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Qoheleth's Response to the Overconfident Preacher: A New Approach to Ecclesiastes 8:1–3¹

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Many commentaries on Ecclesiastes begin by quoting Franz Delitzsch's unpromising assessment: "All attempts to show, in the whole, not only oneness of spirit, but also a genetic progress, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail."² Delitzsch's analysis, however, presumes that the author of Ecclesiastes (referred to here by his Hebrew title, Qoheleth, literally "gatherer" or "preacher") was unclear as to what exactly bothered him, which is incorrect. Delitzsch and others seem to have overlooked the possibility that Qoheleth was bothered by a problem that persists even in our present: overconfident preachers.

Every now and then, one comes across preachers who brazenly claim to know God's ways in the universe, particularly with respect to rewards and punishments.

¹I am grateful for the feedback received on an earlier version of this paper from James VanderKam (University of Notre Dame), for whom it was submitted at the end of a seminar on biblical wisdom. I benefited as well from comments from Tzvi Novick (University of Notre Dame), J. J. M. Roberts (Princeton Theological Seminary, Emeritus), and C. Hassle Bullock (Wheaton College, Emeritus). Shortcomings in the argument are my responsibility.

²Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on The Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1877) 188.

Overconfident preachers "know" all too quickly God's ways in the world, particularly with respect to rewards and punishments. For Qoheleth, however, God's inscrutability is evident in the illogicality of life. Humans might want to understand God and the world, but God is as inscrutable as the world God created.

Qoheleth seems to have come across more than a few. Qoheleth's concern about such preachers is evident in his attitude towards the effectiveness of wisdom (specifically, *human* wisdom) in knowing God's ways in the universe. For Qoheleth, God's inscrutability is evident in the illogicality of life. Humans might want to understand God and the world, but God is as inscrutable as the world God created.

Qoheleth's characterization of wisdom in Eccl 8:1–3 has been misunderstood. As will be argued in this paper, Qoheleth expresses strong doubts about a particular kind of wisdom, namely, *human* wisdom. Qoheleth sought to insist—most likely against overconfident preachers of his time—that true submission to God is to worship God and to keep the commandments, with the recognition that no human being can truly know God's plans, particularly with respect to the reward and punishment of others. God built this world so that human beings eat, drink, find a modicum of pleasure, and keep God's commandments. Nothing in this life can be understood directly in relation to divine reward or punishment.

QOHELETH ON WISDOM: A CLOSER READING

Interpreters have struggled to understand Eccl 8:1a: “Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?” Qoheleth appears to be saying that wise sages do not understand. In a recent study, Scott Jones focuses on the Hebrew original for the noun “interpretation” (*pšr*) and notes that the term is used in the Old Testament (as well as both its Aramaic equivalent and the Hebrew cognate *ptr*) to refer to the interpretation of dreams or supernatural signs by courtiers in service of foreign rulers (for example, Dan 2: 4, 5, 7 [*pšr*]; Gen 40:8; 41:15 [*ptr*]).³ Jones points out that the root *pšr* is also used in a number of the nonbiblical Qumran scrolls to speak of the unraveling of mysteries, especially in prophetic oracles.⁴ Building on the term's usage in Judaism to refer to divination⁵ in the ancient Near East as well as to antic wisdom (ancient magic),⁶ Jones argues that Qoheleth is referring to human ability to interpret what is supernatural. Jones writes: “Eccl 8:1a undoubtedly refers to the prognostication of a divine oracle and [the phrase] belongs, as it does elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in the context of mantic wisdom in the royal court.”⁷ In short, Qoheleth is speaking about human limitation (especially the limitation of human magic) to know the ways of God in the world.

Jones's suggestion is helpful, but perhaps magic is only part of a larger problem for Qoheleth, which is the persistent human desire to overstep one's bounds with God. One oversteps, for example, when one tries to explain fortunes or calamities in the world as God's reward or punishment. We can push Jones's point a

³Scott C. Jones, “Qoheleth's Courtly Wisdom: Ecclesiastes 8:1–9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68/2 (2006) 213.

⁴*Ibid.*, 213–214.

⁵Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 521.

⁶See Jones, “Qoheleth's Courtly Wisdom,” 215 (n. 16).

⁷Jones, “Qoheleth's Courtly Wisdom,” 215.

bit. Since prognostication cannot come about through *human* ability but requires divine intervention, the lack of ability by anyone to comprehend fully God's ways in the cosmos is, in reality, the outcome of *divine* refusal to disclose understanding.⁸ For Qoheleth, the inability to know is the God-ordained plight of the human race. Human beings cannot peer beyond God's designated window of knowledge, which for Qoheleth is as good as closed. To realize this is to recognize the reality of human powerlessness in an irrational and unpredictable universe.

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In my opinion, Michael Fox,⁹ Robert Gordis,¹⁰ Roland Murphy,¹¹ and C. L. Seow¹² improperly consider the phrase in 8:1b, "Human wisdom enlightens one's face and lifts up the hardness of one's countenance"¹³ to be "cynical advice" on how to compose oneself before a ruler or monarch. For support, they cite Sir 13:25: "The heart changes the countenance, either for good or for evil." The verse, however, neither addresses wisdom nor provides guidance on how to behave before a monarch or ruler. These interpreters suggest that Qoheleth had in mind situations in which one could be standing before a king or ruler. Qoheleth, they argue, is saying that when one pretends to be cheerful before a king, one pleases the king and saves one's life. Explaining Eccl 8:1b, Fox says that in the presence of the king "it is prudent to put on a cheery face."¹⁴ Similarly, Gordis says, "Dissembling is important for the politician, then as now!"¹⁵ Seow agrees: it would be unwise to "display any animosity" before a superior; instead, "despite one's feelings, it is smart to act pleasantly."¹⁶ Tremper Longman III reluctantly goes with this reading, sensing that it stands on shaky ground: "Of course, this interpretation of the verse must remain hypothetical because it is the context, rather than anything explicit in the text, that signals the sarcastic tone."¹⁷ Longman is generous.

Remarkably, the "cynical advice" reading is unclear about *whose* face 8:1b is speaking. That is, which face is cheered up as a consequence of "wisdom"? Does the

⁸Qoheleth questions the ability of anyone "to know," "tell" of, or "find out" what happens in the universe (cf. 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 10:14).

⁹Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 275–276.

¹⁰Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World* (New York: Bloch, 1955) 277.

¹¹Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992) 82.

¹²C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 290–291.

¹³My translation of the Hebrew text.

¹⁴Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 275–276.

¹⁵Gordis, *Koheleth*, 277.

¹⁶Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 291.

¹⁷Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 209.

third person singular suffix in the original Hebrew פָּנָיו (“his face”) refer to the *king’s* face or to the *sage’s* face? In other words, when wisdom causes the *sage’s* face to be lifted up (appear cheerful), does the *king’s* face become lifted up as well? The plain reading suggests that the antecedent of the third person suffix in the Hebrew (“his”) is the same; it would thus be the *sage’s* face that becomes cheered by “wisdom” (and then perhaps, cheer the king). Gordis believes that the suffix refers back to *adm* (“human”), or at least functions impersonally (that is, “one’s face”).¹⁸ Thus, for Fox, Gordis, Longman, Murphy, and Seow, wisdom “lifts up” (cheers) the face of the *sage* when standing before the king, whose face (they presume) should become “lifted up” in return. This, however, is far more than what we have in the verse.

In the Bible, language of an enlightened or lifted-up countenance is hardly used in reference to a servant uplifting a master. The language is used to denote favor from a monarch (see Prov 16:15). Perhaps the best-known usage is in the Aaronic blessing in Num 6:25–26, where God is the subject: “May the Lord make his face (פָּנָיו) to shine (אֶרְאֶה) upon you, and may he lift up (שִׂאֵף) his countenance (פָּנָיו) upon you, and give you peace.” In his exposition of the Aaronic blessing, Patrick Miller points out that in the context of Israel’s worship, God’s favor, commonly expressed in the Old Testament using anthropomorphic language, meant help, protection, care, guidance, sustenance, and peace; it meant everything for the Israelites. In Ps 4:6, the psalmist seeks the Lord’s favor as he says: “Let the light of your face shine on us, O LORD!” (see also Ps 31:16; 44:3; 67:1; 80:3, 7, 19).¹⁹ This brings us back to the issue of cynicism in Eccl 8:1b.

Indeed there seems to be cynicism in Eccl 8:1b, as has been suggested, but it appears that Qoheleth set it up at the *beginning* of the clause, fixing it in the overlooked opening phrase, “human wisdom” (MT: חֵכְמַת אָדָם). The phrase is accepted at face value to be a positive wisdom reference, including in Jones’s interpretation.²⁰ In fact, the NRSV translation committee ignored the nuance altogether when it translated the phrase simply as “wisdom,” missing what might well have been a key distinction for Qoheleth. Deciding on whether the sense of the phrase is positive or negative is necessary for an accurate interpretation. A positive reading of the phrase turns the rest of the verse into something akin to advice, with Qoheleth saying that wisdom makes a person cheerful before a ruler or king. Coming immediately after the pessimistic assessment of wisdom’s impotence in v.1a, it can easily be thought of as “cynical advice.” Qoheleth’s sarcasm, however, seems to be nuanced; it is directed specifically against *human* wisdom.

In the Old Testament, true wisdom is inseparable from God.²¹ Wisdom in its

¹⁸Gordis, *Koheleth*, 276–277.

¹⁹Patrick D. Miller Jr., “The Blessing of God: An Interpretation of Numbers 6:22–27,” *Interpretation* 29/3 (1975) 249.

²⁰Jones, “Qohelet’s Courtly Wisdom,” 215.

²¹One can find in Proverbs verses where it would seem otherwise (e.g., Prov 23:15). But Proverbs clearly states that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). The above point is strengthened by Prov 3:5: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.”

best and truest sense is never placed in construct (and without qualification) with *adm* (human) as it is here. Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 5:12) was the "wisdom of God" (1 Kings 3:28). God as the source of wisdom is a key point in Daniel. In Dan 2:20, Daniel praises God, saying: "Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his."

In the Old Testament, true wisdom is inseparable from God. Wisdom in its best and truest sense is never placed in construct with adm (human) as it is here.

A dichotomy between true, God-sourced wisdom and human wisdom was especially apparent during Isaiah's prophetic career, particularly during the reign of Hezekiah. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet faces opponents who were royal counselors with wisdom training. Even though they did not have a true word from God, they counsel Hezekiah and advise him to strike a deal with either Egypt or Assyria in order to protect Judah. Isaiah, of course, believed that God was sufficient for Zion.²² He wanted Hezekiah to trust in God and reject the false counsel.²³ In Isa 33:6, one reads that God alone will be Zion's wisdom, while wisdom not from God (cf. Isa 29:14) will be destroyed.²⁴

Qoheleth seems to believe in a distinction between God-sourced wisdom and human wisdom. We have a hint of this in his positive mention of a "poor wise man" in 9:14–16. Seow mentions David Freedman's suggestion to him that the "poor wise man" might well be Ahithophel, whose counsel Absalom disastrously ignored (2 Sam 16–17).²⁵ Seow does not draw any conclusion from Freedman's suggestion, which is understandable considering that Ahithophel is somewhat of a curious character. Ahithophel was a military advisor to King David, but left David for Absalom during the civil war. Second Samuel 16:23 describes Ahithophel as a counselor endowed with wisdom as he served David: "Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God." After Ahithophel left David and joined Absalom's rebellion, he counseled with the latter to kill his father (2 Sam 17:3). Absalom, however, accepted the duplicitous

²²See J. J. M. Roberts, "The Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 313–330.

²³For Isaiah, God's inscrutability was in large part in response to the people who refused to listen to the prophets. Whenever they sought to make their own plans, they faced the sovereign hand of God, which was terrifying (cf. Isa 28:14–19; 29:15–16). Unlike Qoheleth, for Isaiah, God's actions might seem peculiar, but they always have an internal logic. As Isaiah saw it, if one discerned the will of God, one would learn God's ways, and one's protection would be assured.

²⁴According to Isaiah, the prophet's opponents were royal counselors who had wisdom training. They opposed his prophetic message, which was centered on Zion theology (for example, Isa 30:1–5). In Isa 31:1–5, Isaiah proclaims that power, might, and wisdom belong only to God. See also Jer 18:18, where Jeremiah laments that his adversaries (some of whom are false counselors and prophets) say: "Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet."

²⁵Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 311.

Hushai's errant advice to wait, allowing David time to regroup and launch a counteroffensive (2 Sam 18:1–8).

It is not incorrect that the story of Ahithophel was intended to demonstrate the consequences that await those who ignore truthful counsel, the ultimate source of which is God. In his study of wisdom and prophecy in Israel, William McKane notes that one of the functions of the story of Ahithophel is to illustrate how different counsels can be available to the king. McKane writes, "II Sam 16.23 represents that there are two sources of political guidance available to the king in Israel. On the one hand there is the revealed word of the prophet or the verdict of the priestly oracle [...] and on the other there is guidance, which is a purely human product."²⁶

McKane's analysis is important for our purposes, because Qoheleth might in fact have considered Ahithophel to be a sage who was endowed with true, God-given wisdom (as opposed to Hushai whose guidance was, to use McKane's words, "a purely human product," and thus false). This raises an important question: Was it not God who, in the end, frustrated the wisdom of Ahithophel? Not quite, according to McKane, because it was Absalom's folly that led him to listen to Hushai, preventing the implementation of Ahithophel's counsel. McKane blames "the lack of intellectual discrimination among those who [had] to decide between the competing policies of Ahithophel and Hushai."²⁷ McKane goes on to add, "The real fools are Absalom and the elders of Israel who [could] not distinguish between a bold and serious plan [Ahithophel's] and a bogus strategy [Hushai's]." It is possible that Qoheleth understood Ahithophel's story as teaching the distinction between false wisdom and true wisdom, with the source of the former ultimately being God. If true, then Qoheleth's words in Eccl 8:1b are rhetorically impressive.

QOHELETH'S SARCASM

The expression "human wisdom" is most likely part of Qoheleth's sarcastic critique of those who falsely claim knowledge of God's ways. Qoheleth's audience would have recognized that the most important "lifted-up face" is God's (as in the Aaronic blessing and in the Psalms). Realizing that only God's shining face is the source of assurance and blessedness, Qoheleth's words would have sounded like this: "*Human* wisdom (bogus) brings about one's own cheer (sham)." Coming after the question in 8:1a ("who can know?"), listeners are supposed to realize that Qoheleth is being sarcastic about arrogant and overconfident preachers. They think they know how and why things happen in the world, and they speak confidently about things they know precious little about. Indeed, compared to God-sourced wisdom, human wisdom is foolishness. Instead, they ought to submit to the sovereign God. This brings us to Qoheleth's words in vv. 2–3. In these verses, Qoheleth's counsel to obey and submit to a monarch seems a bit strange, if

²⁶William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1965) 56.

²⁷*Ibid.*

not impractical. It certainly parallels other biblical wisdom sayings (for example, Prov 20:2; 25:6). Fox agrees with Murphy and suggests that Qoheleth has in mind local governors,²⁸ but this seems to miss the point. Why not understand Qoheleth to be talking about one's humility before God? It is not uncommon for the psalmists, for example, to talk about God as king (as in Ps 44:4, "You are my King and my God"). When Qoheleth says in 8:3b that the king "does whatever he pleases," it is not unlikely that he is talking about God. In 5:2, Qoheleth reminds his listeners to recognize their place before God, "for God is in heaven, and you upon earth." The words in 5:2 and 8:3 seem to echo verses from the Psalter, especially, for example, "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Ps 115:3) and "Whatever the LORD pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps" (Ps 135:6). A similar way of thinking about the sovereignty of God (with emphasis on God-derived wisdom) is found in the Aramaic section of Daniel. After God reveals the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream to Daniel, he affirms God's power and wisdom as he says: "He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding" (Dan 2:21). It seems reasonable to consider Eccl 8:2–4 to be speaking (subtly) about the sovereign God and not about a local ruler or a monarch. The words fit both with Qoheleth's teachings on proper worship in 3:14 and with his reminder that humanity has its limits and must humbly remember its lowly position before God "who is in heaven" (5:2b).

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We can look briefly at Eccl 8:5b–7b, a passage that interpreters think suffers from a clash of ideas. Verse 5b appears to say that a wise person knows ("the wise mind will know the time and way"), while v. 7 seems to say that no one knows ("Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be?"). Qoheleth's belief in God's transcendence and inscrutability does not permit much knowledge of the divine plans (see also Eccl 7:14). To reconcile what seems to be a tension, Seow proposes a plausible translation for Eccl 8:5b–7b:

As for time and judgment a wise heart knows: that for every matter there is time and judgment; that the evil of humanity is heavy upon them; that no one knows what is going to happen; and that no one can tell them when it will happen.²⁹

Thus for Qoheleth, a wise heart knows that time is ordained not in ways known to humanity but only to God. And while the cosmos is not entirely a hap-

²⁸Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 277.

²⁹Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 276.

hazard place, life is difficult for many people, which humanity is unable to explain. In 8:17b, Qoheleth says: “No one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.”

For Qoheleth, submission to God must include acknowledgment of one’s inability to know God’s ways. This is also the concern of 8:11–14. Delayed justice in v. 11 echoes Eccl 3:16 and 7:15. According to Seow, Qoheleth does not deny that God’s justice will come, even if he does not know when or how (see Eccl 3:17, 5:8, 8:12, and 11:9).³⁰ Seow might well be correct, but it is not impossible that Qoheleth made statements to that effect with tongue in cheek. Qoheleth, really, knows little about how “well” it will be for the righteous, because justice and salvation rest entirely with God. Qoheleth might have wanted to be far more measured than even Job, who, in his distress, still found a way to profess assurance in God’s salvation: “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold” (Job 23:10).

BEWARE OF HAVING “THE EXPLANATION OF THINGS”

It appears that, as a preacher, Qoheleth sought to oppose *overconfident* preaching that identified blessings as God’s rewards and suffering as punishment. The three friends of Job demonstrated this when they overreached and spoke for God. It pained Job immensely: “As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians. If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!” (Job 13:4–5). In the epilogue of Job, God corrects the erroneous wisdom of the three friends (Job 42:7). Erroneous judgment against the poor and the afflicted seems to have been a major concern as well in the New Testament. Upon seeing a blind man, the disciples presume that one of his parents sinned (John 9:2)—or to borrow Qoheleth’s words, they claimed to have “the explanation of things” (Eccl 8:1 NIV). Jesus denies that either one sinned and offers an indecipherable explanation for the man’s blindness.

Luke introduces the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector by explaining how Jesus sought to instill humility: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). Qoheleth’s intention might well have been similar when saying: “Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise” (Eccl 7:16). Qoheleth’s seemingly peculiar advice of “do not give heed to everything that people say” (Eccl 7:21) sounds like appropriate counsel in response to overreaching wisdom (think of Job’s friends), or presumptions that some people deserve to be disabled (think of the disciples and the blind man’s parents). Qoheleth reminds us that no one has the true explanation (8:1). If preachers or teachers show cheery countenances and confidence rather than humility, and seek to explain God’s ways in the world (cf.

³⁰Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 294.

8:1b), it is only because they forget their lowly place before God the King (Eccl 5:1–7; 8:2–5a).

It is unnecessary, I believe, to suggest that the book of Ecclesiastes is about the “ominous” God³¹ from whom one must turn. It seems that Qoheleth sought to affirm God’s inscrutability in response to the Bildads, Eliphazes, and Zophars of his day who claimed, with much self-assurance, to be God’s spokesmen. And thus, perhaps much like Paul does in Romans, when he instructs his followers to “weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15), Qoheleth says: “Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad” (Eccl 7:3). ⊕



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³¹James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987) 24.