying God’s gift. The person in this evil may be unable to enjoy this wealth because of his own avarice of wanting more [Fausset, A. R.,** “Ecclesiastes” in Jamieson, Robert (et. al., eds.) *A Critical and Experimental Commentary: Volume III: Job-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967 (original, 1866)), p. 527.]

**I may have told you previously of my college roommate’s father. He worked as the caretaker of the grounds for a mansion in Ojai Valley, California. The garden was so lush it was used as the setting for Shangri-La in a Hollywood film and this multi-millionaire was one of the early founders of 3M corporation. He was the “mining” in the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing corporation. But he was so stingy that he wanted his pool to look nice and used a cyanide-based preservative rather than chlorine. It meant that no one, including him, could use the pool except for once a year when he drained it, cleaned it, and refilled it with chlorine for a party.**

**The reason I’m aware of this is because my roommate told me about all of the library resources available to him when he visited his folks. The estate had a self-standing library building and my roommate told me that he had it all to himself. Doesn’t the owner use it? No, it was built for his ex-wife. When she left him, she took all the books away. He wanted to have an event in the library and rather than have all of those empty shelves, he purchased an entire used bookstore and filled up the shelves that way. Reference books, atlases, antique books, first editions, you name it were available to us—strangers who got to use all of these books that he purchased but, because of his attitude, was unable to enjoy.**

**When President Eisenhauer used to visit the estate, he had a one-hole golf course for him. By the time we were visiting, he had forced my friend’s father to take it out. At one point, there was a private bowling alley in the basement of the main house. It had rotted and was now unusable when we explored it. You see, I can’t help but think of this very wealthy, but stingy, man when I read these verses of Ecclesiastes. I don’t think God forced him not to enjoy his wealth; I think he was afraid to enjoy it. Even my old seminary professor expressed it that the man lacked the capacity to enjoy his wealth [**Peterson, Wayne H. “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.) *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 117.]

**Others speculate that since Qoheleth gives no specific reason: “Perhaps it was ill health, a stroke, insanity, depressive illness, chronic and crippling pain—some condition in which you have to look on impotently as other people enjoy all you labored for, but you can’t enjoy it yourself.”** [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), p. 75.]

That speculation is certainly possible, but there is also another element here. This idea of the stranger consuming his wealth. “The only people who can enjoy his wealth are people outside his family who by some legal process receive his wealth.” [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 118.] There is a saying in English, “Use it or lose it.” In many ways, that’s something like Jesus’ parable of the talents. This individual didn’t value what he had enough to use it, so it went to someone else.

The loss of property from those who didn’t build it was always a possibility in the ancient world. Military conquerors could take it; squatters could live on the land that you weren’t using and then claim it when you die; tax collectors could come after you in the name of your own or foreign kings; or bandits could steal the property which could be carried away. Indeed, “stranger” could even be more literal. “During this period, Palestine was filled with both indigenous and immigrant populations, the “people of the land” and the returning exiles or glâ (see, e.g., Ezra 3:3; 4:1; 6:16; 9:1–2; Neh. 9:24, 30; 10:30–31). It was a time when land and family were issues of great contention. Consequently, one’s family roots played a decisive role in reclaiming land that was once lost in exile, not unlike the situation in Palestine today.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 65.]

As powerful as Brown’s observation is, James Crenshaw reminds us that the word used for “stranger” here is not the usual term for “foreigner,” **so we can’t be too certain [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 126.].** What we do know is that the wealthy individual didn’t follow the admonition given by Qoheleth at the end of Chapter 5 and that it cost him. In fact, it cost him so much that the next verses get darker.

Some people notice that God praised Solomon in 2 Chronicles 1:11 because he didn’t ask for wealth, riches [or possessions], or honor, it might be that Qoheleth either has Solomon in mind as the case study [in that case, Jeroboam taking the ten tribes away from Solomon’s son Rehoboam would reflect the stranger.] or may be drawing upon Solomon’s request for wisdom as implying that the person in the case study wasn’t acting with wisdom. The second interpretation there would be additional support for my position.

***3) If a man begot a hundred children and lived many years, and many were the days of his life, he might yet not be sated with good things, and even a burial he might not have. I said: better than he is the stillborn. 4) For in mere breath did it come, and into darkness it goes, and in darkness its name is covered. 5) The very sun it did not see or know—more ease for it than for him. 6) And were he to live a thousand years twice over, yet good things he did not enjoy—does not everything go to a single place?***

Children were considered a blessing in the ancient world, largely because they increased the workforce available for the family’s efforts. It was much the same in the rural U.S.A. when agriculture was predominantly based on the family farm. But Qoheleth wants his readers/hearers to know that offspring are no guarantee of wealth. It reminds me of one disgruntled mother of troubled teens who complained that raising children was like tending a bucket of snakes. But you need to understand that Qoheleth is offering a counter-example to the usual biblical wisdom.

For example, Psalm 127:3-5 talks about sons as a blessing and suggests that having a quiver-full, as though the sons were arrows, is a good idea. In this case, it appears that the offspring didn’t even care enough about their father to provide for his burial. Improper burial was a great disgrace in the ancient world such that if this person couldn’t even count on that, Qoheleth was saying that the individual’s life was meaningless.

Indeed, one could argue that the person who was not honored in their grave and the stillborn who died before being named were in the same situation. Neither might as well have existed and both end up in the same place. It’s interesting that Psalm 58:8 ends with a curse that reads: “Like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.” [NIV] And that dovetails with the way 6:4 reads in the Hebrew. Our familiar word for vapor, wisp, emptiness, etc. begins with its soft h sound and then, the word for darkness with its hard ch sound comes in the next two phrases. Whether vapor, a wisp, or emptiness, it is tantamount to darkness.

It appears that these verses are saying that the person who has their identity stripped away in the fashion of the man in the case study is worse off than the stillborn. To see what is possible and not get it may be worse than never having the chance to see the possibility. In that sense, Qoheleth says that the stillborn child is better off.

Conventional biblical wisdom was that it was a blessing to live to a good old age, but in verse 6, Qoheleth takes issue with that. Does anyone remember how old the oldest person in the Bible was when he died? That’s right. Methuselah was 969 years old when he died (Genesis 5:27). So, Qoheleth says that if one lived twice as long as the oldest person ever, that it would mean nothing unless he learned to enjoy his prosperity. But notice the problem here! It’s the same as the one in the first case study of the chapter, the person who had the wealth, possessions, and honor and couldn’t enjoy it. I think this adds support to my argument that it isn’t that God willfully withheld enjoyment from the person but that God honored the person’s decision to be so greedy or paranoid that they couldn’t enjoy it.

Regardless, Qoheleth tells us that the subject of the case study, the stillborn, indeed everyone goes to the same place, the underworld, death, the grave. He reminds us that we all die. It reminds me of the Roman tradition of the slave riding behind the conquering general in a victory procession. While the masses were shouting how great the general was, the slave was required to whisper, “Memento mori” or “Remember, you will die.” It’s actually a good thing to remember our mortality. We shouldn’t obsess about it, but we should pay attention to the fact that we have a limited amount of time to invest, as Qoheleth would say, “under the sun.”

***7) All a man’s toil is for his own mouth, yet his appetite will not be filled.***

***8) For what advantage has the wise over the fool? What good is it for the poor man to know how to get round among the living.***

***9) Better what the eyes see than desire going round. This, too, is mere breath and herding the wind.* [Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 367]**

Again, we have read from Robert Alter’s translation. Have you ever heard the term, “hand-to-mouth” existence? It means a person who works just to survive and never gets ahead. But whether you are “hand-to-mouth” or slightly ahead of the curve, it is human nature not to be satisfied.

I really appreciate the following paragraph that references back to earlier in Ecclesiastes and to other wisdom literature before finishing the observation: “Although all labor is for the mouth, the gullet, like the sea, never fills up (1:7), or like the eyes, it is never satisfied (1:8; 4:8). Indeed, the appetite can be compared to death itself, which is indiscriminate and insatiable (cf. Prov. 27:20; 30:15–16). The result or gain of work, thus, cannot be the foundation for happiness, the sage contends, for it does not satisfy any more than hoarding possessions or cultivating fleeting fame can.” [Brown, Ecclesiastes, p. 66.]

Verse 8, of course, becomes very cynical. Remembering that rhetorical questions usually expect a negative answer, we would expect that the wise don’t have any advantages over fools and neither does the poor man who is good at ingratiating himself with others [Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 367n8.]

Verse 9 is a return to Qoheleth’s idea of enjoying what you have. In this case, one should enjoy what one sees rather than to chase after what one dreams about. Always dreaming about more is a source of dissatisfaction. Of course, since the Hebrew word for “going” can also be understood as the idea of dying “going on,” Qoheleth could also mean that it is better to enjoy being alive than to go on (be dead) [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 129, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 228, Wright, *Hearing*, p. 75.]

**10) What was has already been called by name and is known, as he is man and cannot deal with one more powerful than he.**

**11) For there are many words that increase mere breath; what is the advantage for man?**

**12) For who knows what is good for man in life, in his days of mere breath, for he spends them like a shadow? Who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?** [Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 369.]

To make his final observation in this chapter, Qoheleth draws from Genesis 2 and God’s instructions to Adam to name the creatures of the creation. Indeed, the very word for humankind (or “man” as Alter translates it here) is “Adam.” So, four times in these verses, you could translate it as “he is Adam,” “what is the advantage for Adam?” “what is good for Adam in life?” and “who can tell Adam what will be after him under the sun?” I’m not saying that Qoheleth is talking about Adam as the individual character in Genesis 2, but I’m saying that he is talking about humankind as being like Adam.

Adam was allowed to name the creatures, but when it was Adam’s sinful will versus God’s holy will, who got kicked out of the Garden of Eden? Qoheleth, like many philosophers, knows that naming is important. Just as, in medicine, diagnosis is the key to a good prognosis, in many cases, naming a problem or opportunity is the key to solving it or making it yours. Especially in our modern age, we can name, identify, control, and modify so many things. “But in the end, we can’t fully understand God himself, still less contend with him—God is probably the one meant by “someone who is stronger.” [Wright, Hearing, p. 76.]

And Qoheleth is worried that just talking can easily lead to babble and frustration. “Qohelet is a Wisdom writer who constantly questions the value of wisdom. He knows that a human life is likely to be bleak, that it is intrinsically unpredictable, may end badly, and will surely be blotted out by death. His ‘wisdom’ is to register this perception, but, apart from his occasional exhortations to enjoy, he does not presume to know what is good for man, unlike the purveyors of mainline Wisdom.” [Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 368.]

There is a certain humility in recognizing that for all of the possibilities God has granted us, we cannot know the whole inside and outside of every situation. And if we KNEW what was best for us all the time, we wouldn’t need to seek God, would we? “Words lose their efficacy before the one who is stronger, yet there are those who babble on *ad nauseum*, hopelessly deluded that something will change, or that God will be more favorably inclined to their desires as a result.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 68.]

Qoheleth artfully mixes together the same sounds in verse 11: *debarim harbeh marbim habel*. [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 131, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 233.] Do you hear them? Seow thinks he was trying to imitate babble. He paraphrases this line as “Wordiness is not worthiness.” [Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 233]

One thing is for sure, Qoheleth isn’t content to offer us pre-cooked answers. He has faith in God, but he’s not about to presume that he understands everything about God and what God wants. Would that we had more Christians who think like him today.