



The Use of Qoheleth in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*

GAIL NORD PAULSON

*Incarnation Lutheran Church
North Oaks, Minnesota*

ONE EVENING I READ THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOK OF QOHELETH (ECCLESIASTES) in its entirety. I next began reading *Ethics* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, starting (near the middle!) with the chapter entitled "The Last Things and the Things Before the Last." By the second page of the chapter I sensed in the *Ethics* a resounding echo of Qoheleth. I began excitedly writing "Q" in the margins, page after page, wondering if I was imagining this congruence. Then I came to page 156 and, lo and behold, found an entire paragraph of quotes from Qoheleth. I knew then there was more going on than my own imposition of Qoheleth on Bonhoeffer.

Knowing that Bonhoeffer based many of his important concepts on the teachings of Martin Luther, curiosity then led me to a reading of Luther's commentary on Ecclesiastes, where I found an interpretation similar to that implied by Bonhoeffer's use of the material. I also find my own reading of Qoheleth coincides in many respects with Luther's and Bonhoeffer's.

I will in this essay first give a brief discussion of Qoheleth. Then I will treat Luther's view, followed by a discussion of Bonhoeffer's use of Qoheleth in his *Ethics*.

GAIL NORD PAULSON is associate pastor at Incarnation Lutheran. She has a deep interest in Bonhoeffer's works and the study of ethics as it pertains to pastoral ministry.

Bonhoeffer uses Qoheleth's emphasis on both the pleasures and the "vanity" of this world to distinguish between the penultimate and the ultimate. Ethics involves living joyfully in the penultimate, acting in light of the ultimate.

I. HUMANS AND GOD IN QOHELETH

Reading Qoheleth is like staring at one of those “optical illusion” drawings. Look at the drawing one way and you see a double profile of a lovely young woman. Look at it another way and you see a vase. Look at Qoheleth one way and you see life-giving hope. Look at it another way and you see deadly despair.

One factor affecting what is found in Qoheleth is the reader’s view of life’s meaning and purpose. Those who focus on the life and accomplishments of the individual human will find despair.

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. (1:3-4)

What do mortals get from all the toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. (2:23)

This is hardly a cheery picture from the perspective of one who looks at human effort as the ultimate value, who sees human beings as the pinnacle of all that is. The voice speaking to us in Qoheleth is that of one who has done it all and seen it all, and asks, “Is that all there is?” I think of those today who strive for a successful career, a big house, the right car, but who, after attaining these, feel as empty as they did at the beginning.

Another factor that guides how one reads Qoheleth is the readers’s picture of God. Leo Perdue sees God in Qoheleth portrayed as a “divine tyrant.”¹ He believes that the recurring phrase “under the sun” serves to distance God from humans. “A radical gulf separates human and divine worlds.”² If one sees God as a distant tyrant, the overall message of Qoheleth will surely be one of despair.

I read the book differently. I see the narrator as one who has asked many questions about God’s relationship to human beings and the world. What is the point of human effort? Why does there appear to be no justice in the world? The narrator has sought meaning through the pursuit of wisdom, knowledge, pleasure-seeking, acquisition of possessions, and found them all to be without lasting value, a “chasing after wind.” The phrase sounds over and over, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”³ The narrator has found nothing that he can do, make, acquire, or know that lasts.

Or at least he has found “nothing under the sun” that is not ephemeral. According to Perdue, this phrase serves to distance God from us. I disagree; rather, it helps us to keep things in perspective. That which is under the sun is that which is not lasting, that which God has made, but is not God. That which is not under the sun is lasting, is God. We are shown thereby that we are not to look to our own efforts for anything that lasts. We are freed from the tyranny of making more of ourselves than we should, more than we can.

God has given us good things in life to enjoy, and once we are freed from the

¹Leo Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 228.

²Ibid., 211.

³I would like to translate this phrase, “Ephemera of ephemera! All is ephemeral.”

necessity of finding ultimate meaning in these things, we are freed to find the joy that God has intended for us.

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (2:24-25)

I do not read these as words of despair but as words of wisdom. This is the wisdom of one who understands that God, not the human, is the center of all that is, the center of being and knowing and doing. What we do matters little in the end. Whether this knowledge leads to freedom or despair depends, in large part, on one's attitude toward God.

II. LUTHER'S VIEW OF QOHELETH

Martin Luther's interpretation of Qoheleth is similar to that outlined above. He states:

The summary and aim of this book, then, is as follows: Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in the everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future and are, as St. Paul said, without care and anxiety.⁴

He points out that this book is difficult and often misunderstood for two reasons: difficulty in understanding the intent of the author (Luther believes the author is King Solomon) and difficulty in translating the Hebrew.

Luther interprets the phrase "under the sun" as excluding the works of God which are above the sun and beyond our effort as humans. Qoheleth is, then, talking only of the works that we undertake, of that which pertains to this life.

Luther takes the word "vanity" to mean "nothing." This "nothingness of nothingness" is not a threat. It means that we are to stop worrying about that which is God's business and relax. Luther shares a proverb which is very much to the point: "Let it happen as it happens, because it wants to happen as it happens."⁵ We are to "walk by faith" and let God be God.

Therefore learn to keep quiet, to commit the kingdom to God, and to pray: "Lord, Thy will be done." Otherwise you will wear out your heart and your body, and you will waste time and eventually your life.⁶

Luther further states that we are to accept the happiness that comes our way from the hand of God. Happiness does not ever come of our own strivings, because we are never satisfied and always want more. If we have one thing, we want another. If we receive praise, we want more. There is no end and no satisfaction to be found by our own efforts in life.

There are those, according to Luther, who read Qoheleth and conclude that

⁴Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes, Luther's Works*, vol. 15, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972) 7.

⁵*Ibid.*, 27.

⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

one must despise all the things of the world, all the joys and pleasures. Wrong, says Luther.

The real despisers of the world are those who accept everything God sends to them, using everything with thanksgiving while it is present and freely doing without it if the Lord takes it away.⁷

The bottom line for Luther is to keep God at the center, to remember that there is ultimately nothing to be gained from all our efforts, to relax and enjoy what God gives, and to accept when God takes away what we had been given.

III. INTRODUCTION TO BONHOEFFER'S *ETHICS*

Bonhoeffer's ethical thinking is unique and difficult to categorize.⁸ His ethics, as well as his theology, are strongly christocentric. His eye is always and in every way on Christ and on justification of the sinner by grace alone. He is a Lutheran theologian. Yet at the same time he rejects what he calls "religion." His rejection of religion is based on his rejection of two-sphere thinking, the traditional division of all that is into two separate realms—the divine, holy, Christian realm, and the profane, worldly and un-Christian realm. He sees this division as "pseudo-Lutheran."⁹

This grounds Bonhoeffer's ethics (and theology) squarely in the real world. He rejects absolutely the moral absolutism of Kant. The two basic questions of ethics, "How can I be good?" and "How can I do good?" are discarded outright. The question he asks instead is "What is the will of God?" What is of utmost importance is nothing but the reality of God as the ultimate reality. The answer to the question of good is answered only in Christ.¹⁰

Bonhoeffer sees the penultimate (the things before the last) as all that precedes the ultimate (the last things), yet which is itself determined by the ultimate. The penultimate has no value in and of itself (all is ephemeral!), yet it is necessary for the coming of the ultimate. Bonhoeffer sees two opposite errors made in relation to the penultimate and the ultimate. One is denying the penultimate or dismissing it all as sinful. We then, as Christians, have no concern for the world. The other error is in keeping the ultimate far off from the everyday concerns of the world. The ultimate is excluded; God stands distant and cold.

The power of Bonhoeffer's ethics comes in his emphasis on the penultimate, on things as they really are in the world, combined with his placing Christ at the center of this real world. Through Christ the ultimate and the penultimate come

⁷Ibid., 31.

⁸Bonhoeffer did not write what we have today as his *Ethics* in this form. After his murder at the hand of the Nazis, his dear friend Eberhard Bethge gathered the various fragments on ethics that Bonhoeffer had written over time. He had intended to write a volume of ethics but never achieved that goal, the war having interfered with his work in this area. The writings comprising what we have as *Ethics* were written between 1940 and 1943.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (1955; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1995) 193-194.

¹⁰Ibid., 186-187.

together. As Christians we are to dwell in the world. The fallen creation is still the creation, and it is to this creation and to sinful people that Jesus Christ came.

Yet the crucifixion of Jesus does not simply mean the annihilation of the created world, but under this sign of death, the cross, men are now to continue to live, to their own condemnation if they despise it, but to their own salvation if they give it its due. The ultimate has become real in the cross, as the judgement upon all that is penultimate, yet also as mercy towards that penultimate which bows before the judgement of the ultimate.¹¹

Bonhoeffer does not traffic in the ideal, but in every way deals only with the real. There is no place for the idea of God or the idea of Christ or the idea of an ideal world. As he says,

Just as in Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of the world, so, too, is that which is Christian to be found only in that which is of the world, the "supernatural" only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, and the revelational only in the rational.¹²

James Burtness argues that Bonhoeffer's work can be most helpfully termed an "ethical theology." Bonhoeffer's theology, according to Burtness, is "a theology that is penetrated at every point by ethical concerns and issues and questions."¹³ His theology and his ethics cannot be separated.

Bonhoeffer does not prescribe a specific method for making ethical decisions. We are not told in his ethics what is good and what is not. It is only in reference to Christ that we can know what it is to do good. We do good for the sake of the ultimate. The hungry need bread, the homeless need shelter, the dispossessed need justice, the lonely need fellowship, the undisciplined need order, and the slave needs freedom. As Christians we are to see to these things because "what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one's neighbour....To provide the hungry man with bread is to prepare the way for the coming of grace."¹⁴

IV. BONHOEFFER'S USE OF QOHELETH

The focus on reality, the rejection of two-sphere thinking, and the theological bent of his ethics are all reasons, I believe, that Bonhoeffer especially liked the book of Qoheleth. According to James Woelfel, Ecclesiastes (and the Song of Solomon) fascinated Bonhoeffer.¹⁵ Woelfel sees Bonhoeffer's use of Qoheleth as underlying his concept of religionless Christianity, and backs up that contention with a quote from Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

By [Christian] this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes, and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own suffer-

¹¹Ibid., 131.

¹²Ibid., 196.

¹³James Burtness, *Shaping the Future: The Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 25.

¹⁴Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 136.

¹⁵James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 223.

ing, but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith, that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian.¹⁶

Qoheleth was a major influence on Bonhoeffer, according to Woelfel, in a way that is truly reminiscent of Luther's interpretation:

The message of Ecclesiastes, that "there is a time for everything," was a significant biblical influence on the "religionless" Bonhoeffer—enjoying and being truly grateful for earthly blessings when God grants them and reflecting on death and eternity when the time comes, but without mixing them together and casting a "religious," ascetical pall over earthly joys and the fullness of life.¹⁷

In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer quotes or refers to the following passages from Qoheleth: 2:24; 2:25; 3; 3:12; 7:24; 9:7ff.; 9:10; and 11:9. He first quotes Qoheleth in his fascinating discussion of "The Right to Bodily Life." His argument is based on the notion that bodily life, which we have been given without our asking, has an innate right of preservation. He sees this right as basic to all other rights. Bonhoeffer places great emphasis and value on our bodiliness, and sees our bodies as ends in themselves. From this he argues that we have the right to "bodily joys." It is here that he begins to quote Qoheleth, and hardly seems to know where to stop!

"There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God" (Eccl. 2.24).

"I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life" (Eccl. 3.12).

"Eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun all the days of thy vanity; for that is thy portion in this life and in thy labor which thou takest under the sun" (Eccl. 9.7ff).

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment" (Eccl. 11.9).

"Who can eat gladly and have enjoyment without him?" (Eccl. 2.25).¹⁸

Bonhoeffer refers to Eccl 9:10 ("Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going") in the chapter on "History and Good" referring to the passage as a biblical admonition "to do what is waiting to be done."¹⁹

Under the heading "The 'Ethical' and the 'Christian' as a Theme," Bonhoeffer refers to chapter 3 of Qoheleth. The reference comes in the context of his contention that humans are not at every moment engaged in something momentous.

¹⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. R. Fuller, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1953) 202; cited in Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology*, 232-233.

¹⁷Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology*, 258.

¹⁸Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 156.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 256.

Everything in human existence comes in its time ("For everything there is a season..."), some of which is playful, purposeless, or joyful.²⁰

The final direct reference to Qoheleth comes in his interesting discussion of "What is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?" He quotes 7:24, "That which is far off, and exceeding deep; who can find it out?" Bonhoeffer is making the point that in order to "tell the truth" we must always keep in mind "the totality of the real" (which he sees as the fall) and God's word of creation and reconciliation. Our words can appear to be correct, while being, in fact, untrue from the perspective of God's reality.²¹

Beyond the direct references to Qoheleth, one can see the worldview of Qoheleth operating throughout Bonhoeffer's ethics. A few examples must suffice: "Everything but faith is subject to doubt" (121). "My life is justified solely by that which is the property of Christ and never by that which has become my own property" (122). "When we speak of the things before the last, we must not speak of them as having any value of their own, but we must bring to light their relation to the ultimate" (125). "Eating and drinking do not merely serve the purpose of keeping the body in good health, but they afford natural joy in bodily living" (157). "The divine character of labour cannot be ascribed to its general usefulness or its intrinsic values, but only to its origin, its continuance and its goal in Jesus Christ" (205).

Bonhoeffer and Qoheleth (read properly) have much to offer a world enmeshed in despair. Christians who, lost in their religion, have lost sight of the world in which they dwell would benefit from such reading. Non-Christians who are turned off by religion might be given a clearer vision of what it truly means to be a follower of Christ in the world.

The wise man is the one who sees reality as it is, and who sees into the depths of things. That is why only that man is wise who sees reality in God.²² ⊕

²⁰Ibid., 261.

²¹Ibid., 365.

²²Ibid., 70.