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## A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE?

### IS THERE ROOM FOR ECCLESIASTES IN AN EVANGELICAL BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

Lindsay Wilson

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The issue of Ecclesiastes and biblical theology is actually asking the question, how should Christians read and apply the book of Ecclesiastes today? This involves reading Ecclesiastes as part of the Christian canon, recognizing that it is different from other parts of the Bible, but insisting that it is still part of the authoritative word of God.

There are three main problems in discussing the place of Ecclesiastes in biblical theology. First, there is no agreement on the shape and flavor of biblical theology (the “round hole”). Second, there is little consensus, even among evangelical scholars, on how to interpret Ecclesiastes (the “square peg”). Third, given that our two “fixed poles” (biblical theology and Ecclesiastes) are actually moving targets rather than stationary ones, there is little prospect of explaining their interrelationship in a convincing way. Is there a better solution than trying to fit a square peg in a round hole?

#### THE SQUARE PEG: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN READINGS OF ECCLESIASTES

There is vast disagreement over the interpretation of individual wisdom books like Job and Ecclesiastes, even among evangelicals. In terms of Ecclesiastes, several strategies have been commonly employed. A first possibility (the “epilogue” approach) is to regard the teaching of the book only to be found in the epilogue which encourages us to fear God and keep his commands (so Longman).<sup>1</sup> On this view much of Qohelel’s “wild thinking” is excluded from a biblical theology because it is overridden within the book itself. It might stumble across truth from time to time—after all, even a stopped clock is right twice a day—but it is largely not a source of insights and truths. Why then, we might ask, do we have twelve chapters of it included in Scripture?

Another reading (what I call the “under the sun” approach) is to view the book as essentially pessimistic, but to assert that this pessimism is based on excluding a God perspective and limiting one’s view to “under the sun” (so Derek Kidner,

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LINDSAY WILSON is Senior Lecturer in Old Testament at Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, and Senior Research Fellow at the Australian College of Theology.

<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Michael Eaton, Richard Belcher, and most recently, Brian Peterson). Michael Eaton, for example, comments, “What, then, is the purpose of Ecclesiastes? It is an essay in apologetics. It defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative.”<sup>2</sup> Belcher, too, sees Christ as the answer to Qohelet (the fall reversed by Christ; wisdom found in Christ; and injustice overcome by Christ’s righteousness).<sup>3</sup> On this view, once God is factored back in, Qohelet is essentially confirming the views of the rest of the Old Testament. This perspective interprets Ecclesiastes as promoting the superiority of Jesus because it showed how “meaningless” life is without him. However, both of these first two hermeneutical stances incorporate little of the distinctive contributions of Ecclesiastes in a resulting biblical theology—especially its positive and realistic observations.

A third approach, evident in recent commentaries by Athas and Heim, picks up on a number of points in the first two, but adds as the decisive contribution an argument that Ecclesiastes needs to be read in the light of a particular historical circumstance (the “historical setting approach”).<sup>4</sup> In terms of where this would be included in a biblical theology, such an historically grounded interpretation could incorporate it at that particular stage of redemptive history. For both Athas and Heim, this is in the Greek period, but with an historically based interpretation like those who would tie it to the Solomonic era, and it could be incorporated into redemptive history at that point.<sup>5</sup> What is common to these approaches is that the historical setting of the book more than the intellectual one is crucial to its interpretation, and therefore to understanding it in the light of biblical theology.

A fourth option is to regard the views expressed by Ecclesiastes as orthodox, but challenging, enigmatic, and realistic. That is, these views do not contradict the

<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 44. See Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, BST (Leicester: IVP, 1976); Richard P. Belcher, “Ecclesiastes,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*. ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Brian Neil Peterson, *Qoheleth’s Hope: The Message of Ecclesiastes in a Broken World* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Belcher, “Ecclesiastes,” observes at 454 that Eccl. 1:12–12:7 takes an “under the sun” approach and “so there is no real answer to the problems of life until one comes to the epilogue (12:8–12). Thus it is imperative that the reader make connections to the epilogue, to other Old Testament scriptures, and to the New Testament in order to see the necessary ‘above the sun’ perspective.”

<sup>4</sup> Knut M. Heim, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019); George Athas, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020). Athas in particular does a significant amount of work on reading each passage in the light of Christ and biblical theology.

<sup>5</sup> Among evangelical commentators, we could include Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1979); Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1993); Daniel Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, AOTC (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010).

teaching of Proverbs, but they do nuance it as part of an inner-wisdom correction. I call this the “Let Ecclesiastes be Ecclesiastes” reading, and this is the view I will argue for in this article, exploring what this means for developing an evangelical biblical theology.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, once we have settled on a hermeneutical stance to Ecclesiastes, we need to do some detailed exegetical work on some key words and passages. What does *hebel* mean in the book? What role does the fear of God play? How do you balance the exhortations to enjoy life with the reminders of the limitations and difficulties? Unfortunately, this is outside the scope of this article.

So much for the square peg, or perhaps the many different shapes of pegs. What about the round hole?

### THE ROUND HOLE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

I want to start with the views of Graeme Goldsworthy since many of the more popular works of biblical theology seem to be based on an analysis like that of Goldsworthy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a helpful way of seeing the plot and storyline of the Old Testament, and how the various parts relate together, is the coathanger diagram by Goldsworthy.<sup>8</sup> What is crucial in this flowchart is the theological interpretation of the events. The diagram on the next page revolves around God’s dealings with his chosen people in the various covenants: Abraham, Sinai, David, exile/new covenant promise, and then Jesus. Goldsworthy uses the term “kingdom of God,” but his model seems to be filtered by the concept of “covenant.”

Where do the wisdom books fit into covenant? This has been an issue to which Goldsworthy has given some thought (see his *Gospel and Wisdom*<sup>9</sup>), but I am not satisfied with his solution. His view is that the fear of the Lord is important to both wisdom books and the covenant strand. That is true, but he suggests that the teaching of the wisdom books on everyday life is largely unpacking what it means to fear the

<sup>6</sup> Included in this category (although the categories overlap) would be Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009); Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd ed., Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> In particular, Goldsworthy is central to understandings of biblical theology among evangelicals in Australia and the United Kingdom, and also has significant connections with the United States through a couple of articles on biblical theology in 2006 and 2008 for the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. His early and most influential books were *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), and *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), although he has more recently written *Christ-Centred Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Graeme L. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel’s Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987).

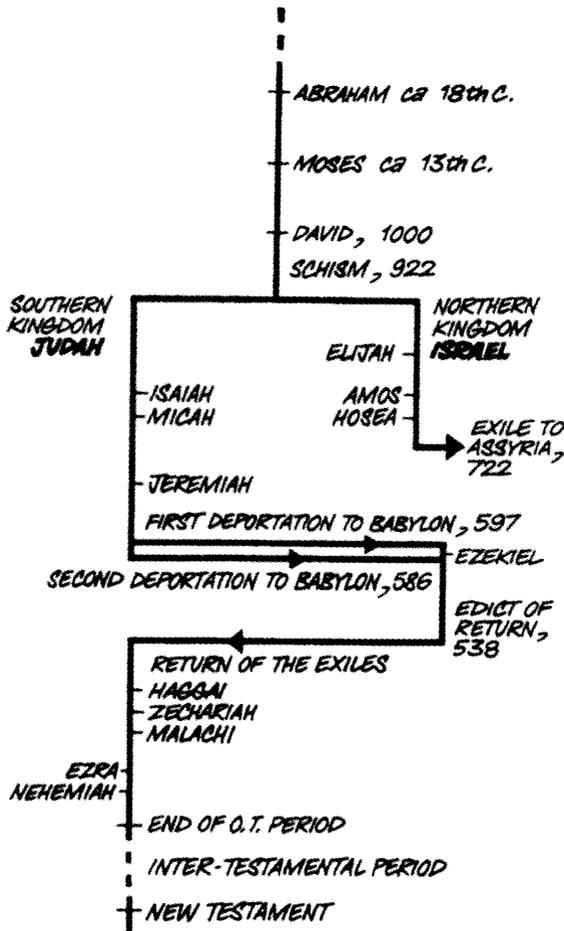


Figure 1: Outline of Old Testament History (not to scale)

Lord. Yet, when you look at the wisdom books, they often have much more to do with living in the light of order in creation than fearing the Lord. A clear example is learning from the ants in Proverbs 6:6–11.

Ben Witherington voices the obvious objection: “what about the large quantities of material in the OT that do not seem to be about salvation history at all, for instance the wisdom literature (e.g., Ecclesiastes or Job)? Something other than redemption, rescue, salvation is the subject of a good deal of the Old Testament.”<sup>10</sup> Many attempts at biblical theology account well for God’s great acts of redemption, but do little to

<sup>10</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Biblical Theology: The Convergence of the Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4.

incorporate God's ongoing sustaining of the created world in everyday life. It is commonly pointed out that wisdom literature is the Achilles heel of many scholarly views, since this has been the part of the Old Testament that most biblical theologies have had difficulty in incorporating. Yet, a truly biblical theology must be able to integrate all parts of Scripture, including the book of Ecclesiastes. It is the argument of this paper that the umbrella category of God's active kingly rule—in both creation and redemption—is one which most comfortably includes those parts of the Old Testament that other themes struggle with.

There has been some interesting work recently in the area of evangelical biblical theology, and I want to acknowledge contributions by Mark Boda and Daniel Hays.<sup>11</sup> While Boda in particular wants to incorporate creation, his narrative, character, and relational “rhythms” are too covenant-based. Daniel Hays argues for the theme of God's relational presence, which is wider than covenant, but his notion of presence needs to be filled out by God's ongoing activity, his ordering of creation in everyday life. While both concede that there are limitations to the comprehensiveness of covenant, they do not take us any further in relation to the book of Ecclesiastes.

One solution to this whole issue is to acknowledge the significance of covenant and yet to suggest that any unity to the Old Testament and to the Bible as a whole is not a simple unity, but a multiplex or multi-strand unity. I. Howard Marshall a number of years ago used an analogy that I find helpful—that biblical theology is like a multi-strand rope, woven together to give unity but able to encompass diversity. This rope is made up of various strands that are twisted together and run along the length of the rope. Some strands go the whole length, while others run for limited stretches, but it is the one rope, with real continuity although its composition varies at different stages. The strands running the whole length are the major focus of the rope's identity and unity, but the shorter ones are also important over limited periods. The strands may even be different colors.<sup>12</sup> Along similar lines, Chris Wright uses the image of a cable with several entwined wires running inside one outer casing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), and Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Marshall used this analogy in several places. I first encountered it in I. Howard Marshall, “Using the Bible in Ethics,” in *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics*, ed. David F. Wright (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 39–55.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 325, has a similar model: “It is futile to isolate any single theme or category as the sole organizing center for the whole discipline. Old Testament theology is not like a wheel with a single theological hub at the center of radiating spokes. Rather, it is like a cable, with several closely entwined wires running along together at the core.” He adds, “The sequence of covenants in the Canonical narrative offers us *one* fruitful way of presenting the grand narrative that constitutes the cable.” The aspect of Wright's model which is attractive is the idea of all the entwined wires held together in one cable by the outer casing. However,

The rope represents the chronological course of biblical revelation. There is unity in that there are strands which go right through the rope, and others which stretch for long distances. The belief in one God, creator and ruler of the universe, is one. The fact of the Son of God coming as savior is very dominant later on, but a seemingly minor part of the rope early on (also the Holy Spirit). Some strands are woven in at a late stage (e.g., baptism and the Lord's Supper); others once were important, but eventually disappear (some ritual laws, food laws, physical circumcision). It is not necessary for unity that all the basic strands run through every passage in Scripture. The task of biblical theology is not to cut the rope up and re-arrange it, but rather to tease out, identify, and describe the different strands, to notice changes and developments over time, and show how they were interwoven at any given point, when strands emerge and become dominant, etc. John Goldingay has made a helpful study of the interplay between creation and covenant.<sup>14</sup>

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perhaps a drawback of the model is that, I think, cables only carry power if each wire goes from one end of the cable to the other. Marshall's image of the rope allows some strands to start late, finish early, and be of variable thicknesses throughout the rope.

<sup>14</sup> John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), has sought to develop a multi-strand Old Testament theology around the twin poles of creation and redemption, asking if this is a kind of dialectical tension that can encompass and synthesize the diversity of the Old Testament. On this, see an outline and critique in Lindsay Wilson, "The Place of Wisdom in Old Testament Theology," *RefTR* 49, no. 2 (1990): 67–68. Goldingay goes further than most in attempting to show how these twin foci are integrated in the Old Testament. The complex relationship between creation and redemption, he asserts, can be summarized in the following four statements:

1. The world God redeems is the world of God's creation.
2. The world that God created is a world that needed to be redeemed.
3. Human beings are redeemed to live again their created life before God.
4. The redeemed humanity still looks for a final act of redemption/new creation.

It is helpful to take a closer look at these four summary statements. The first two establish the connection between creation and salvation history/covenant, and ensure that both voices are heard. God's purposes are wider than the covenant people, yet they are also focused on Israel, and effected through them. The last enables us to see the incompleteness and forward-looking nature of the Old Testament. When we read these three together, we appreciate something of the flow of Old Testament theology. We see the movement from creation, through God's redeeming acts in different generations, to the future hopes variously described as redemption or new creation. This is the big picture, the broad canvas of the Old Testament.

Yet Goldingay also sees the smaller picture where the focus is on everyday life and its continuities and order. Here again he recognizes that both creation and redemption have a part to play—people are *redeemed* to live their *created* life before God. Daily living is, of course, the concern of all parts of Scripture, but the Wisdom themes have a great input here, particularly in the area of attitudes and the formation of character. But the Torah, the prophets, and indeed the New Testament will also have much to contribute in terms of how to live day by day. This synthesis then seems to be a very promising framework upon which to develop an Old Testament theology. Where more work needs to be done is in demonstrating in more

## BRINGING THE TWO TOGETHER: FITTING THE RESHAPED PEG INTO A BROADER BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The third aspect of this article is to read some key ideas of Ecclesiastes in light of a creational biblical theology. What, specifically does the book of Ecclesiastes contribute to biblical theology?<sup>15</sup> A book like Ecclesiastes goes right back to the beginning, to the doctrine of creation, to God as Creator as well as Redeemer, sustaining the regularity of the created world. Ecclesiastes is exploring the extent to which this world is ordered and how humans can find purpose and meaning.<sup>16</sup>

I call this part of God's active kingly rule, a broader category than God simply being the Redeemer. God rules over all of humanity but in a more focused way over his covenant people. God rules everywhere, not only where his covenant people are, but over the entire planet, and even the cosmos. Moving under God's rule as set out not just in the covenant stipulations but also by discovering the order in creation and what sensible living is all about, involves learning not only from God's words but also from God's world. Here I am arguing for an understanding of biblical theology that is as broad as the Bible itself, and incorporates all the Scripture not just part (even an important part) of it.

Bartholomew argues that it is important not to restrict our focus only to those passages where the New Testament quotes or alludes to Ecclesiastes. He also notes that Ecclesiastes's contribution to biblical theology is often not explored. He suggests that "its celebration of life and its affirmation of feasting resonate deeply with Jesus' ministry, especially as it is described in Luke's gospel, in which Jesus seems to go from party to party."<sup>17</sup>

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detail how the strands interact, and seeking to outline the nature of the OT theology that results. We need a biblical theology that deals with God's activity in creating and redeeming.

<sup>15</sup> This is all grounded in my view of the more general relationship between wisdom and biblical theology which I have set out in Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 291–320.

<sup>16</sup> There are many scholars who tie Ecclesiastes back not only to the creation, but especially to the fall. See especially David M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19, no. 3 (1994): 5–8. However, see also the objections of Katharine J. Dell, "Exploring Intertextual Links between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–11," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, LHBOTS (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3–14. Of course, Dell is not denying the presence of creation theology in Ecclesiastes, but is asking if there is enough evidence that the author had access to Genesis 1–11. She is especially unconvinced that the fall narrative is being alluded to, and finds the linguistic links weak.

<sup>17</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 98. At 99, he adds, "Ecclesiastes, with its particular emphasis on celebration and feasting, offers itself as a major source from which Jesus would have taken this understanding of the Kingdom." See also Craig G. Bartholomew, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," in *The Words of the Wise are like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 367–86.

I think that there are a number of areas in which Ecclesiastes makes a significant contribution to biblical theology. First, it asks the right questions that address contemporary men and women who are seeking to understand something about life and its purpose. This is often called the search for the meaning of life. Second, it addresses issues of living in the light of death. Third, it has a positive but qualified place for enjoying or finding pleasure in the normal everyday activities of eating and drinking with others (Eccl. 2:24–26; 3:12–3, 22; 5:18–20; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). This minor refrain occurs throughout the book. Included in this is a positive place given to work or daily toil. It reinforces the teaching of the rest of the Old Testament on the dangers and advantage of wealth, affirming its positive contribution but acknowledging its limitations. It also endorses the questioning attitude of Ecclesiastes as a legitimate stance of faith. Faith is not simply about passive submission to the will of God, but also embraces asking hard questions in order to find answers. This process of questioning is endorsed in the first part of the epilogue (Eccl. 12:9–11). One particular contribution here is an honest admission that sometimes the way God has ordered his world appears confused or at least confusing. Of course, in the light of the coming of Christ, some of this is resolved as we read of his atoning sacrifice dealing with sin once for all, and the future resurrection and judgment providing a clear end-point to history. Yet some issues with which Ecclesiastes grapples (e.g., injustice, suffering, wealth, death, everyday life) we often still find confusing/puzzling/enigmatic since our limited capacity cannot fully fathom God’s purposes, even though Christ has come.<sup>18</sup> We know more than enough to remember our Creator in the days of our youth, to trust in Christ, but still have many unanswered questions.

I want now to fill this out through the writings of three scholars who have considered the positive contribution of Ecclesiastes to biblical theology: Peter Enns, Iain Provan, and Doug Ingram.

### Peter Enns

In his *Two Horizons Commentary*, Peter Enns deals extensively with the contribution of Ecclesiastes to biblical theology and the contribution of biblical theology to Ecclesiastes (some 56 pages).<sup>19</sup> Two aspects are particularly important: his comments on the process of a biblical theological reading of Ecclesiastes, and also

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<sup>18</sup> Bartholomew, “The Theology of Ecclesiastes,” 381, however, argues more for the New Testament as an answer to Ecclesiastes: “As the NT story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Jesus redeems us from this futility and our sinful autonomy and suppression of the truth about this world (Rom. 1:18–23). . . . The NT therefore provides a more comprehensive perspective on the problems with which Qohelet struggles. The problem of death, for example, overshadows his journey of exploration, but in the light of the Christ event we know that history is indeed headed toward the final judgement and resurrection, something which no OT believer saw with comparable clarity. Death is not the end but a stepping stone into the presence of the living and true God. In terms of history as well, from a NT perspective we now have the contours, if not the details, of the full story—something that Qohelet lacked.”

<sup>19</sup> Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 136–91.

how Ecclesiastes changes our biblical theology. His suggested procedure is that we allow parts of Scripture to play off against one another, allowing the various biblical voices to be heard in their distinctiveness (rather than muted), as there is both tension and harmony between some texts and others.<sup>20</sup>

Enns has a vivid image here that if we mute Scripture by listening only to those voices which fit with our preconceived theological ideas then we are effectively cutting biblical theology off at the knees. In relation to Ecclesiastes, he suggests:

we must be ever diligent to allow scripture to take us where it will, to be willing to explore new avenues and to take theological risks, if that seems warranted by the text. Thus a biblical theology that involves Ecclesiastes will not see its task as alleviating tension in favor of a theological unity that, supposedly, is more consistent with God's character. Rather, it will explore the unique contribution of a book like Ecclesiastes to our understanding of what the Bible *as a whole* is saying about God and humanity.<sup>21</sup>

In the book of Job we have God's speeches to guide our interpretation, but we do not hear God's voice in that way in Ecclesiastes. However, we do find the endorsement of Qohelet's (questioning) attitude in the first part of the epilogue of the book (12:9–11), and this is meant to guide our reading of the earlier sections. It seems that God is not opposed to people asking hard questions of their faith, with the goal of coming to a deeper, truer understanding. I do not end where Peter Enns ends (for he concludes that Qohelet has given up on the viability of discerning any pattern in how God runs his world and so shows no hesitation in giving God an earful), but I agree with him that Ecclesiastes must be interpreted as part of an inner-wisdom conversation, and that if we wish to explore the contribution of Ecclesiastes to biblical theology we must first see it as part of this wider wisdom corpus. Enns then also explores how Ecclesiastes fits as part of Israel's wider story.<sup>22</sup> His conclusion is that the wisdom books and psalms seem "less willing to be brought under the redemptive-historical umbrella."<sup>23</sup> While Enns attempts to relate Ecclesiastes to

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<sup>20</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 137. He notes that one assumption of biblical theology which he shares is that books of Scripture can and should be in conversation with one another. However, he quickly adds that "this canonical conversation can just as easily be filled with tension as harmony." In particular, he comments that "a canonical conversation does not aim to obliterate the distinctives of any particular book." He also notes that we should not assume that harmony is preferable to tension, especially when dealing with Ecclesiastes.

<sup>21</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 138. He argues that we cannot therefore dismiss Qohelet's struggles in the light of the gospel as some do. Instead, "we must now bring the voice of Ecclesiastes into conversation with the gospel, realizing in somewhat paradoxical fashion that in Christ we see the climactic (and therefore final) revelation of God, while also realizing that the God presented in Ecclesiastes may help us better understand what that final revelation means."

<sup>22</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*. At 153–54, he suggests that "Ecclesiastes is one of several strands of Scripture that serve as a counterpoint to Israel's dominant picture of God. . . . Qohelet is a relentless prosecuting attorney cross-examining the dominant portrayals of God in the OT."

<sup>23</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 159.

Israel's redemptive historical story,<sup>24</sup> I think it is preferable to see the theology of the Old Testament as wider than simply the story of redemption.<sup>25</sup> God is actively at work in redeeming his people, but is also sustaining his people as the Creator.

Enns's proposal is for a christotelic reading of the book, which involves not looking for Jesus in every verse of Ecclesiastes, nor in comparing and contrasting Ecclesiastes in the gospel to see where the former falls short. Rather, we need to allow the contours of the book of Ecclesiastes to contribute to our understanding of Old Testament theology as a whole and outline the nature of God which finds its fulfilment in Christ. Enns helpfully begins the process by reading Ecclesiastes in the light of the other wisdom books. This is important because, as Derek Kidner has pointed out, the three main wisdom books are in counterpoint, so Job and Ecclesiastes should be interpreted as conducting an inner-biblical conversation with the foundational book of Proverbs and each other.<sup>26</sup> While Proverbs majors on the observable patterns in life in which God rewards wisdom and punishes wickedness, it does contain exceptions (e.g., Prov. 24:15–16) which are certainly amplified or nuanced in the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. Thus, Ecclesiastes notes that the order discerned in Proverbs is sometimes confused and confusing. We can almost hear the boundary-pushing Qohelet listening to Proverbs and interjecting, "But what about . . . ?" It is not that Qohelet disagrees with Proverbs, but he does wish to clarify his understanding by exploring some exceptional circumstances, each of which will be misunderstood if heard alone; they need to be listened to alongside the others and nuanced by them.

In terms of content, Enns identifies several theological themes in Ecclesiastes

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<sup>24</sup> Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 164, 166: "The contribution of Ecclesiastes to biblical theology is in its relentless probing of the justice and even goodness of God . . . What Ecclesiastes says on a nationalistic level is that, despite the ravages of the exile and the subsequent generations, Israel is still connected to God, even though every impulse is to the contrary. . . . The book's relentless focus is on the deeply felt sense of disconnect between Israel and its covenant God. Qohelet gives voice to the people's anger at being abandoned by God."

<sup>25</sup> Along these lines, see Bartholomew, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," 380–81: "Ecclesiastes is certainly in touch with the frustration and sense of futility that can grip individuals in our fallen world, and Qohelet, in his explorations, emphasizes the fact that this futility touches every aspect of our lives. Qohelet demonstrates the futility of trying to find meaning in a fallen world apart from remembering one's Creator and beginning with the fear of the Lord, but he also affirms life, and he resolves its tension at the conclusion of his journey precisely through his exhortation to remember one's Creator. Thus, the futility that Ecclesiastes exposes is the attempt to find meaning while embracing human autonomy in a world that depends at every point upon its Creator."

<sup>26</sup> Derek Kidner, *Wisdom to Live By: An Introduction to the Old Testament's Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 116–24. See also Bartholomew, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," 376: "Proverbs and Job provide the immediate co-text for reading Ecclesiastes . . . rather than Ecclesiastes representing a crisis in wisdom, it should be seen as focusing on the retributive paradox that Proverbs is aware of and subsumes under its more general long-term character-consequence understanding."

and asks how this can affect their understanding of Christ's climatic role of embodying Israel's mission and how they can bring greater clarity to understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ. In terms of the role of Christ he focuses on three aspects: Jesus the suffering King, Jesus as sage, and Jesus and the end. When it comes to Ecclesiastes and the people of God, Enns explores issues such as suffering and doubt, and fear and obedience.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of Jesus as sage, this is a useful category that leads us to Colossians 1:15–23. Here we see a full-orbed picture of Christ as not only Lord of redemption (vv. 18–23) but also Lord of creation (v. 15, *the firstborn over all creation*), who sustains the creation in what we call everyday life (v. 17, *in him all things hold together*). I think that it is this aspect of Christ's work—how he sustains the creation—that is Qohelet's focus in Ecclesiastes. He is asking hard questions in order to nuance a simplistic understanding of how the world runs, or perhaps better, how God in Jesus sustains his created world.

The third category of Jesus and the end is also worth mentioning, in that here the teaching and resurrection of Jesus fill out Qohelet's more limited understanding of what happens when you die. I think that the hard questions raised here can prepare the way for Jesus finally making sense of death as the end of this life, and the beginning of new life. This means that we can read Ecclesiastes with a much fuller understanding of how God orders his created world. In terms of the ministry of the church, Ecclesiastes explores the pain and difficulties of daily living but also insists on the place of trusting and obeying God even though all their questions are not answered.

#### Iain Provan

In 2013 Iain Provan published an interesting article called “Fresh Perspectives on Ecclesiastes: ‘Qohelet for Today’” in which he explored the positive value of the book for daily living and for biblical theology.<sup>28</sup> He concludes that we need to accept the

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<sup>27</sup> I am not persuaded that the issue of suffering is a big one in Ecclesiastes, but Enns views it in the New Testament in terms of Jesus as King feeling the abandonment of God.

<sup>28</sup> Iain Provan, “Fresh Perspectives on Ecclesiastes: ‘Qohelet for Today,’” in Boda, Longman, and Rata, *The Words of the Wise are like Goats*, 405. Provan asked particularly what Qohelet has to teach us today. He suggests three important truths:

1. The teaching of the book is set in a context of reference for an obedience to God (12:13–14), who has created a moral universe in which there is accountability for actions. This can be seen in 3:1–17 and 8:5–6 and sits well with the book of Proverbs and its two ways to do life. While he places qualifications on wisdom, he is clear that wisdom is better than folly (2:13). His teaching is grounded in these truths, and provide an important perspective for the challenging, exploratory questions he asks.
2. In a list of passages (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 9:7–10; 11:9–10) he commends activities such as drinking wine and eating and the enjoyment of wife, work, wealth, and possessions since enjoyment of these is enabled by God. Such enjoyment is not opposed to living a morally good life.

limitations of our knowledge and live accordingly. Death is a reality that overshadows everything in our world. Reality does not change simply because we want it to change. We need to live lives in proper relationship with God and with our neighbors, in care of the garden that God has entrusted to us. Life needs to be accepted as it is, an opportunity seen as God's good gift. We cannot control the times when different events happen and have to accept this. We have to deny those destructive thoughts that lead us to live selfishly and unfairly exclude others from justice in the community. We need to base our lives on reality, and not be distracted from the right path by illusion or delusion. This includes seeing that even good things like wisdom and righteousness do not always bring an evident reward.<sup>29</sup> Having considered all these matters, there is still room for joy and the embrace of life's challenges. Obviously, there is no room in this paper to fill out these considerations in more detail. However, I wanted to outline these factors simply to sketch the likely contributions that the book of Ecclesiastes could make to a robust biblical theology.

#### Doug Ingram

Doug Ingram focuses on what Ecclesiastes teaches about God.<sup>30</sup> He notes that there are three characteristic types of actions that God is said to do. He describes these as *God gives*, which is used at least 13 times; *God acts* (used 11 times); and *God is to be*

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3. A realistic view of life must include some of its gloomier aspects, which Qohelet links to the keyword *hebel*. Provan prefers the translation "breath" rather than "meaningless," with an emphasis on their passing nature and their elusiveness to human control, both physically and intellectually. In particular, Qohelet targets the pursuit of knowledge and wealth and reminds readers of the reality of death that must be factored into everyday decisions. Therefore, instead of trying to control all aspects of our life, we need simply to live our lives before God. If we do so it will still "be possible for us to experience joy whether in work or in wealth and to find, in wisdom, valuable help for living." (405)

<sup>29</sup> Bartholomew, "The Theology of Ecclesiastes," 377, suggests that "Job and Ecclesiastes should be seen as parallel representations of the struggle with the paradoxes of life in which the character-consequence structure *appears* not to apply. Job focuses on the devastating experience of an individual, whereas Ecclesiastes is more of an intellectual quest, with the question of epistemology at its heart. Both books find resolution to the problems they wrestle with through a painful and hard-won recovery of the doctrine of creation."

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Ingram, *Ecclesiastes: A Peculiarly Postmodern Piece* (Cambridge: Grove, 2003). In terms of the title, Ingram notes at 23 that "Postmodernity, like Ecclesiastes, helps us open our eyes to the ambiguities and uncertainties of life. It is in this respect that Ecclesiastes truly is a peculiarly postmodern book. However, Qohelet's emphasis on a God who gives, acts and is to be worshipped perhaps fits rather less well with postmodernity's suspicion of any grand narratives." He argues that "Ecclesiastes is certainly not a 'Godless' book—God features often, a total of 40 times in the 12 chapters. Moreover, there are three main characteristics of this God to which attention is drawn (and which account for 39 out of the 40 explicit references to God in the book). None of these can the author have discerned by simple observation of the world—this is part of his worldview which he holds by faith."

worshipped, noting that the phrase fearing God is mentioned 6 times in total. My reframing of these three categories is that *God gives or sustains; God acts in everyday life* and not just in history or for Israel; and that *our life and thinking need to be shaped by God*. These three themes, crucial to the book of Ecclesiastes, are a rich contribution to biblical theology. Of course, they are not unique to Ecclesiastes (which should not be expected) even if they are distinctive. In the light of identifying these three themes Ingram then concludes with a number of dot points about how we as Christians might cope with a world full of ambiguity and uncertainty, the world of Ecclesiastes. He highlights the need for realism, for the insistence that God is in charge, the need to accept God's gifts, to live in the light of God's judgment, to worship God, to admit that things may look very different from God's perspective, and an awareness that something bigger is in play than our finite understanding of life. In the light of all these things, Ecclesiastes does not provide exhaustive answers, and Ingram argues that in a whole-Bible context we need to see that the gospel does address some of the questions that Qohelet has asked.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

There is much more to say—and, of course, many questions to answer—but what I wish to point out in this paper is that these distinctive contributions of the book of Ecclesiastes are often lost if you opt for a biblical theology that is solely based on God's redemptive work, that is only interested in the fact that Ecclesiastes says *fear God and obey his commands*. Ecclesiastes encourages us to search out those truths that can be found as we observe God's creational work of sustaining his world, and as we receive instruction from the sages about how this is so. Including this material in a biblical theology is an important contribution to a well-rounded, or what I call a thoroughly biblical, biblical theology. Our biblical theology must be as wide as the content of Scripture, and must include all its major threads. If we edit out God's sustaining work—and the many questions Qohelet raises about that—then we have missed much of the activity of God as he exercises his active kingly rule. Ingram writes, "Ecclesiastes is a book that faces the harsh realities of life head on and refuses to provide nice neat answers . . . the ambiguity of the book captures something of the ambiguity of this harsh life 'under the sun.'"<sup>32</sup> Of course, I do not wish anyone to undermine the significance of what Christ has achieved in his sin-bearing death on the cross. But believers who trust in Jesus for salvation still need to live in the real world as God's people. Our faith in Christ is not undermined by enjoying the food and drink that God has graciously provided, and asking how to live a purposeful life. Nor is it compromised by living in the light of the reality of death, or conceding our limited understanding of how God runs his world. Our faith is strengthened, not weakened by seeing our daily work as a source of pleasure and as a contribution to

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<sup>31</sup> Ingram, *Ecclesiastes*, 24–25

<sup>32</sup> Ingram, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.

the community around us. And our consideration of hard questions will lead to a stronger, tested faith that will be more able to commend God's way in Christ to a contemporary unbelieving world. The distinctive contributions of Ecclesiastes enrich our biblical theology.

Let me finish by giving the final word to Jason deRouchie: "While the message of Ecclesiastes is highly disputed, every book in the Christian canon matters, and I am convinced that this book in particular bears distinct lasting significance in this increasingly broken world."<sup>33</sup> Maybe a square peg cannot fit into a round hole but Ecclesiastes can certainly become a key part of a biblical theology—and our Bible is much richer because God has seen fit to include this puzzling, even enigmatic, book.

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<sup>33</sup> Jason S. deRouchie, "Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd: Grasping for Breath in Ecclesiastes," *SBTJ* 15, no. 3 (2011): 4–5.

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